

The Gustav Line Handout

"Italy's mountainous backbone sends rib-like ridges down to the coast to both east and west. Rivers flow between the ridges. An attacker advancing from the south is confronted by a heartbreaking sequence. Behind every ridge lurks another river, and behind that river lurks another ridge. Climate conspires with terrain to make Italy an unpleasant place to fight. Summers are blazing hot, whilst winters are freezing cold."

Richard Holmes, "World War II: The Battle of Monte Cassino," February 17, 2011
British Broadcasting Corporation

The Line

The Gustav Line was a series of German defensive positions and fortifications. It was the fourth German defensive line designed to protect Rome from invasion from the South and the most heavily defended. In addition to the military defenses, the Germans skillfully incorporated the natural features into their fortifications as barriers and obstacles, including rivers and mountains. The line was constructed at the narrowest point of the Italian Peninsula and spanned from the Tyrrhenian Sea in the west to the Adriatic Sea in the east, making any flanking attack impossible.



Herman Czirnich, German Paratrooper at Cassino Front, February 1944
German Nation Archives (146-1974-006-62)

The Gustav Line Handout cont.

The anchor in the Gustav Line was the town of Cassino, and high above the town of Cassino stood the ancient Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino. The Abbey dominated the entrance to the Liri Valley. Highway 6 ran right through the Liri Valley and was the only road suitable for moving the Allied Army toward Rome. Due to the valley's sheer size and gentle terrain, the Allies decided what the Germans had already known; it would be the only place they could attack the Gustav Line and push toward Rome. Monte Cassino and the mountains to its rear gave the Germans clear observation of potential attackers advancing toward the Liri Valley. Monte Cassino, and numerous other dug-in, hilltop German positions, had to be taken.

The Obstacles

Any assault on Monte Cassino would begin with a river crossing. The Rapido River was incorporated into the Gustav Line and formed a natural moat, protecting Monte Cassino. Rapido is an Italian word that means fast or rapid, and the river was appropriately named. The Rapido's banks were very steep and in some places vertical. The shallow crossing areas of the Rapido had been scouted by the Germans, allowing for concentrated, accurate artillery fire. Artillery fire originated from well concealed gun pits blasted out of the solid rock in the mountainside.

Before the Allies could get close to the river and attempt the crossing, the Allied soldiers had to deal with flooded ground along its banks. The Germans had diverted the Rapido by damming the river near crossing points. Allied soldiers had to walk and crawl across the submerged, near freezing ground to reach the river, carrying all of their heavy equipment across the flooded fields. The soggy terrain had made it impossible to use heavy, tracked vehicles. Tanks could only move in single-file on steel matting laid down by engineering companies. The Germans only had to knock out the lead tank and the rest became helpless.

Once across the river, the Allied soldiers dealt with entanglements of barbed wire and extensive minefields. While clearing paths across the minefields the soldiers were exposed to interlocking machine gun fire from concrete pillboxes. The Germans cleared the river banks of all obstructions to provide clear fields of fire. Once Allied tanks were able to cross the river they had to deal with antitank ditches. As Allied troops began the attack uphill, the rocky hillsides proved to be a natural, well protected, concealed fighting position for the Germans. The man-made obstacles of the Gustav Line added to the natural Italian features and made Cassino a defender's dream and an attacking army's nightmare.

The Gustav Line Handout cont.

List Five Advantages to High Ground and a Defensive Fighting Position

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