

ANZIO

BATTLE REPORT



LANDING— Allied forces numbered more than 100,000 after reinforcement troops came ashore at Anzio. Six months of bloody fighting would pass before American GIs entered the capital city of Rome.

By Vernon Pizer

BY THE end of 1943, after interminable and bloody fighting, the Allies had become bogged down in their efforts to push north through the heavily fortified Cassino front the Germans had drawn across the mountains of central Italy. The Allied command reasoned an

end run might succeed where frontal assault had failed. The decision was made to launch an amphibious assault behind the German lines and outflank the Cassino front, push inland, cut enemy supply lines and escape routes from Cassino, and—it was hoped—lead to the quick capture of Rome.

In the pre-dawn hours of Jan. 22, 1944, under cover of a naval barrage, the assault force landed at Anzio, a port on Italy's west coast about 60 miles northeast of Cassino and 35 miles south of Rome. Achieving surprise and finding only two battalions of Germans defending the port, the landing force was only lightly opposed. After cap-

Vernon Pizer, an author of 15 books, was

DAYS TURNED INTO WEEKS AS THE STALEMATE CONTINUED BETWEEN THE ALLIES AND GERMAN FORCES.

force consisting of elements of eight divisions surrounding the beachhead, with more troops on the way. During the same period, Allied strength increased to 69,000 men, 508 artillery pieces and 237 tanks.

Each side sent small units to seek weak spots that could be exploited. There were frequent short, sharp clashes, such as the one involving Army GI Eric Gibson. When his 3rd Division company attacked an enemy position on Jan. 28, Army Technician Fifth Grade Eric G. Gibson, a company cook, took charge of a handful of replacements newly assigned to the unit. Leading his men in their baptism of fire, Gibson charged a machine gun emplacement, killing five of the enemy and capturing two. When a heavy machine gun bracketed them, Gibson

ordered his squad to cover him while he crawled forward alone to flank the emplacement. Reaching it, he threw two grenades into the position and then leaped in, firing his submachine gun and killing the crew. Then, as he roved ahead of his squad, he ran toward a German outpost and killed the machine pistolman but was killed in the volley.

In the bone-chilling, early hours of Jan. 30, the Allies launched their first large-scale attack, a two-pronged assault with a British division on the left and the 3rd Division and two battalions of U.S. Army Rangers on the right. Moving forward silently along a wide, deep irrigation ditch, the Rangers

seemed to have found a gap in the German lines; by sunrise they had advanced more than one mile without being challenged. Unwittingly, they had walked into an ambush. Suddenly the enemy fired with devastating power from rifles, machine guns, mortars and tank guns. The fighting quickly spread throughout the assault force. For three days the battle raged fiercely, taking a heavy toll from both sides. Finally, after each side had sustained more than 5,500 casualties in the engagement, the fighting broke off and the Allies drew back behind a perimeter protected by minefields and barbed wire.

Stalemated, each side dug in. For the Allies, compressed in a beachhead 10 miles deep and 12 miles wide, this was an especially difficult period. Low, muddy and almost treeless, the entire area was vulnerable to German artillery positioned on the higher ground and ringing the Allies.

Along the perimeter each side tested the other—attack and counterattack, here a unit gaining a little hard-earned ground, there a unit grudgingly yielding some ground. Between the snowstorms and heavy rains, Allied and enemy aircraft duelled overhead and attacked ground troops. Artillery exchanges were constant. Both sides sustained heavy casualties, but neither dealt a decisive blow. By mid-February Allied strength had built up to 100,000 men; the enemy had amassed even more, to 125,000.

On Feb. 16, counting on their superior strength, the Germans launched a major attack along the axis of the Anzio-Albano road with elite infantry troops supported by tanks. The mud that had made life miserable for the Allies now helped them by bogging down the enemy tanks so that artillery could pick them off. The brunt of the German attack came against the U.S. 45th Division. Consisting of battle-hardened veterans, the division resisted fiercely, blunting much of the initial momentum.

For five days the Germans pressed their assault. Sheer weight of numbers forced the Allies back more than one mile, but there they dug in and refused to yield farther. Stymied, the Germans broke off the attack. A week later the enemy mounted another major offensive but again the Allies held. Conceding failure to eliminate the beachhead, the Germans settled into a routine of raking Allied positions with artillery and air raids.

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attal was ault ank cut utes lead . 22. rage, port niles south find-mans force cap- turing Anzio and the nearby town of Nettuno, by nightfall the Allies managed to land 36,000 troops and 3,200 vehicles. But the Germans had not been idle. Recovering from their surprise, they quickly countered the invasion, summoning three divisions from northern Italy and other reinforcements from France and the east coast of Italy. Within 24 hours of the landing, the enemy had built a defensive line around the beachhead.

Fighting was indecisive the first few days as both sides sparred and probed while they concentrated on building their strength. By the end of the first week, the Germans had a formidable

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Days stretched into weeks as the stalemate continued. In the meantime, fighting intensified on the Cassino front as the Germans, with part of their strength pinned to contain Anzio, faced increasing Allied pressure. Enemy defenses began to buckle. By mid-May, yielding to relentless Allied attacks, the Germans began to fall back along the Cassino front.

At Anzio on May 23, shortly before dawn, 498 Allied artillery pieces fired on the Germans circling the beachhead. Simultaneously, Allied aircraft streaked overhead to bomb and strafe enemy positions. When the barrage lifted, the Allies launched a four-division assault toward the town of Cisterna. Breaking through the enemy lines, the Allies pressed forward, gaining momentum as they advanced. In mid-afternoon Cisterna fell to the assault force. At the same time, the 3rd Division from Anzio moving south from the beachhead succeeded in linking up with the U.S. II Corps pushing north from Cassino. With that linkup, the breakout from the beachhead was complete.

Now the Germans, although mounting furious rear-guard actions, were in retreat all across Italy. On June 4 American troops entered Rome. ☐

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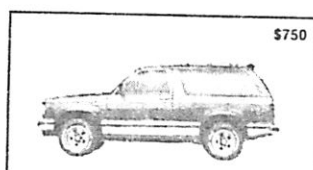


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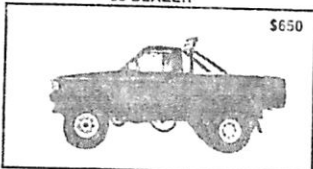
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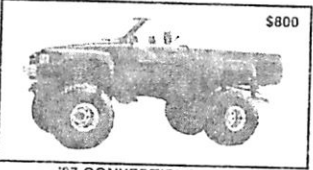
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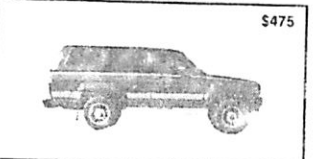
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