



HISTORY

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CASSINO

General Mark Clark, commander of the Fifth Army called the battle of Cassino "the most gruesome, the most harrowing and in one aspect the most tragic, of any phase of the war in Italy." During the fall of 1943, the [100th Infantry Battalion](#) was attached to the 34th Division, fighting up the boot of Italy towards Rome. The [Nisei](#) of the 100th, like other American soldiers in Italy, were dangerously short of supplies. The [Allies](#) were hoarding men, equipment and even air support for the anticipated invasion of France.

From November to January, the 100th captured hills and villages. The men fought Hitler's elite SS troops, but they also fought the weather. The soldiers hiked through two feet of snow and up 6,000-foot peaks - all without special boots. Many suffered from [trenchfoot](#). Cold rain poured down on their thin Eisenhower jackets and summer uniforms. The fighting was so bitter that at one battle, C Company, which started with 187 men, had only 50 left.

In mid-January 1944, in blizzard conditions, the 100th took the three mountains overlooking the town of Cassino. From here, the soldiers could see the Gustav Line, which protected the key road to Rome. The Germans used the natural landscape and their engineering skills to build one of the strongest defense lines in all of human warfare.

To take the Gustav Line, the Allies would have to descend into the Rapido River valley, traverse two miles of open fields filled with landmines, mud, and knee-deep cold water, cross a swift-moving river, then climb past more mines and barbed wire and up the steep, rocky slopes, to the 1500-foot peak of Monte Cassino. From there they would have to ascend still higher to a four-story fortress, with 10-foot-thick stone walls. This was the St. Benedictine monastery. The Germans had a commanding view of the entire valley. They aimed their tanks, powerful 88s, and machine guns with interlocking fire down on the exposed Allied troops. Thousands of crack SS troops waited in concrete pillboxes built into the hillside and linked by underground tunnels.

On the night of January 24, A and C Companies crossed the muddy flats. The men stopped to check for trip wires. Then they waded or swam the deep irrigation ditches filled with icy water, all under German machine gun and artillery fire. Finally, at dawn, they made it to a wall, sheltered from the enemy fire. Then in daylight, B Company tried to cross the flats. The Germans gunned them down. Of the 187 men in B Company, only 14 made it to the wall. By the next day, the 100th, which was now missing many men and officers, was ordered back in reserve.

On February 8, the 100th again attacked, this time halfway up the mountainside on the way to the St. Benedictine monastery. The [Nisei](#) soldiers secured a key hill, close to the monastery, but the 34th division's right and left flank units were not able to keep pace with the 100th. The 100th soldiers dug in deeper and held the hill for four days, but fierce resistance on their flanks still made the position perilous. The 100th was again ordered back in reserve.

Allied commanders reluctantly gave the order to bomb the sacred monastery. On February 15, 255 planes dropped 576 tons of explosives, reducing it to rubble.

When the 100th launched its third attack on February 18, it was already under-strength. Again and again the men stormed the defenses of the well-entrenched, well-equipped enemy who rose from the rubble. The 100th regained the ground halfway up to the stone monastery, but it lost 200 more men. One platoon started the attack with 40 and ended with five. After four days of intense fighting and holding, the 100th was ordered back for replacements and equipment re-supply.

The British and Indian soldiers who relieved the 100th saw first hand what the battalion had done and praised them. War correspondents called them "little men of iron" and the "[purple heart](#) battalion."

The men of 34th Division, including the 100th, had Cassino in their grasp, but they ran out of men and material. Eventually it took two more major assaults by five fresh divisions and nearly three months of ferocious fighting to capture Cassino. The 34th, in less than one month, had almost done it alone.

The Battalion had landed in Salerno in September with 1300 men. But now, five months, later it had only 521 effectives. Monte Cassino was the last campaign the original 100th completed. After that, the battalion received replacements from the [442nd Regimental Combat Team](#) and headed for [Anzio](#).