After landing in Italy in September 1943, Allied forces under General Sir Harold Alexander began pushing up the Italian peninsula. Due to the Apennine Mountains, which run the length of Italy, Alexander’s forces advanced on two fronts with Lieutenant General Mark Clark’s US Fifth Army on the west and Lieutenant General Sir Bernard Montgomery’s British Eighth Army on the east. Allied efforts were slowed by poor weather, rough terrain, and a tenacious German defense. Slowly falling back through the fall, the Germans sought to buy time to complete the Winter Line south of Rome. Though the British succeeded in penetrating the line and capturing Ortona in late December, heavy snows prevented them from pushing west along Route 5 to reach Rome. Around this time, Montgomery departed for Britain to aid in planning the invasion of Normandy and was replaced by Lieutenant General Oliver Leese.
To the west of the mountains, Clark’s forces moved up Routes 6 and 7. The latter of these ceased to be usable as it ran along the coast and had been flooded at the Pontine Marshes. As a result, Clark was forced to use Route 6 which passed through the Liri Valley. The southern end of the valley was protected by large hills overlooking the town of Cassino and atop which sat the abbey of Monte Cassino. The area was further protected by the fast-flowing Rapido and Garigliano Rivers which ran west to east. Recognizing the defensive value of the terrain, the Germans built the Gustav Line section of the Winter Line through the area. Despite its military value, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring elected not to occupy the ancient abbey and informed the Allies and Vatican of this fact.

First Battle of Monte Cassino: January 17 – February 11 1944

Reaching the Gustav Line near Cassino on January 15, 1944, the US Fifth Army immediately began preparations to assault the German positions. Though Clark felt the odds of success were low, an effort needed to be made to support the Anzio landings which would occur further north on January 22. By attacking, it was hoped that German forces could be drawn south to allow Major General John Lucas’ US VI Corps to land and quickly occupy the Alban Hills in the German’s rear. It was thought that such a maneuver would compel the Germans to abandon the Gustav Line. Hampering Allied efforts was the fact that Clark’s forces were tired and battered after fighting their way north from Naples.

Moving forward on January 17, the British X Corps crossed the Garigliano River and attacked along the coast, putting heavy pressure on the German 94th Infantry Division. Having some success, X Corps’ efforts forced Kesselring to send the 29th and 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions south from Rome to stabilize the front. Lacking sufficient reserves, X Corps was unable to exploit their success. On January 20, Clark launched his main assault with the US II Corps south of Cassino near San Angelo. Though elements of the 36th Infantry Division were able to cross the Rapido near San Angelo, they lacked armored support and remained isolated. Savagely counterattacked by German tanks and self-propelled guns, the 36th Division was ultimately forced back.
Four days later, an attempt was made north of Cassino by Major General Charles W. Ryder's 34th Infantry Division with the goal of crossing the river and wheeling left to strike Monte Cassino. Crossing the flooded Rapido, the division moved into the hills behind the town and gained a foothold after eight days of heavy fighting. These efforts were supported by the French Expeditionary Corps to the north which captured Monte Belvedere and assaulted Monte Cifalco. Though the French were unable to take Monte Cifalco, the 34th Division, enduring incredibly harsh conditions, battled their way through the mountains towards the abbey. Among the issues faced by Allied forces were large areas of exposed ground and rocky terrain that precluded digging foxholes. Attacking for three days in early February, they were unable to secure the abbey or the neighboring high ground. Spent, II Corps was withdrawn on February 11.

U.S. II Corps, after two and a half weeks of torrid battle, was fought out. The performance of the 34th Division in the mountains is considered to rank as one of the finest feats of arms carried out by any soldiers during the war. In return they sustained losses of about 80 per cent in the Infantry battalions, some 2,200 casualties.

The withdrawn American units were replaced by the New Zealand Corps (2nd New Zealand and 4th Indian Divisions), commanded by Lieutenant General Sir Bernard Freyberg, from the Eighth Army on the Adriatic front.
DESTRUCTION OF THE MONTE CASSINO ABBEY

On February 15, 1944 the Abbey of Monte Cassino, established in 529 AD and the oldest Benedictine monastery in the world, was destroyed by Allied bombers in what is now acknowledged as one of the biggest strategic errors of the Second World War on the Allied side.

The Abbey was attacked despite an agreement signed by both sides with the Vatican that the historic building would be respected as occupying neutral territory. But Allied commanders, who had seen their infantrymen suffer heavy casualties in trying to advance along the Liri valley, the route of the main highway between Naples and Rome, were convinced that the Germans were using the Abbey, which commands sweeping views of the valley, at least as a point from which to direct operations. This perception was reinforced by a radio intercept, subsequently alleged to have been wrongly translated, which suggested a German battalion had been stationed in the Abbey, ignoring a 300-metre area around it that was supposed to be out of bounds to soldiers on both sides.

Knowing that attacking a historic and religiously sensitive target would divide public opinion, particularly among their Catholic populations, military sources in Britain and the United States leaked details of their suspicions to the newspapers, who obligingly printed stories that seemed to justify the plan. On Valentine's Day, 1944, leaflets were fired towards the Abbey and the nearby town of Cassino to warn residents and monks of what was coming.

The raid began at 9.24 am the following day as the Abbey was bathed in wintry morning sunshine. It continued for more than four hours in what was the biggest sustained attack on a single building of the entire war and, many have contended, the greatest aesthetic disaster of the conflict.
Fortunately, many of the art treasures contained in the Abbey had already been removed to safety in Rome by two far-sighted German officers, including paintings by Titian, El Greco and Goya, along with tens of thousands of books and manuscripts. They had been transferred to the Vatican in more than 100 truckloads the year before, although some did end up in Germany. But nothing could be done to save the frescoed walls of the building itself. In all, 229 American bombers, arriving in wave after wave, dropped 1,150 tons of high explosives and incendiaries, reducing the entire top of the 488 meter (1,600 feet) mountain to a mass of smoldering rubble.

The 79-year-old Abbot, Gregorio Diamare, escaped, along with the other monks, some of whom hid in the underground vaults. But 230 refugees given shelter inside the Abbey were killed. There were no German casualties. The German positions above and below the Abbey, outside the neutral zone, were seemingly untouched. The information passed on from the radio intercept was wrong. No German troops were inside the building, nor had been, although it was more than two decades before the mistake was fully acknowledged.

To make matters worse, the bombardment created for the Germans a superb defensive position among the ruins.

There had been a plan for Allied troops to storm the site in the aftermath of the bombing but communications between the Air Force commanders and the Army on the ground were poor and it is thought the raid was launched to take advantage of good weather with no consideration of the readiness of the follow-up plan. As it was, essential supplies and equipment had not reached the valley and some of the soldiers who were ready to attack were forced to withdraw after stray bombs hit their positions. As a result, the Germans were able to take control of the ruined site and create the strategic stronghold the Allies had thought they were destroying.

Pope Pius XII made no public comment about the destruction of the Abbey but his Cardinal Secretary of State, Luigi Maglione, denounced it as "a colossal blunder, a piece of a gross stupidity."
SECOND BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO: FEBRUARY 15 – 18 1944

With the removal of II Corps, Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg's New Zealand Corps moved forward. Pushed into planning a new assault to relieve pressure on the Anzio beachhead, Freyberg intended to continue the attack through the mountains north of Cassino as well as advance up the railroad from the southeast. Following the destruction of the monastery, on the nights of February 15 and 16 troops from the Royal Sussex Regiment attacked positions in the hills behind Cassino with little success. These efforts were hampered by friendly fire incidents involving Allied artillery due to the challenges of aiming accurately in the hills.

Mounting his main effort on February 17, Freyberg sent forward the 4th Indian Division against German positions in the hills. In brutal, close-in fighting, his men were turned back by the enemy. To the southeast, 28th (Maori) Battalion succeeded in crossing the Rapido and captured the Cassino railroad station. Lacking armor support as the river could not be spanned, they were forced back by German tanks and infantry on February 18. Though the German line had held, the Allies had come close to a breakthrough which concerned the commander of the German Tenth Army, Colonel General Heinrich von Vietinghoff, who oversaw the Gustav Line.
THIRD BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO: MARCH 15 – 26 1944

Reorganizing, Allied leaders began planning a third attempt to penetrate the Gustav Line at Cassino. Rather than continue along previous avenues of advance, they devised a new plan which called for an assault on Cassino from the north as well as an attack south into the hill complex which would then turn east to assault the abbey. These efforts were to be preceded by intense, heavy bombing which would require three days of clear weather to execute. As a result, the operation was postponed for three weeks until the airstrikes could be executed. Moving forward on March 15, Freyberg's men advanced behind a creeping bombardment. Though some gains were made, the Germans rallied quickly and dug in. In the mountains, Allied forces secured key points known as Castle Hill and Hangman's Hill. Below, the New Zealanders had succeeded in taking the railroad station, though fighting in the town remained fierce and house-to-house.

On March 19, Freyberg hoped to turn the tide with the introduction of the 20th Armored Brigade. His assault plans were quickly spoiled when the Germans mounted heavy counterattacks on Castle Hill drawing in the Allied infantry. Lacking infantry support, the tanks were soon picked off one by one. The next day, Freyberg added the British 78th Infantry Division to the fray. Reduced to house-to-house fighting, despite the addition of more troops, Allied forces were unable to overcome the resolute German defense. On March 23, with his men exhausted, Freyberg halted the offensive. With this failure, Allied forces consolidated their lines and Alexander began devising a new plan for breaking the Gustav Line. Seeking to bring more men to bear, Alexander created Operation Diadem. This saw the transfer of the British Eighth Army across the mountains.
FOURTH BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO - VICTORY AT LAST: MAY 11 – 17 1944

Redeploying his forces, Alexander placed Clark’s Fifth Army along the coast with II Corps and the French facing the Garigliano. Inland, Lieutenant General Sir Oliver Leese’s XIII Corps and Lieutenant General Władysław Anders’ 2nd Polish Corps opposed Cassino. For the fourth battle, Alexander desired II Corps to push up Route 7 towards Rome while the French attacked across the Garigliano and into the Aurunci Mountains on the west side of the Liri Valley. To the north, XIII Corps would attempt to force the Liri Valley, while the Poles circled behind Cassino and with orders to isolate the abbey ruins. Utilizing a variety of deceptions, the Allies were able to ensure that Kesselring was unaware of these troop movements.

At 11:00 pm on May 11, with a bombardment using over 1,660 guns, Operation Diadem saw Alexander attack on all four fronts. While II Corps met with heavy resistance and made little headway, the French advanced quickly and soon penetrated the Aurunci Mountains before daylight. To the north, XIII Corps made two crossings of the Rapido. Encountering a stiff German defense, they slowly pushed forward while erecting bridges in their rear. This allowed supporting armor to cross which played a key role in the fighting. In the mountains, Polish attacks were met with German counterattacks. By late on May 12, XIII Corps' bridgeheads continued to grow despite determined counterattacks by Kesselring. The next day, II Corps began to gain some ground while the French turned to strike the German flank in the Liri Valley.
With his right wing wavering, Kesselring began pulling back to the Hitler Line, approximately eight miles to the rear. On May 15, the British 78th Division passed through the bridgehead and began a turning movement to cut off the town from the Liri Valley. Two days later, the Poles renewed their efforts in the mountains. More successful, they linked up with the 78th Division early on May 18. Later that morning, Polish forces cleared the abbey ruins and hoisted the Polish flag over the site.

**THE AFTERMATH**

Pressing up the Liri Valley, the British Eighth Army immediately attempted to break through the Hitler Line but was turned back. Pausing to reorganize, a major effort was made against the Hitler Line on May 23 in conjunction with a breakout from the Anzio beachhead. Both efforts were successful and soon the German Tenth Army was reeling and facing being surrounded. With VI Corps surging inland from Anzio, Clark shockingly ordered them to turn northwest for Rome rather than cut off and aid in the destruction of von Vietinghoff. This action may have been the result of Clark’s concern that the British would enter the city first despite it being assigned to Fifth Army. Driving north, his troops occupied the city on June 4. Despite the success in Italy, the Normandy landings two days later transformed it into a secondary theater of the war.

The capture of Monte Cassino came at a high price. The Allies suffered around 55,000 casualties in the campaign. German casualty figures are estimated at around 20,000 killed and wounded. Total Allied casualties spanning the period of the four Cassino battles and the Anzio campaign with the subsequent capture of Rome on June 5 1944, were over 105,000.
M’44 SCENARIOS FOR THE BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

The Battle of Monte Cassino Campaign includes 13 scenarios, including 1 Breakthrough (BT) scenario and 1 Overlord (OL) map. These scenarios chronicle the major engagements of the Battle of Monte Cassino, and include only the best available in the Scenarios from the Front (SFTF) files section on the DoW website.

No campaign rules are included; not all M’44 players have access to the Campaign books. Instead, simply tally up the number of medals won in each scenario after playing both sides. A medal tally table for all scenarios is included below.

These scenarios include a variety of armies. Although optional, it is suggested that you use the unofficial Battle of Nations rules when playing the sides of these armies.
THE BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

1. JAN 20 – JAN 22: Breaking the U.S. 36th Division
2. JAN 24 – FEB 11: 2nd Battle of Monte Cassino
3. JAN 25 – FEB 03: Belvedere
4. JAN 25 – FEB 12: Cassino
5. FEB 15 – FEB 18: Capture of the Cassino Station
6. FEB 15 – FEB 18: Low Point of the Cassino Campaign OL
7. FEB 17: Snakeshead Ridge
8. MAR 15: Assault on Cassino
9. MAR 15 – Mar 17: Monte Cassino
10. MAR 15 – Mar 22: Breakthrough to Cassino Station BT
11. MAR 19 – MAR 22: Monte Cassino – 3rd Battle
12. MAY 11 – MAY 12: Operation Diadem **
13. MAY 11 – MAY 18: Taking Monte Cassino

** Scenario notes:

1. Operation Diadem: as the Allied player, if you fulfill the alternative win conditions score the full 6 medals.

There are a total of 175 medals if all scenarios are played, 151 medals without the Overlord map, and 139 medals if only standard scenarios are played.

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