

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 38
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2008*

Article 11

11-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Kingseed, Cole C.. "Review Essay: The Anzio Campaign." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 38, 4 (2008). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol38/iss4/11>

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Review Essay

The Anzio Campaign

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Long after the liberation of Italy by the Allies in World War II, questions concerning the merits of conducting the Italian campaign linger. As correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote in *Brave Men*, “There was some exhilaration in Italy, and some fun along with the misery and the sadness, but on the whole it had been bitter.” Much of the bitterness centers on Operation Shingle, the amphibious assault on Anzio-Nettuno on 22 January 1944. In their efforts to ensure that the campaign ought “to be understood rather than overlooked,” authors John S. D. Eisenhower and Lloyd Clark have contributed to the continuing debate surrounding this most controversial of Italian battles.

In *They Fought at Anzio*, Eisenhower portrays the struggle from the perspective of the senior commanders, along with that of a few selected foot soldiers and nurses. Eisenhower views British Prime Minister Winston Churchill as the driving force behind the Anzio campaign. Conceived by Churchill as an attempt to break the Italian stalemate and to cause the withdrawal of German forces from Cassino, the operation was too hastily planned and ill-equipped to achieve its planners’ intent. A disastrous rehearsal did little to inspire confidence in the Allied command team.

Complicating the invasion plan were 5th Army commander Lieutenant General Mark Clark’s orders for VI Corps commander Major General John P. Lucas, whose forces had been selected to execute the Anzio operation. Everyone agreed that once ashore, the invasion force needed to seize a hill mass called Colli Laziali, better known as the Alban Hills, “a rugged, broad-shouldered guardian of the two main approaches to the Italian capital.” Concerned that Lucas would be stranded at Anzio before he could consolidate the beachhead, Clark urged caution and authorized Lucas to “advance on Colli Laziali, not to Colli Laziali.” Following the initial success of the invasion, Clark took a back seat and left Lucas to his own devices.

Neither Clark nor Lucas fares well in Eisenhower’s estimation. Clark emerges as personally brave, though often “searching for someone to blame” when the campaign turned sour. Clark remains controversial to this day, in Eisenhower’s view an egotistical coalition commander who “always viewed the armed forces of their allies as inferior to his own.” As for Lucas, destined to be relieved by Clark one month following the Anzio landing, the author opines that he was “professionally competent, but lacking the basic optimism so necessary to command.” This reviewer believes both assessments are near the mark.

Eisenhower does portray American Major Generals Lucian Truscott and Fred Walker in a more favorable light. Truscott, the epitome of a combat leader, emerges as the best American commander in the Italian theater. Originally in charge of the US

3d Division, Truscott was elevated to corps commander following Lucas's dismissal. He immediately restored the fighting spirit and led VI Corps to victory after a tough campaign. Walker, whose 36th Division suffered extensive casualties crossing the Rapido River in December 1943, later played an integral role in the breakout from the beachhead and the capture of Velletri, the key to the Alban Hills. Even Walker's adversaries agreed that his actions were responsible for rupturing the German Caesar Line, thus opening the way for Clark's seizure of the Italian capital.

If there are genuine heroes in Eisenhower's book, they include a series of junior officers, notably Lieutenant Lloyd Wells, a platoon leader in the 1st Armored Division, and Lieutenant Avis Dagit, one of 26 nurses in the 56th Evacuation Hospital. Through Wells and Dagit's eyes, Eisenhower offers a new appreciation of the war from the perspective of the soldiers who fought it.

Like John Eisenhower, Lloyd Clark brings impressive credentials to his study of the Anzio campaign. A senior lecturer at the Department of War Studies, Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, Clark is the author of several books. His "Line of Fire," "Command Decisions," and "Battle Plan" vignettes have frequently appeared on the History Channel.

Clark's analysis of Anzio and the ensuing battle for Rome is more critical of the American commanders and more laudatory of Lucian Truscott's performance upon assuming command of VI Corps than Eisenhower's view. The author also chastises Churchill and 15th Army Group commander General Sir Harold Alexander, both of whom failed to anticipate "the intense, grinding encounter that eventually took place at Anzio." Not until the end of the book does Clark cite Churchill's postmortem that "Anzio was my worst moment in the war. I had most to do with it."

The most interesting aspect of Clark's analysis centers on the relief of Lucas as VI Corps commander. Clark posits that Churchill and Alexander had Lucas "in their sights and demanded satisfaction" when the campaign reached a stalemate. According to Clark, Lucas was sacrificed to "quiet Churchill's restless criticism of the tactical handling of his strategic brainchild." Clark adds that 5th Army commander Mark Clark no longer wanted to be tainted by association with Lucas and, after the immediate threat to VI Corps had passed, General Clark "was willing to be the hangman."

Truscott's assumption of command represents a sea change in Allied fortunes. He immediately improved the security of the beachhead and developed a more fully integrated fire-support plan. Given additional time to prepare for an offensive, Truscott launched a well-coordinated attack in mid-May that finally opened the way to seize Rome. Still, the cost of the campaign exceeded Allied expectations.

Why did the campaign fail to reach its stated objectives? The easy answer is to blame Lucas's decision to consolidate the bridgehead rather than moving to seize the Alban Hills and severing the German lines to the south. Eisenhower hedges his bets and opines that the question does not carry a great amount of relevance today, leaving the reader to conclude only that after "paying a fearsome price, the men and women who suffered through Anzio and the rest of Italy brought the day of Allied victory that much closer." Clark is more circumspect. While Lucas's performance

demands scrutiny, states Clark, a more balanced response is necessary. Here the author examines the differences between the British and American approaches to waging war in a theater where Allied aims were divergent. In addition, he opines that there is some disagreement regarding whether the campaign significantly diluted the German forces in northwest Europe. Indeed, Clark wonders who was pinning down whom in Italy, for the German defense engineered by Field Marshal Albert Kesselring demanded a far greater Allied investment than initially anticipated.

In the final analysis there are far more similarities than differences between John Eisenhower's and Lloyd Clark's accounts of the Battle for Anzio. Both authors remain highly critical of Generals Mark Clark and John P. Lucas for their evasiveness and caution, and both are respectful of the German adversaries who conducted a tenacious defense. In the authors' estimation, General Clark, totally absorbed with self-aggrandizement, emerges as "the Germans' favorite enemy general" who always gave the enemy an easier time than anticipated. Only after he basked in the glory of his capture of Rome did General Clark turn his attention to the business of defeating the German 10th Army. It is a harsh assessment.

In the end, both authors agree that the Italian adventure was largely a disappointment, failing to deliver its more extravagant objectives. In an effort to salvage his personal reputation and develop a positive spin onto his failed enterprise, Churchill later ruminated, "Such is the story of Anzio; a story of high opportunity and shattered hopes, of skillful inception on our part and swift recovery by the enemy, of valor shared by both." Authors Eisenhower and Clark would not disagree.

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