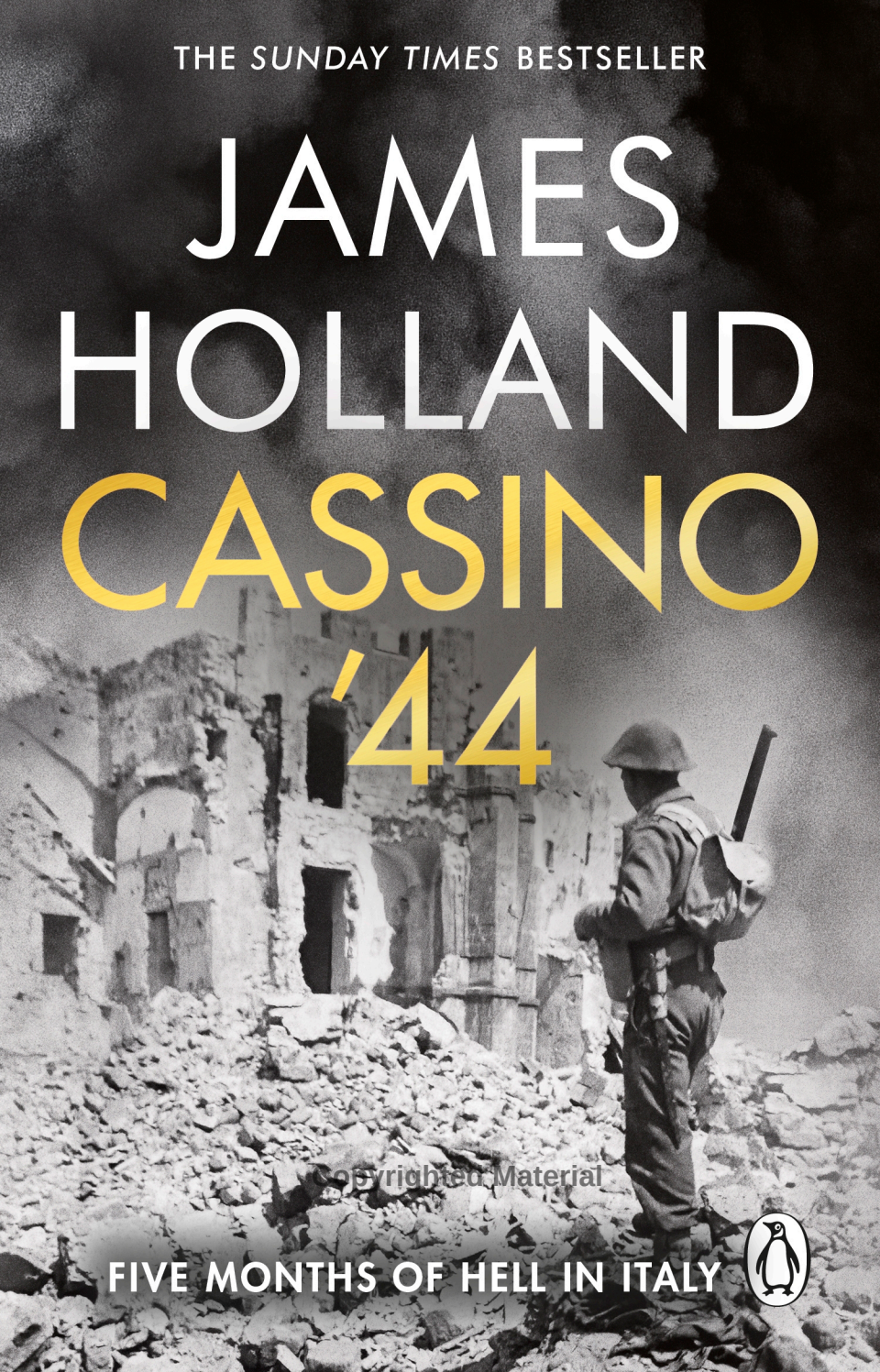
THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

JAMES HOLLAND

CASSINO '44



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Sebastian Faulks

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James Holland is an internationally acclaimed and award-winning historian, writer and broadcaster. The author of a number of best-selling histories, he has also presented – and written – a large number of television programmes and series. He has a weekly Second World War podcast, *WW2 Pod: We Have Ways of Making You Talk* and a YouTube channel, *WW2 Walking the Ground*, both with Al Murray, and is a research fellow at St Andrew's University and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He is also the Co-Founder and Creative Director of the annual Chalke History Festival in the UK. He can be found on X as @James1940, on Instagram as @jamesholland1940, and on his website, www.ww2headquarters.com.

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CASSINO '44

Five Months of Hell in Italy

James Holland



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For Al Murray

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'A world of shadows; of primordial gloom; of inchoate violence steeped in menace, lay all around me. I was staring down a vertiginous tunnel where all was dark and bloody, and the great wind of ultimate desolation howled and hungered. I was alone. Relentlessly alone, in a world I never knew.'

Lieutenant Farley Mowat

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Map Key

Allied units **Axis units**

Standard Military Symbols

I = Company	X = Brigade
II = Battalion	XX = Division
III = Regiment	XXX = Corps
	XXXX = Army
	XXXXX = Army Group

Armoured unit   Paratroopers

Other Abbreviations

Alg. = Algerian
Armd = Armoured
Bde = Brigade
Bn = Battalion
Br. = British
Can. = Canadian
Cdo = Commando
CEF = Corps Expéditionnaire Français
Div. = Division
DWR = Duke of Wellington's Regiment
FBE = Folding Boat Equipment
FJD = Fallschirmjäger-Division
FJR = Fallschirmjäger-Regiment
GAK = Gebirgsarmeekorps
Gds = Guards
Ger. = German
GJD= Gebirgsjäger-Division
GR = Grenadier-Regiment
HG = Hermann Göring
Ind. = Indian
Inf. = Infantry
KSLI = King's Shropshire Light Infantry
MG-Bn = Maschinengewehr-Bataillon
NZ = New Zealand
PD = Panzer-Division
PG = Panzergrenadier
PGD = Panzergrenadier-Division
PGR = Panzergrenadier-Regiment
PIR = Parachute Infantry Regiment
PK = Panzerkorps
Pol. = Polish
Raj. Rif. = Rajputana Rifles
SSF = Special Service Force
US = United States

• 123 = Point 123

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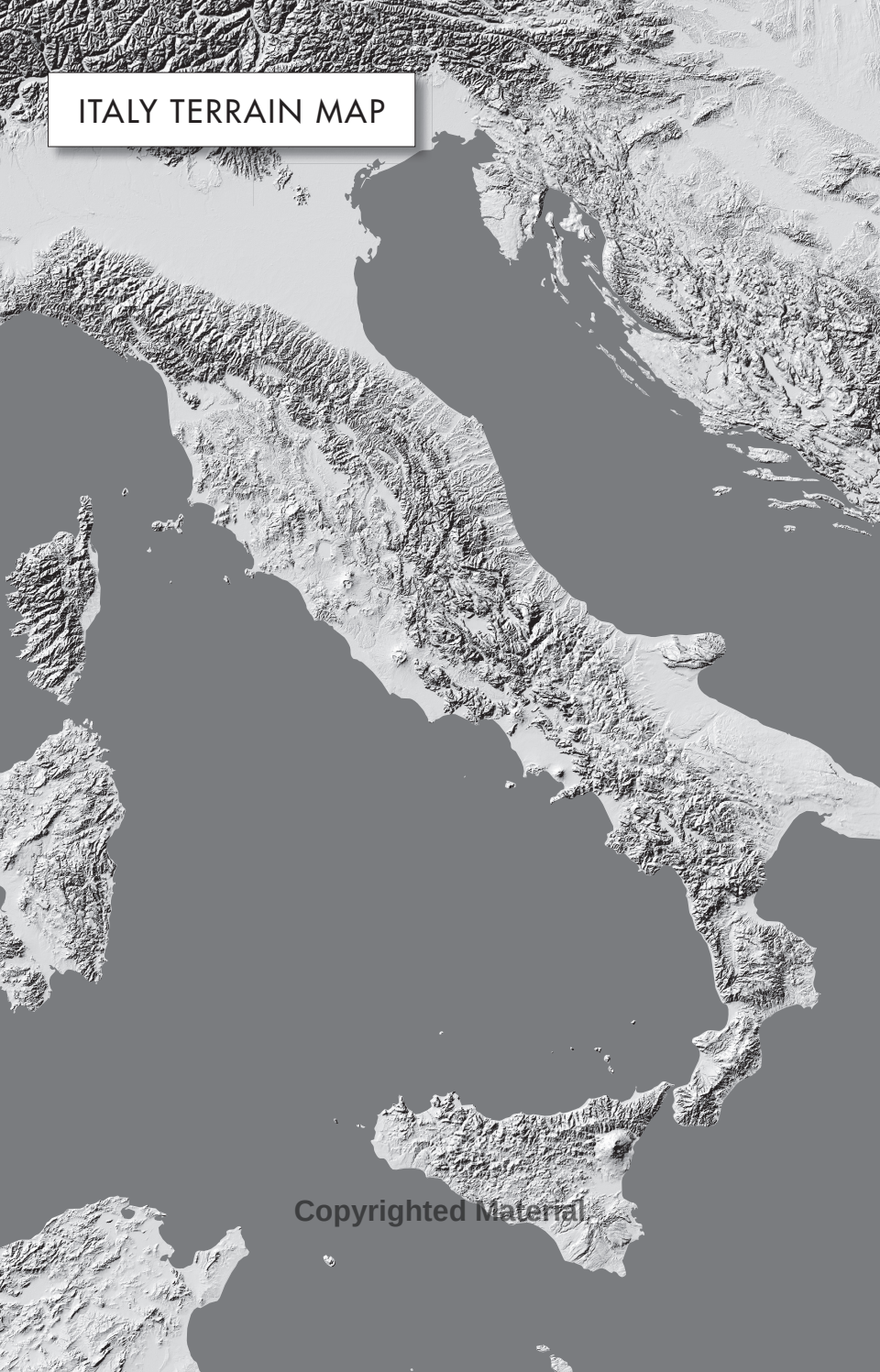

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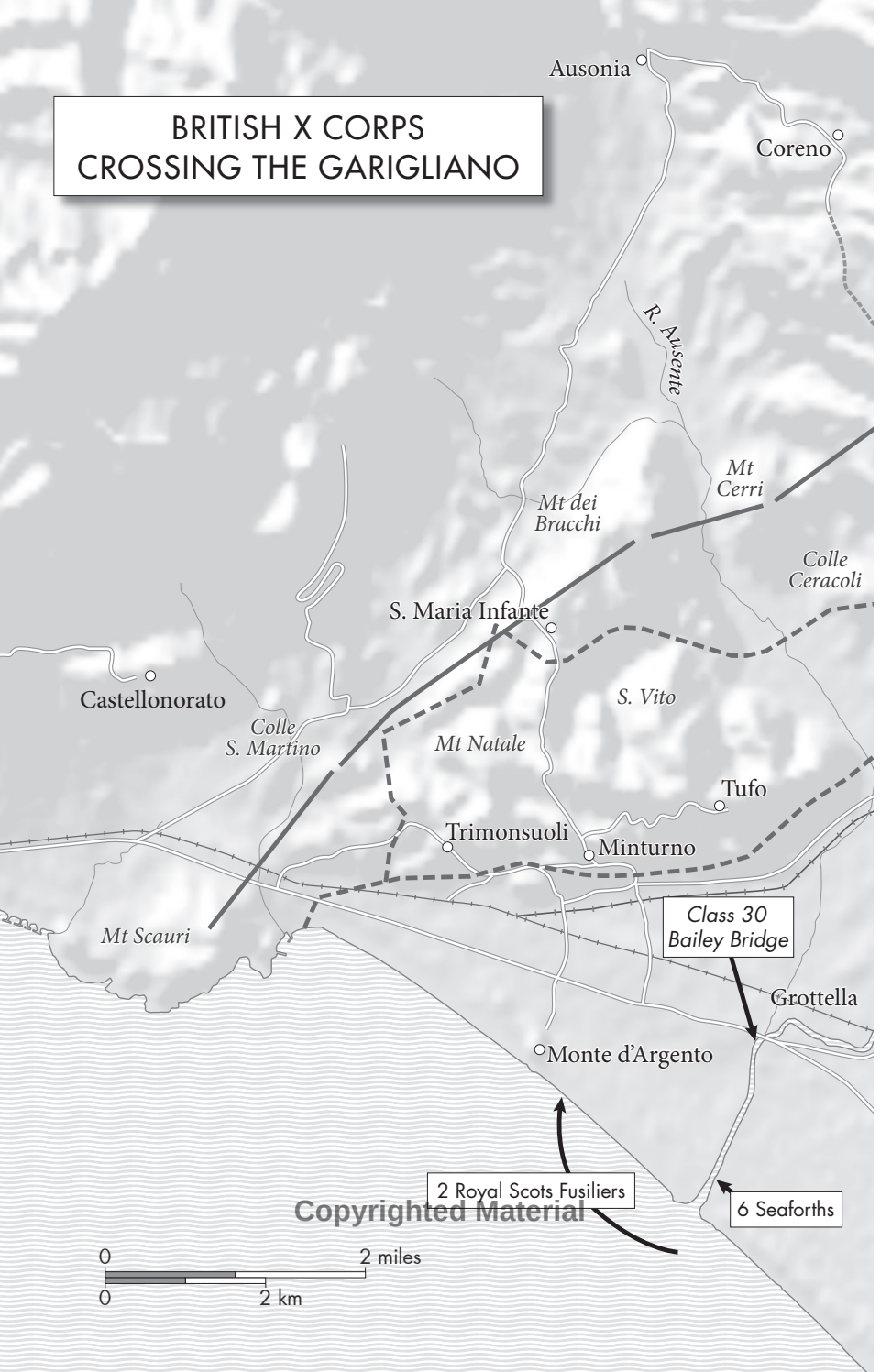

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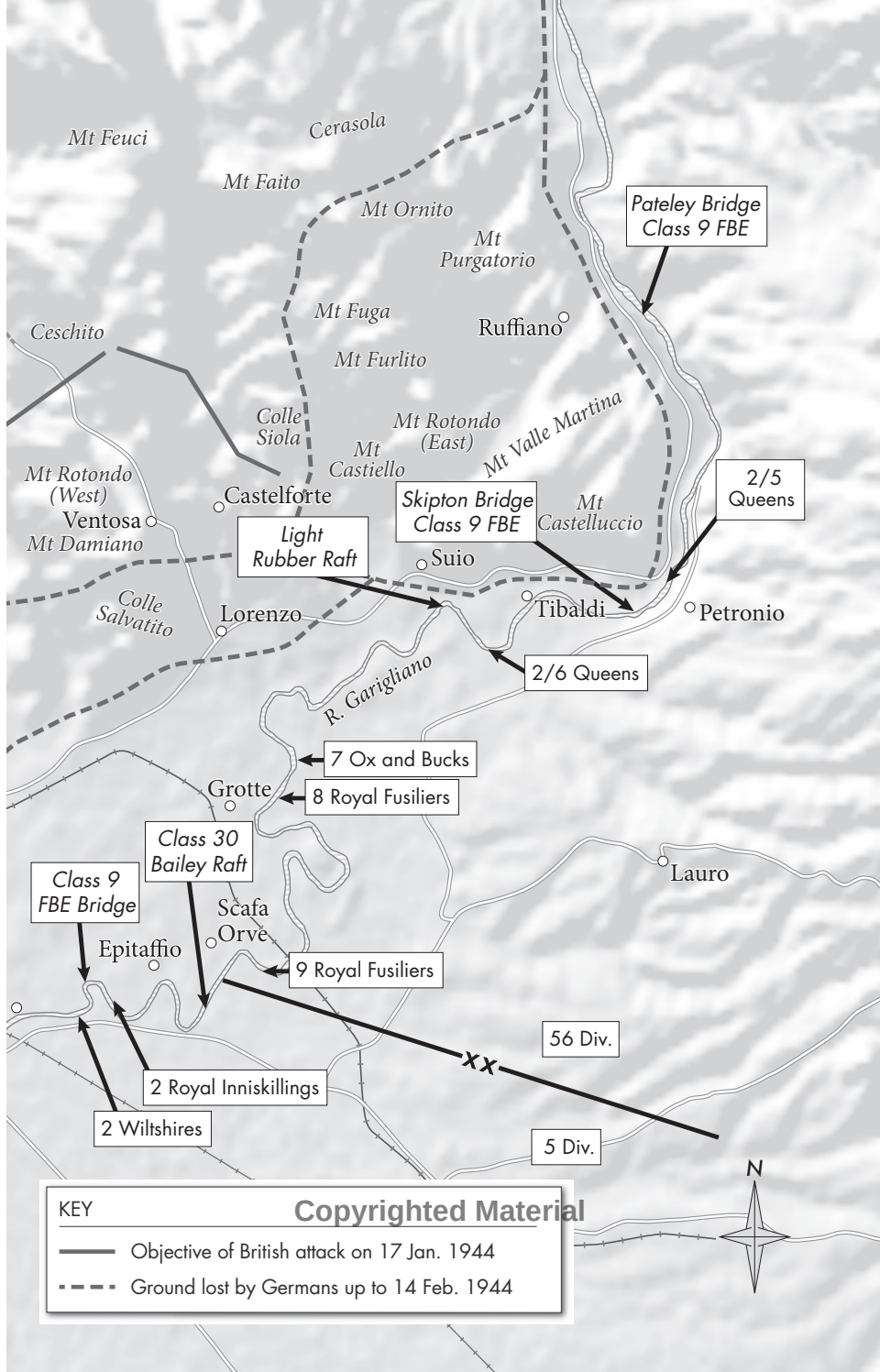

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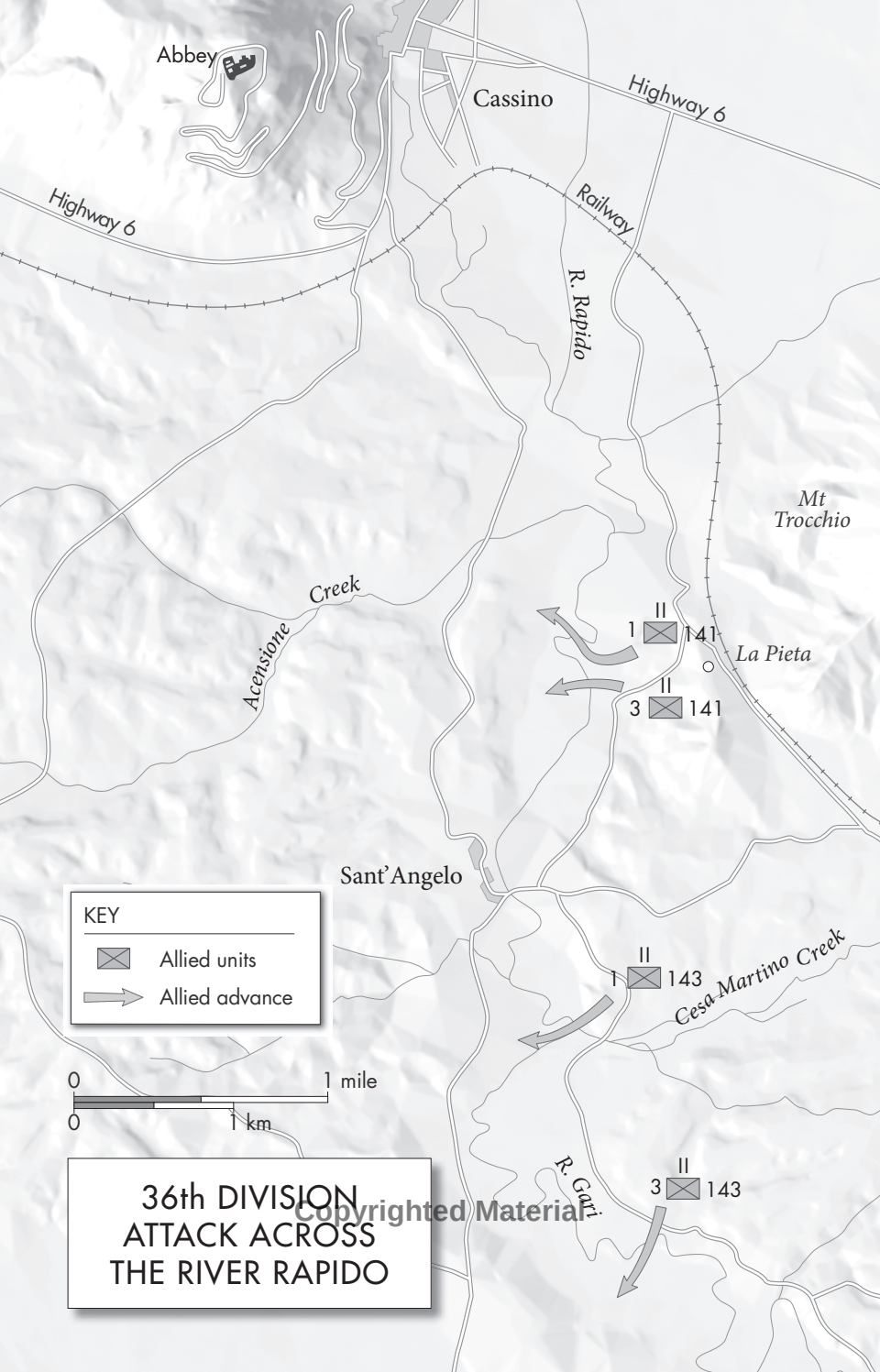

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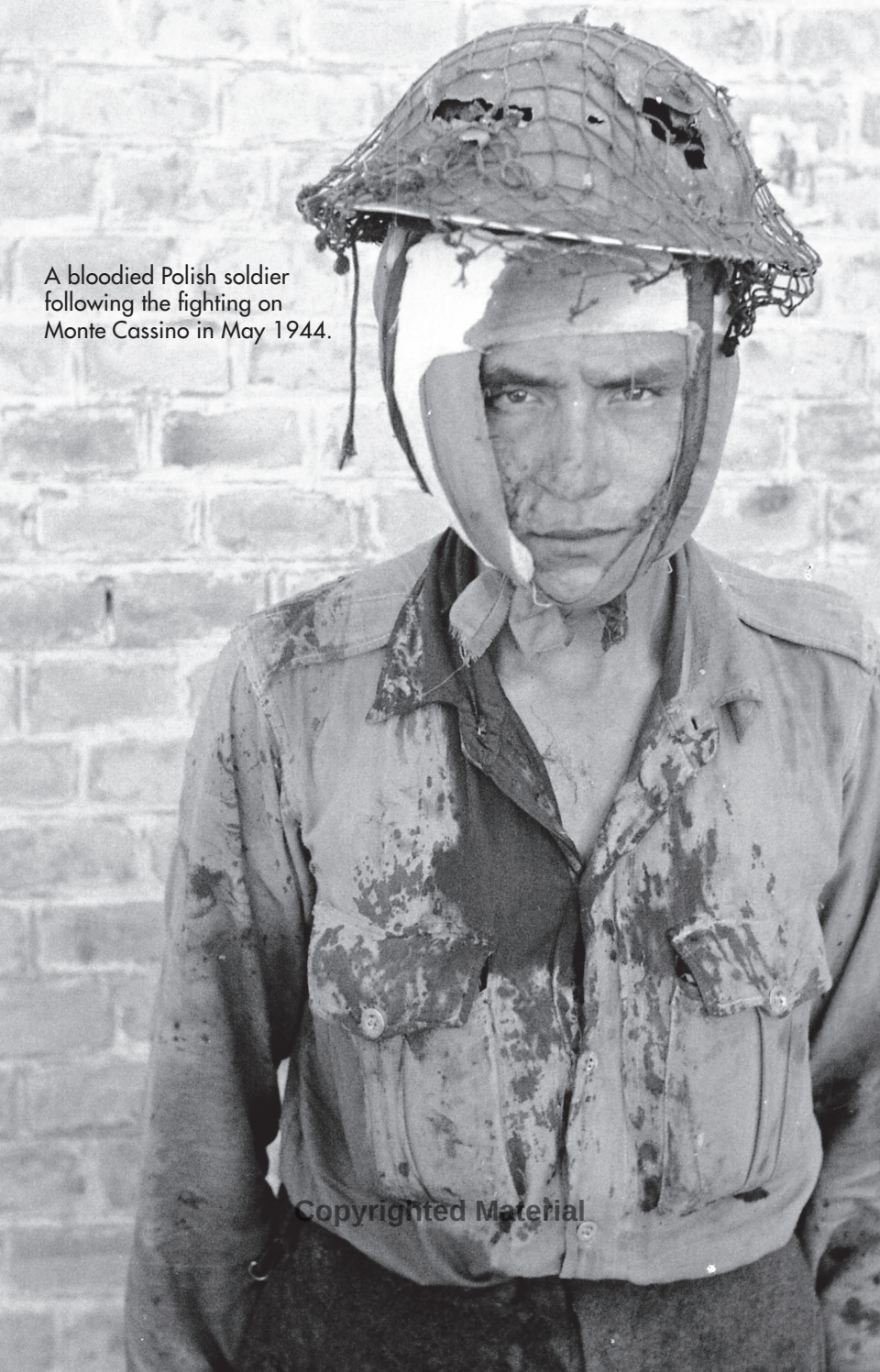

A bloodied Polish soldier following the fighting on Monte Cassino in May 1944.

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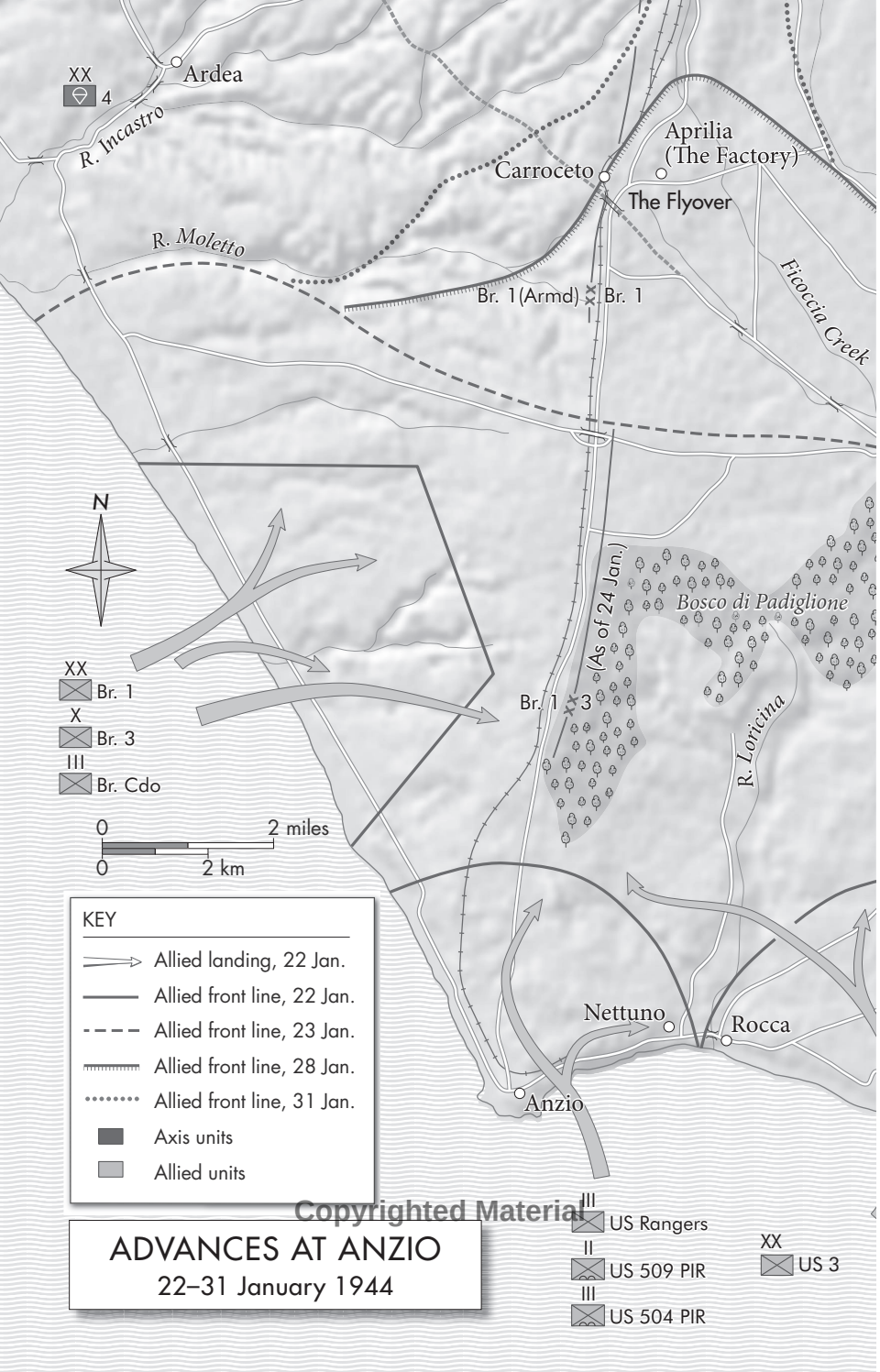

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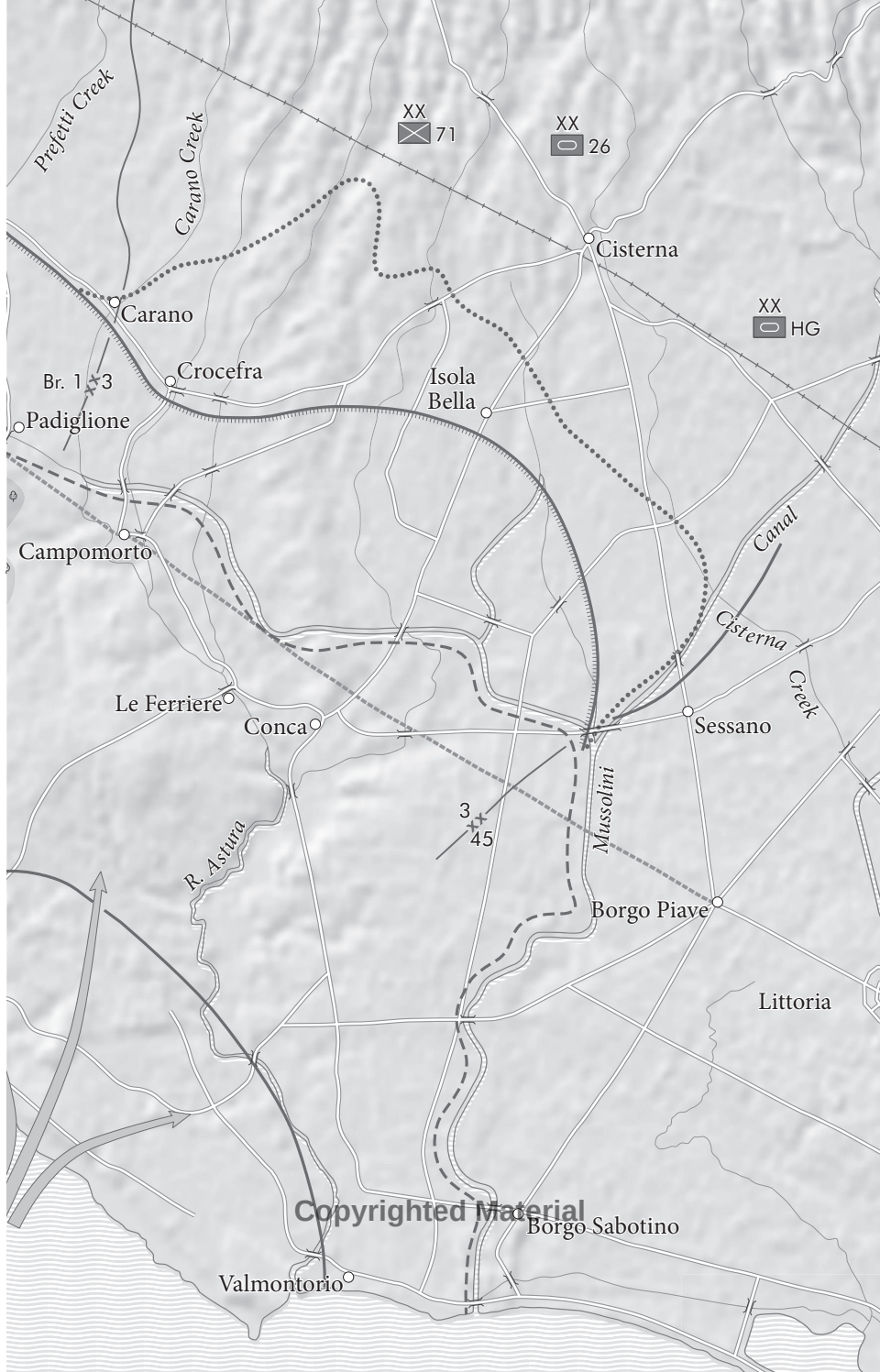
ADVANCES AT ANZIO
22–31 January 1944



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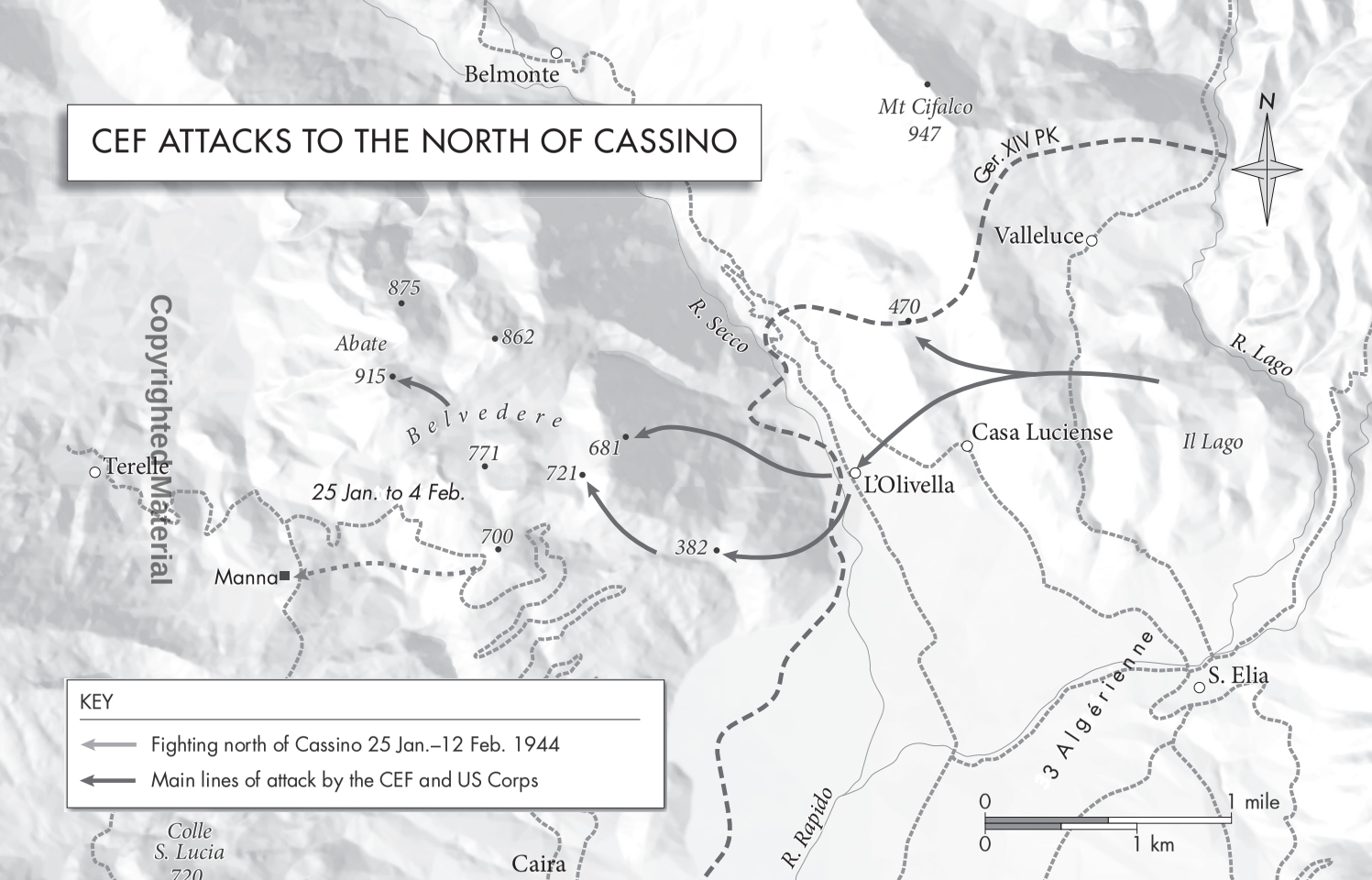
CEF ATTACKS TO THE NORTH OF CASSINO
Belmonte
Mt Cifalco
947
Ger. XIV PK
N
Valleluce
875
Abate
862
915
Belvedere
R. Secco
470
R. Lago
Il Lago
Casa Luciense
681
771
721
25 Jan. to 4 Feb.
Terelle
L'Olivella
700
382
Manna
S. Elia
3 Algérienne
KEY
Fighting north of Cassino 25 Jan.–12 Feb. 1944
Main lines of attack by the CEF and US Corps
0
1 mile
0
1 km
R. Rapido
Colle
S. Lucia
720
Caira
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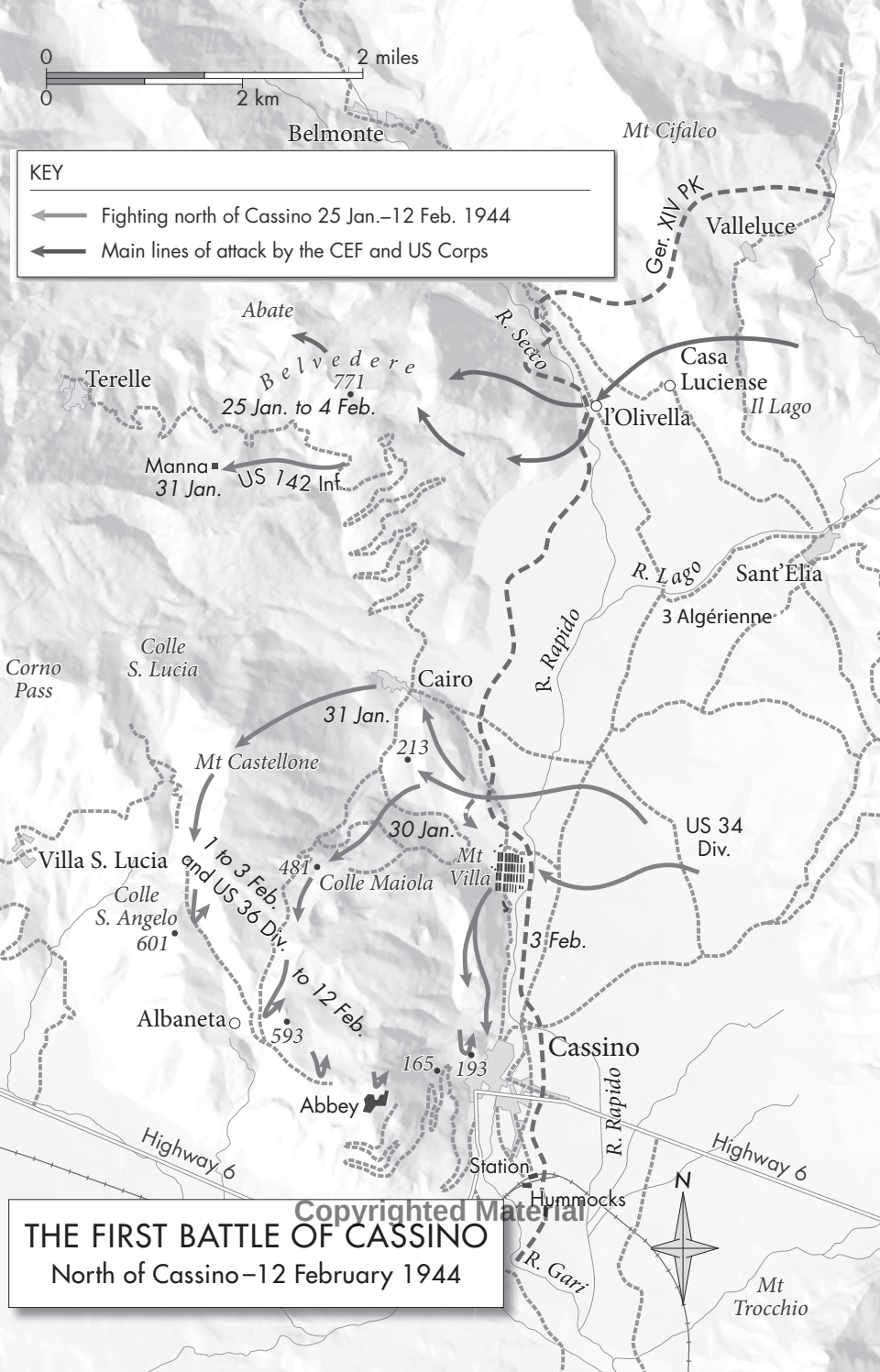

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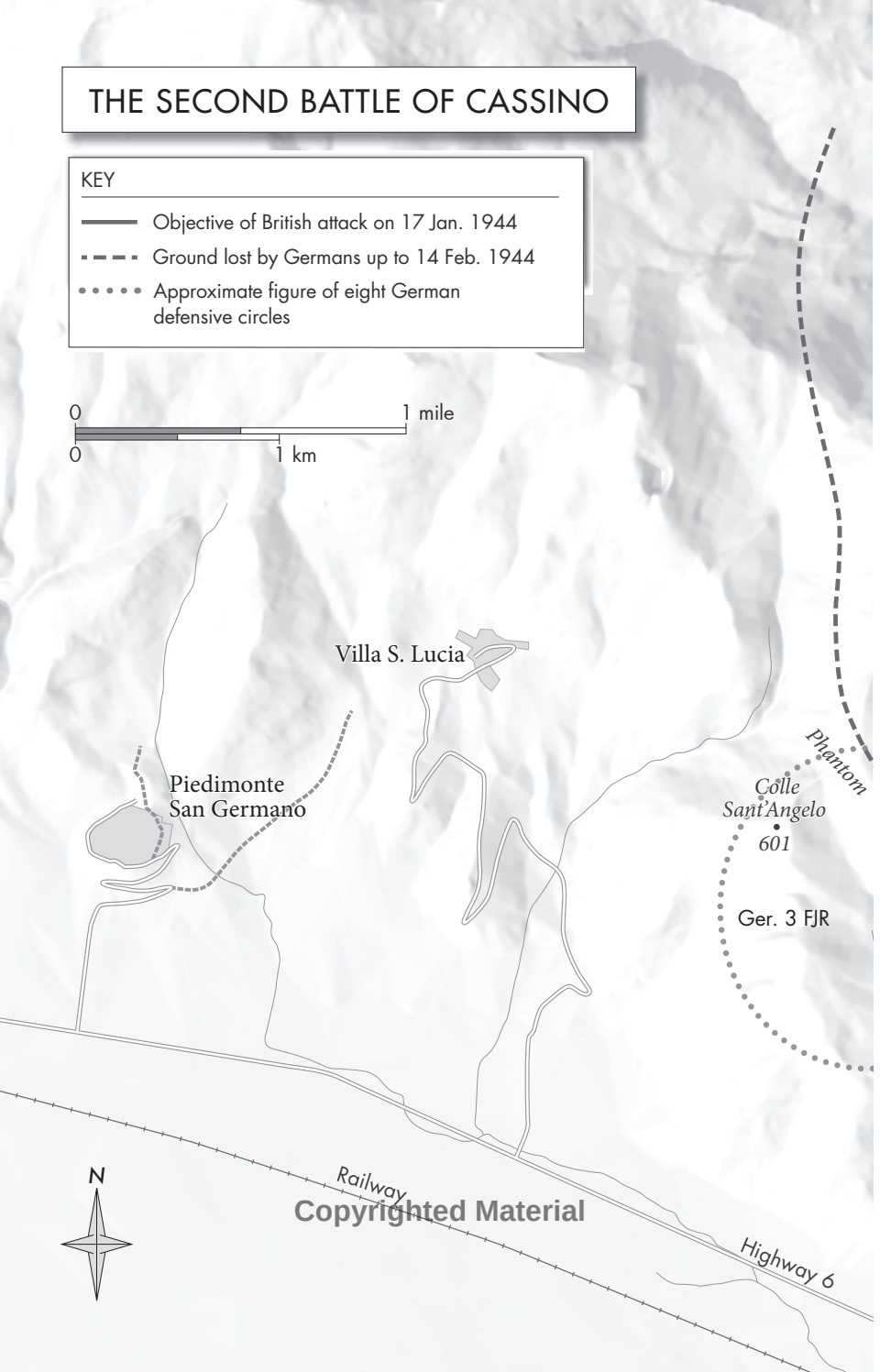

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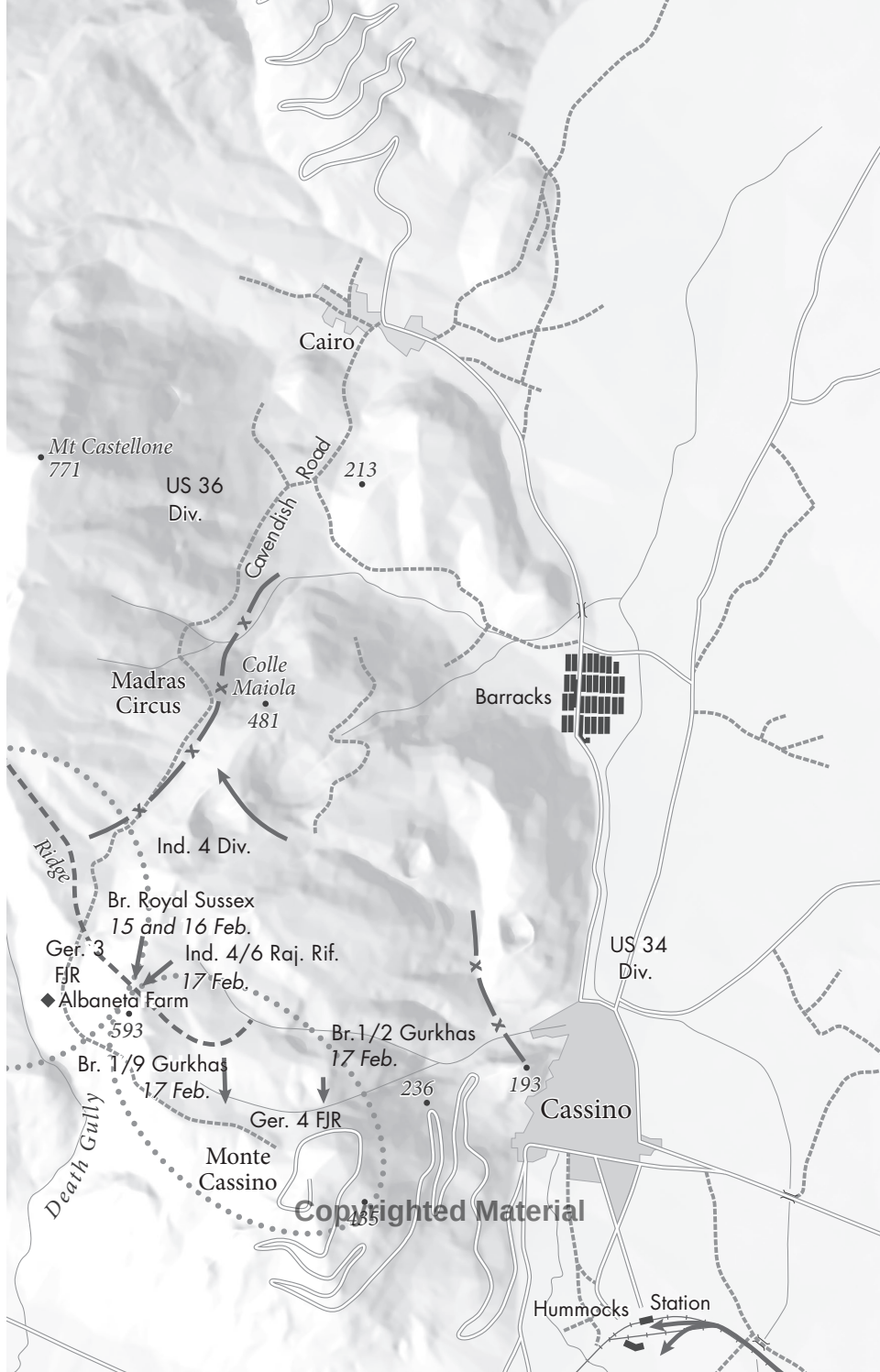

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ANZIO BRITISH SALIENT
The Loss of the Campoleone Salient 3–4 and 7–11February 1944
Campoleone Station
Br. 1 DWR
Tufello
Br. 2 Sherwood Foresters
Ger. 145 GR
Br. 1 Irish Gds
Ger. 147 GR
Ger. 725 GR
Ger. 147 GR
Disused railway
Br. 1 Scots Gds
Br. 5 Gren. Gds
Ger. 145 GR
Boundary between Br 1st Div. and 157th Inf Regt of the US 45th Div.
Aprilia
Br. 2 North Staffs
Carroceto
Buonriposo Ridge
R. Moletta
The Wadis
Caves
24 Guards Bde
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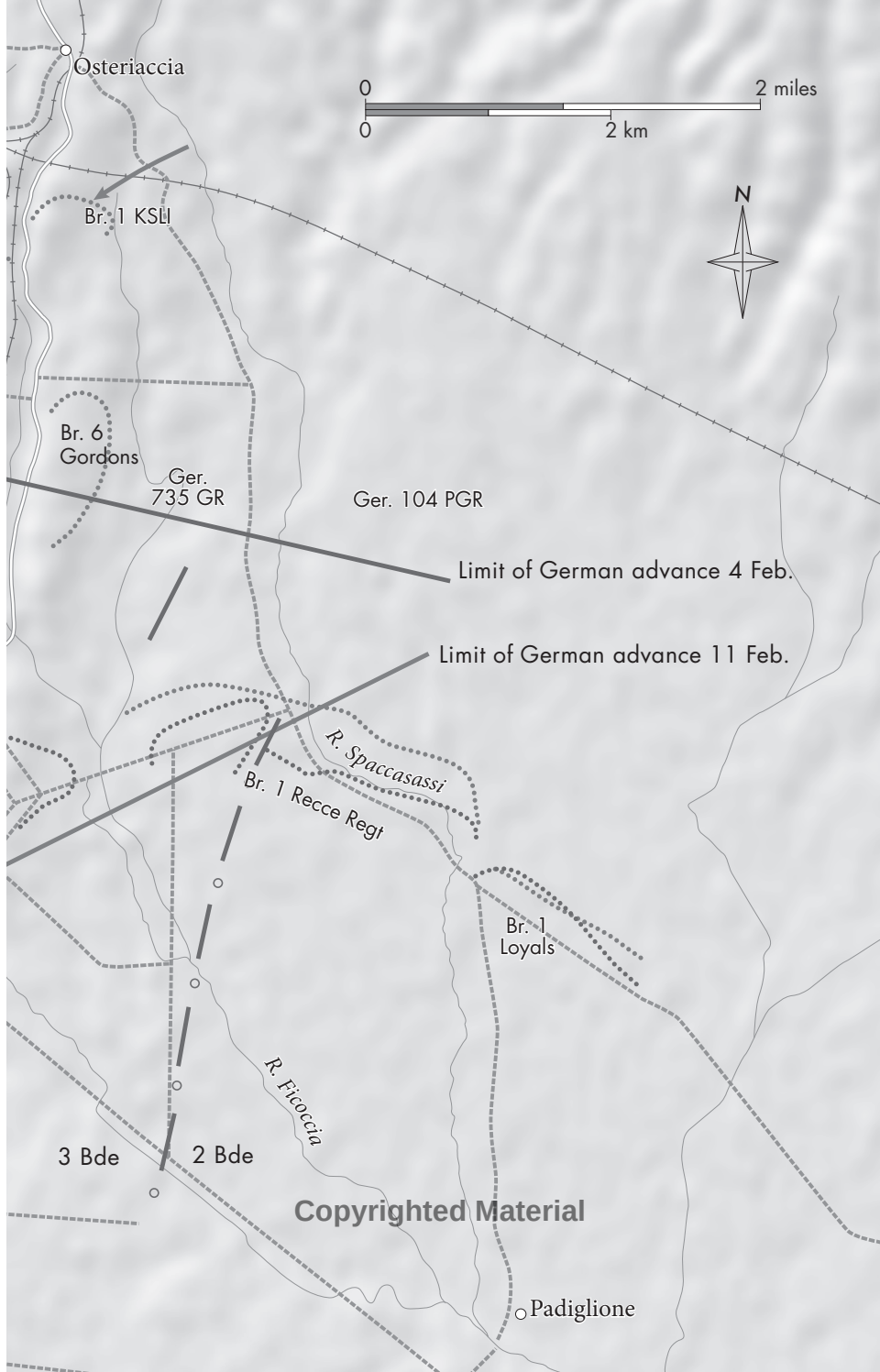
Dead End Road
Flyover



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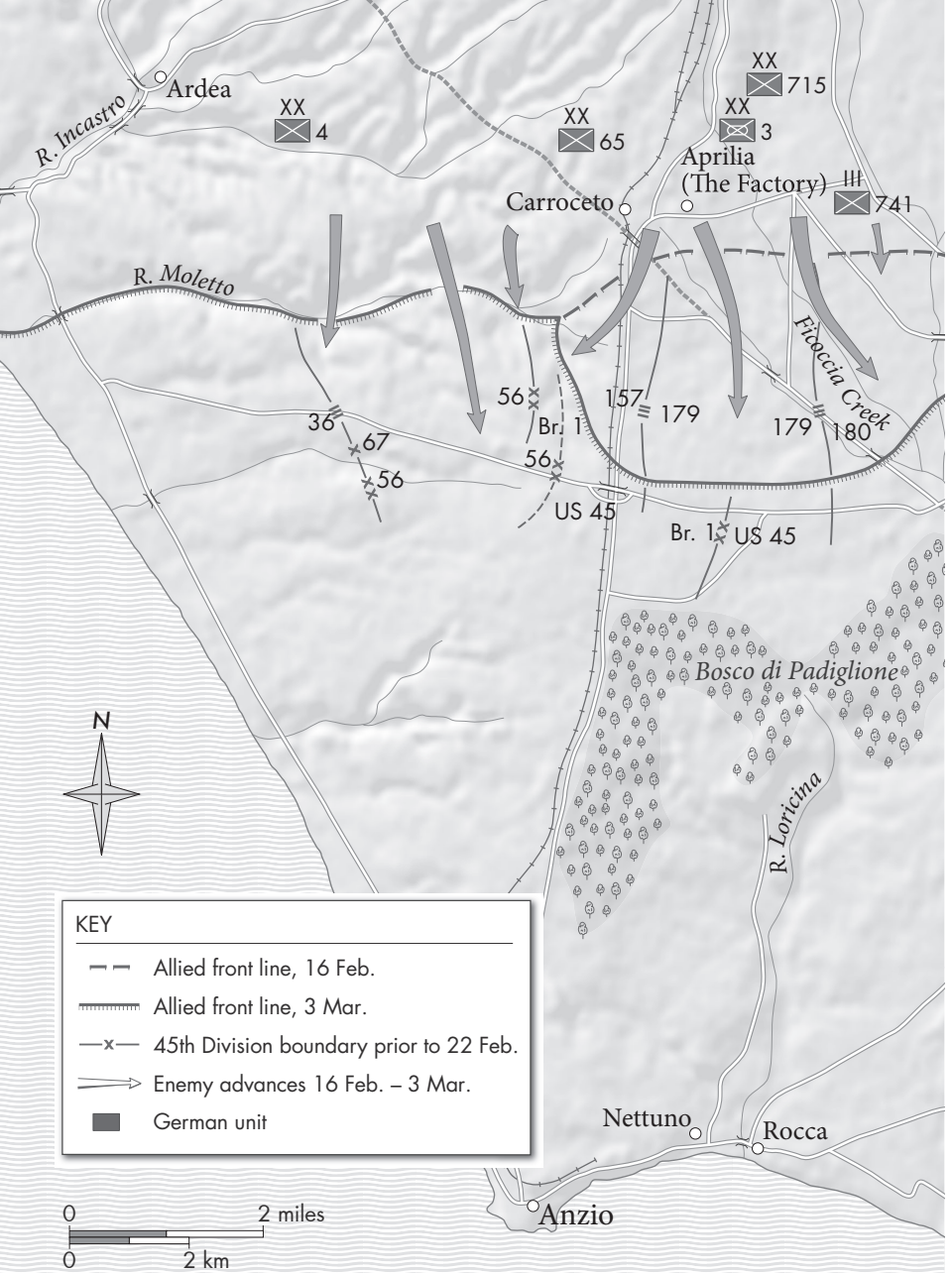

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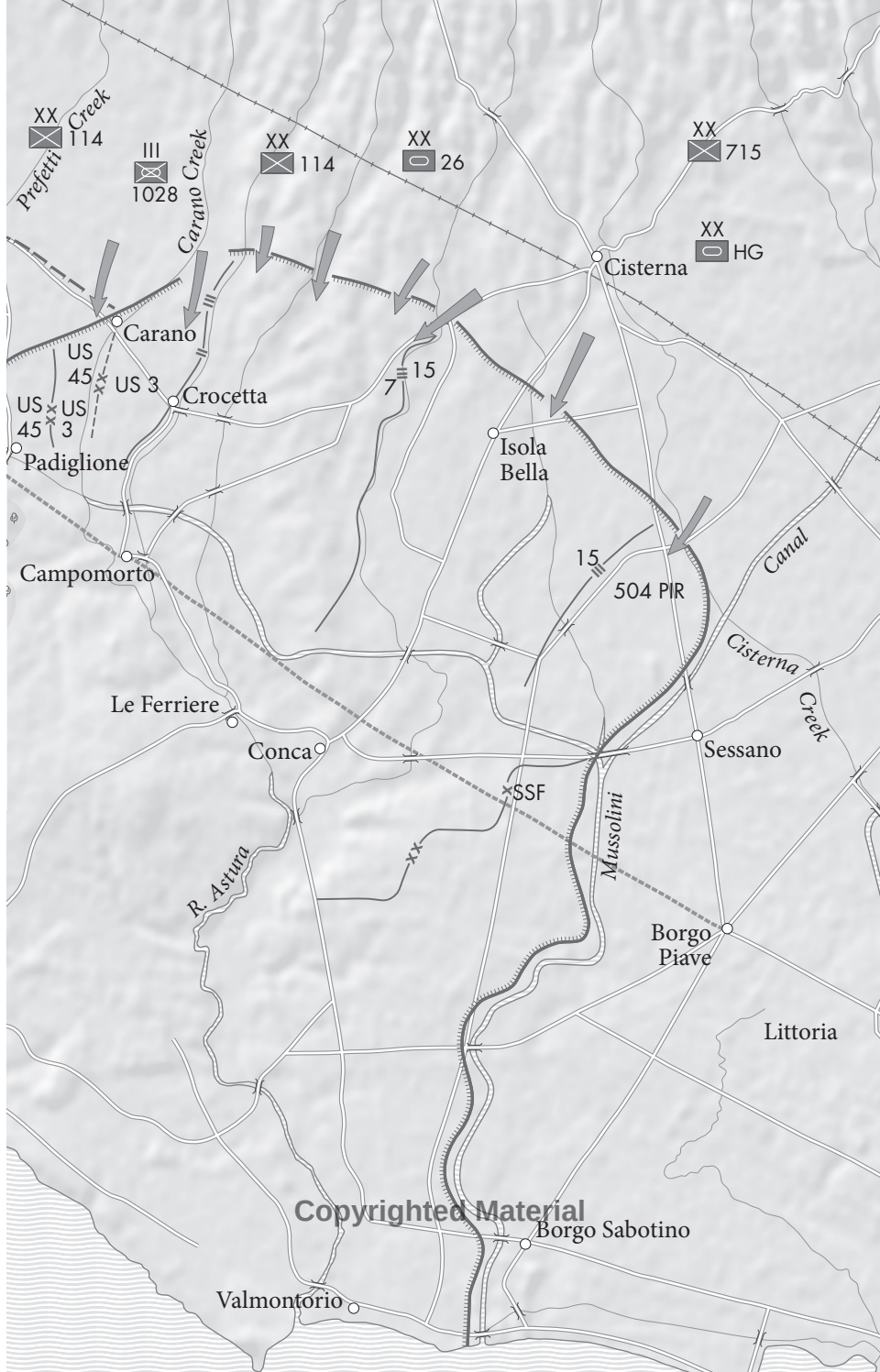
OPERATION FISCHFANG

Enemy Offensive 16 February–3 March 1944



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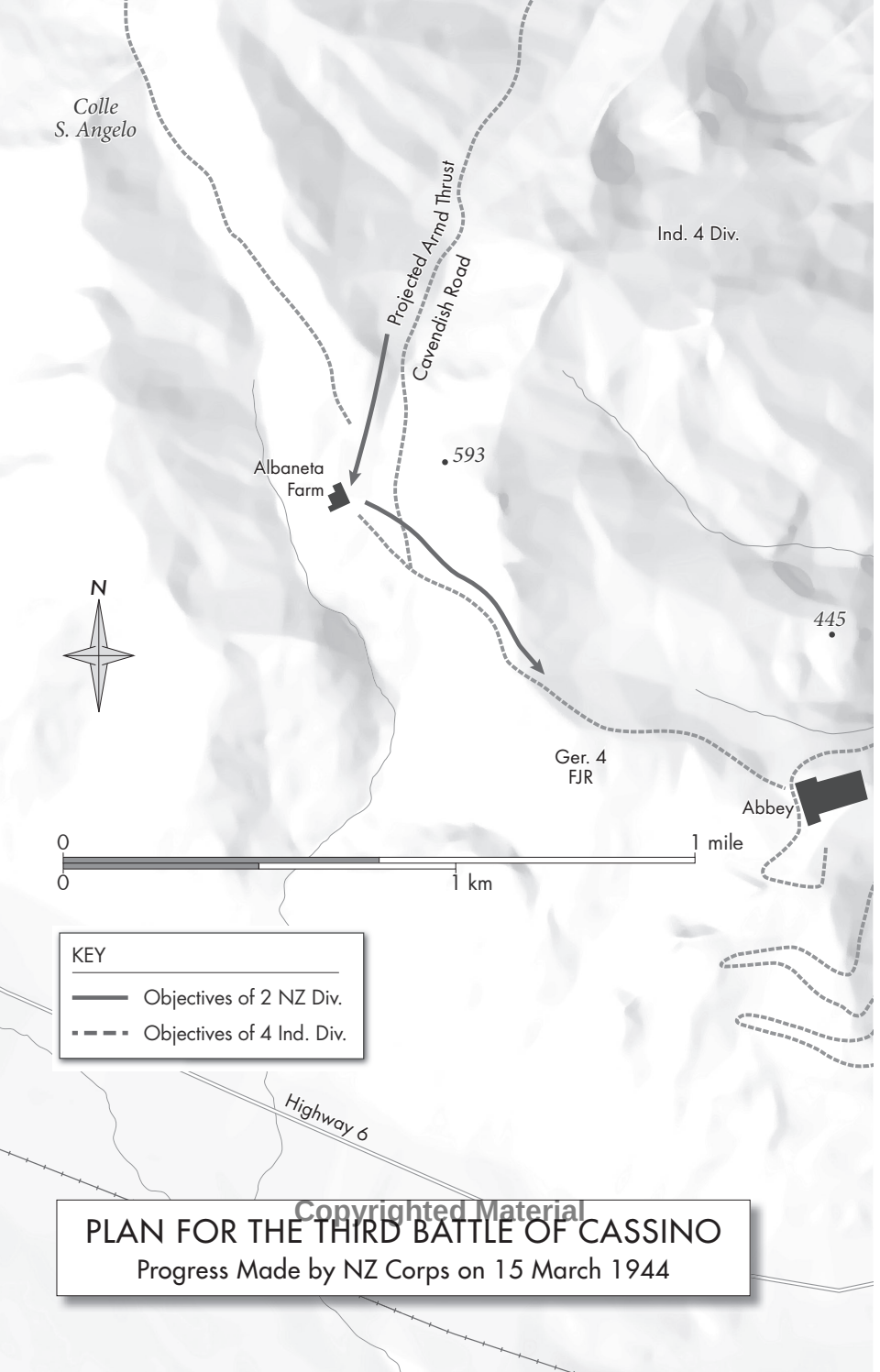

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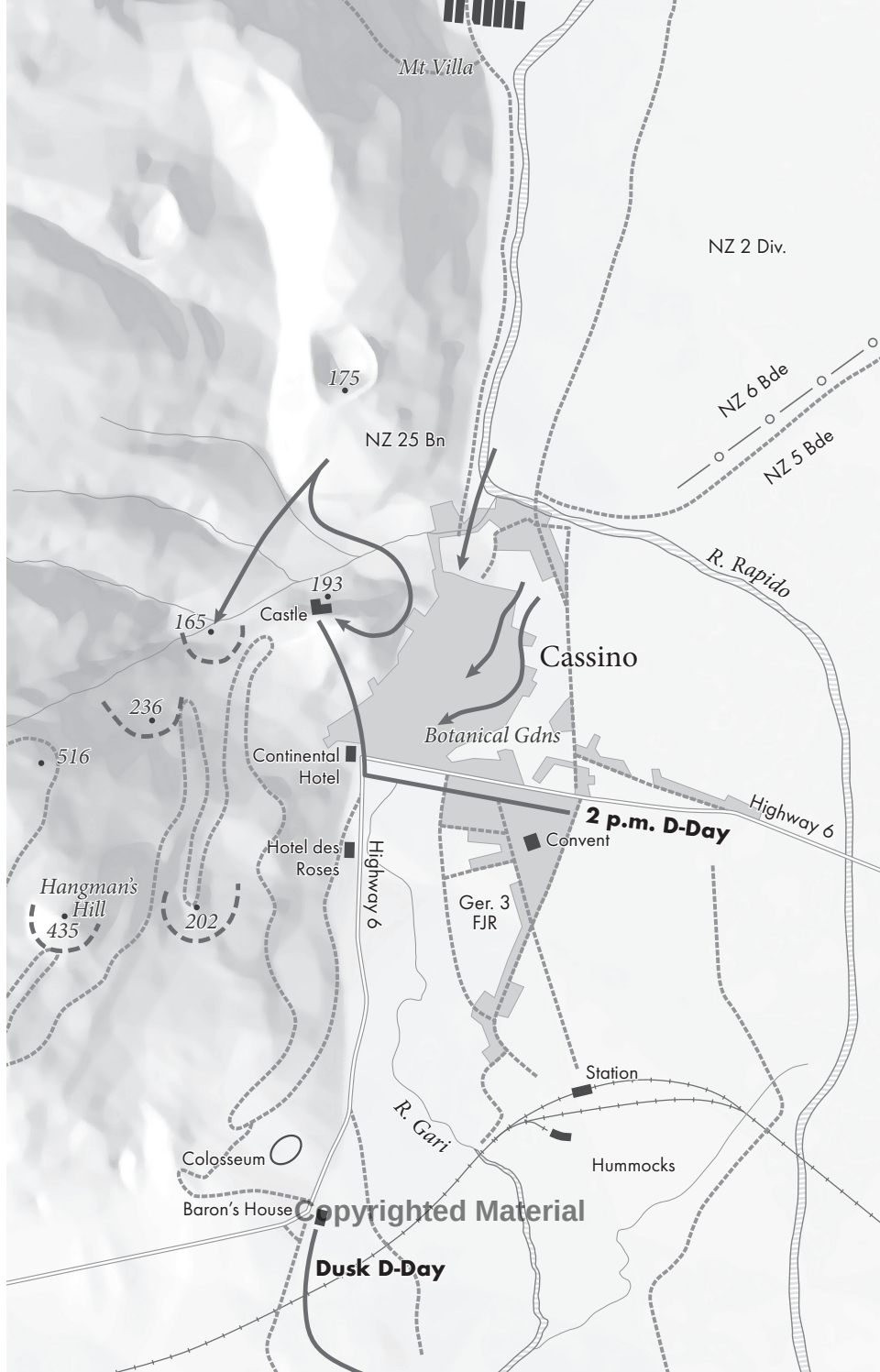
PLAN FOR THE THIRD BATTLE OF CASSINO

Progress Made by NZ Corps on 15 March 1944



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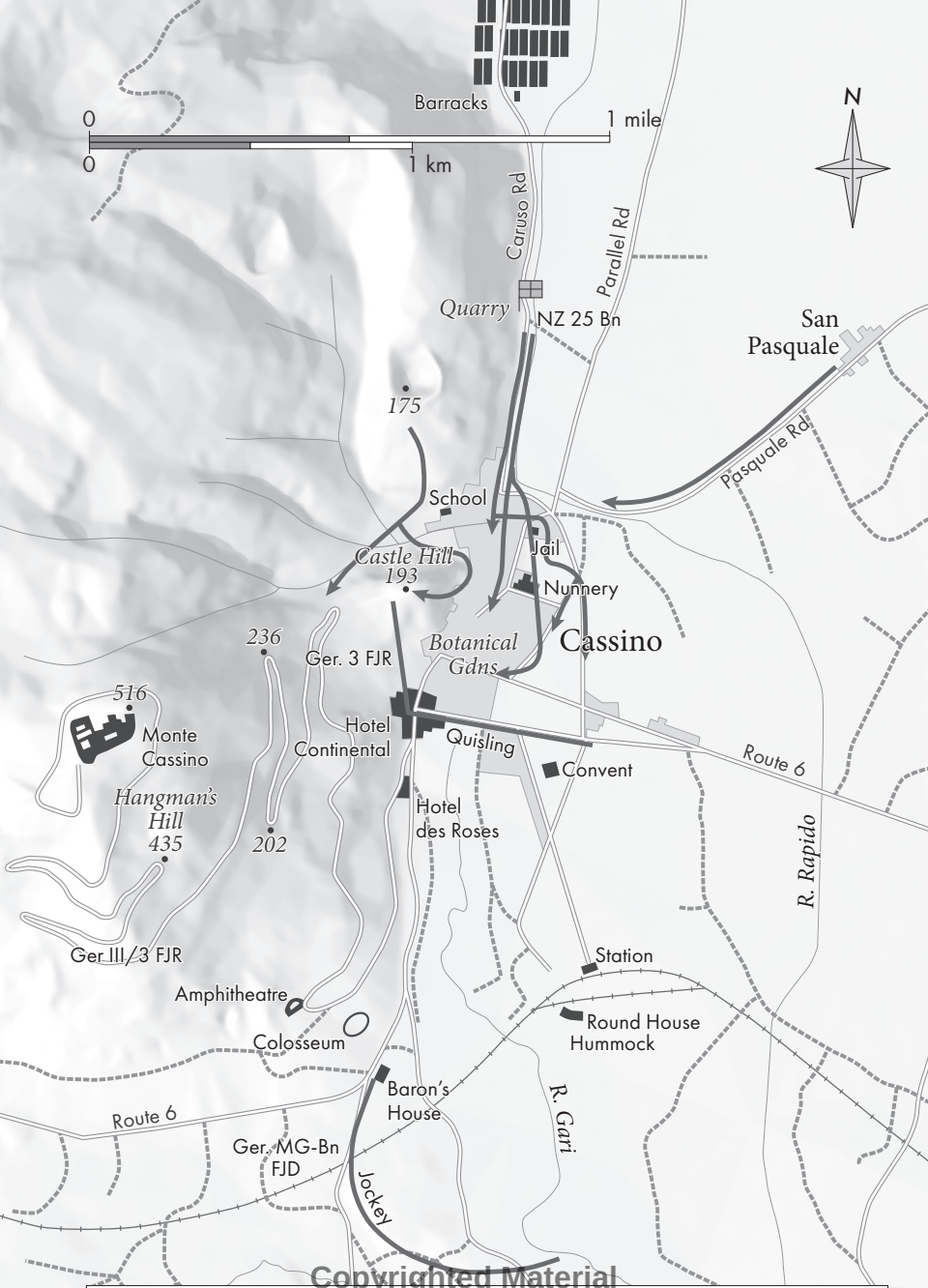

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THE THIRD BATTLE OF CASSINO

The New Zealanders' Attack into the Town on 15–16 March 1944



A taped pathway clear of mines up to the ruins of the abbey, May 1944.

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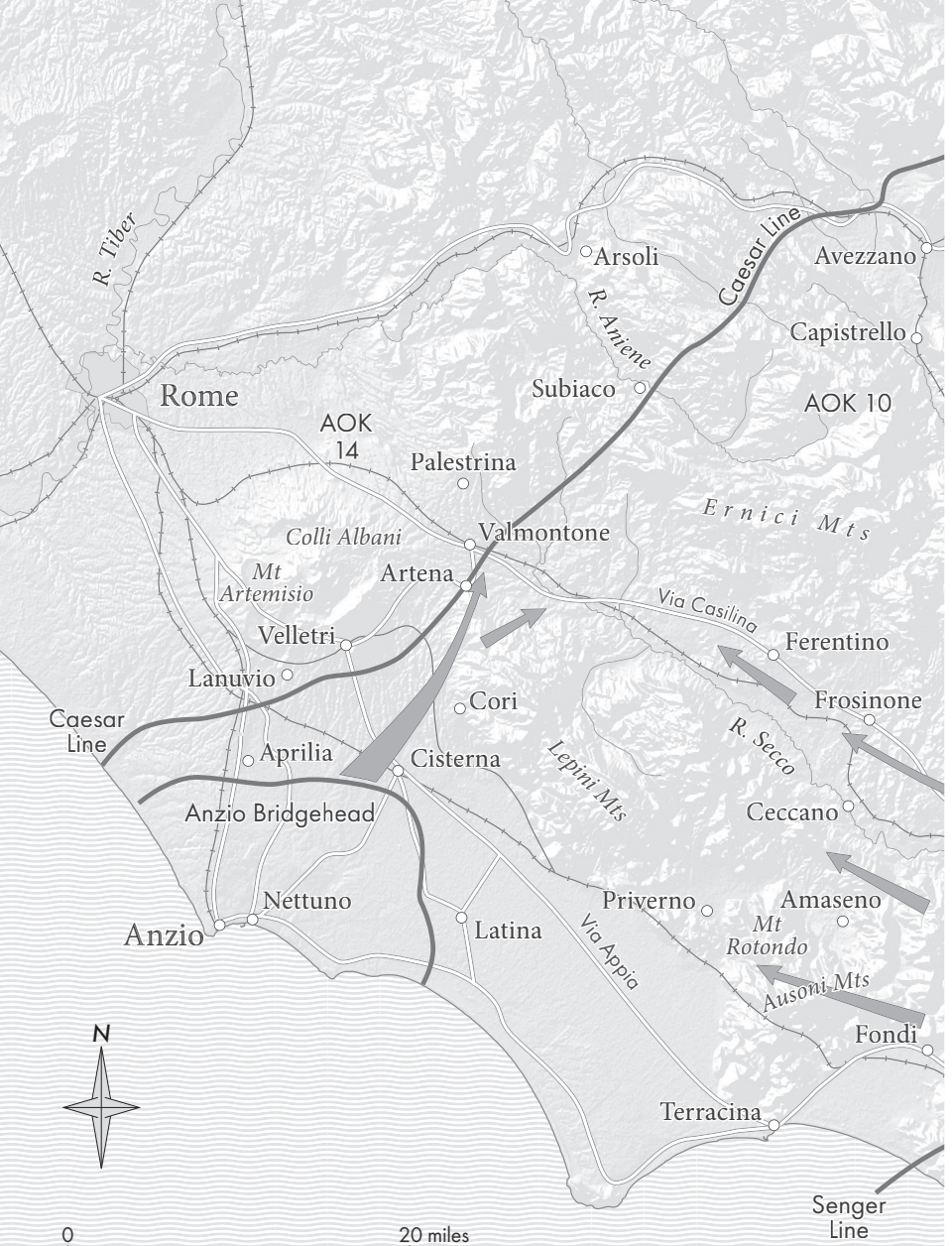

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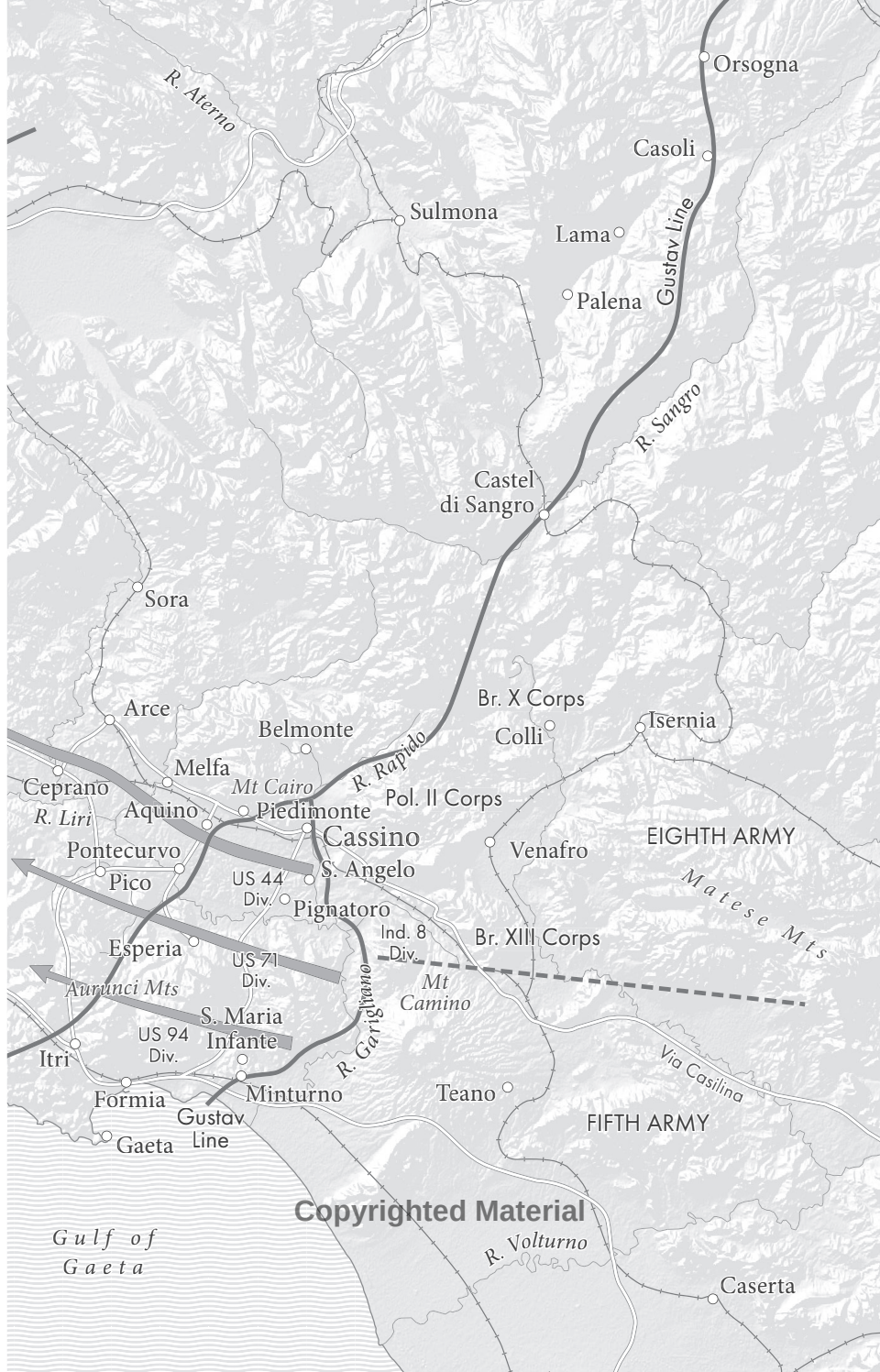
PLAN FOR OPERATION DIADEM



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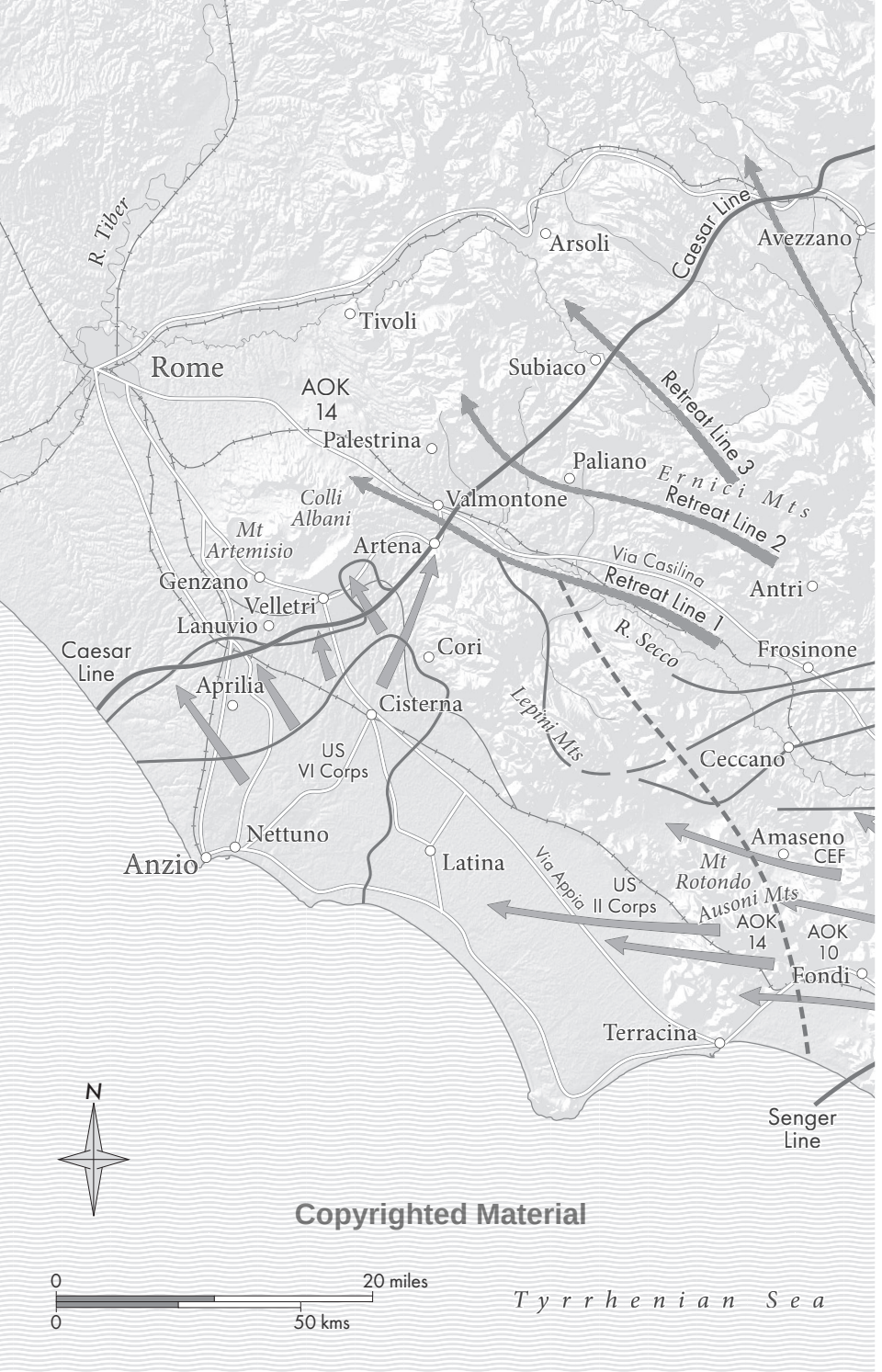
R. Tiber
Arsoli
Caesar Line
Avezzano
Tivoli
Rome
Subiaco
AOK
14
Retreat Line 3
Palestrina
Paliano
Ernici Mts
Retreat Line 2
Colli
Albani
Valmontone
Mt
Artemisio
Artena
Via Casilina
Retreat Line 1
Antri
Genzano
Velletri
Lanuvio
R. Secco
Caesar
Line
Cori
Frosinone
Aprilia
Cisterna
Lepini Mts
US
VI Corps
Ceccano
Nettuno
Amaseno
CEF
Anzio
Latina
Via Appia
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Rotondo
US
II Corps
Ausoni Mts
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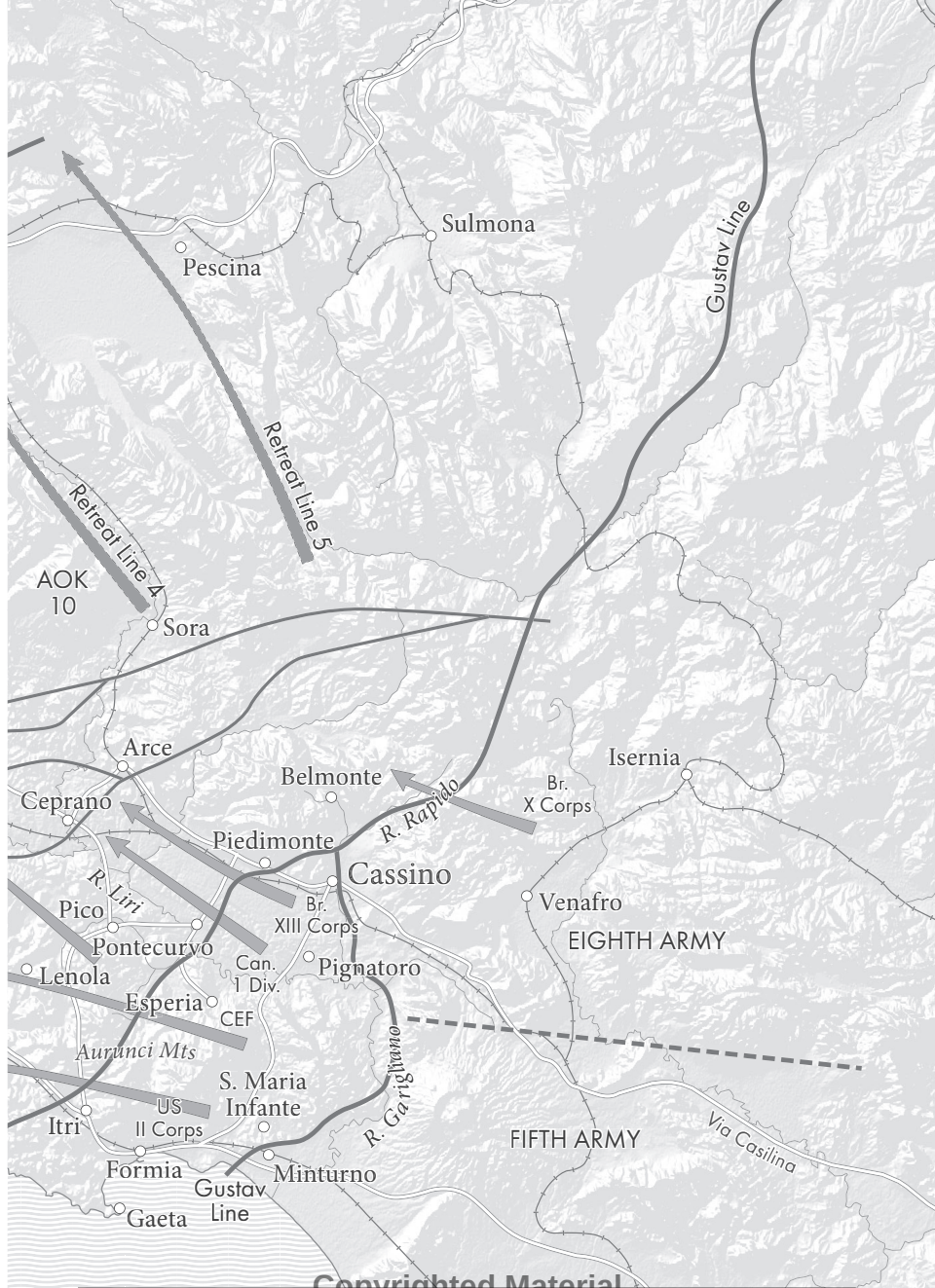
50 kms
Tyrrhenian Sea



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THE BATTLE FOR ROME

The Battle for Rome and German Lines of Retreat for AOK 10



A New Zealand heavy-machine-gun crew near Castle Hill, March 1944. The thin soil and rocky ground made digging in and finding cover very difficult.

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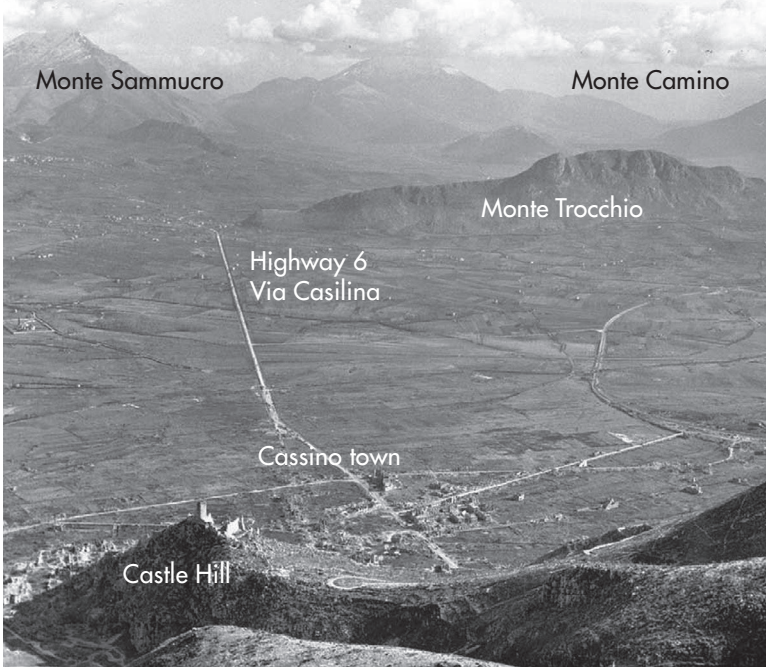
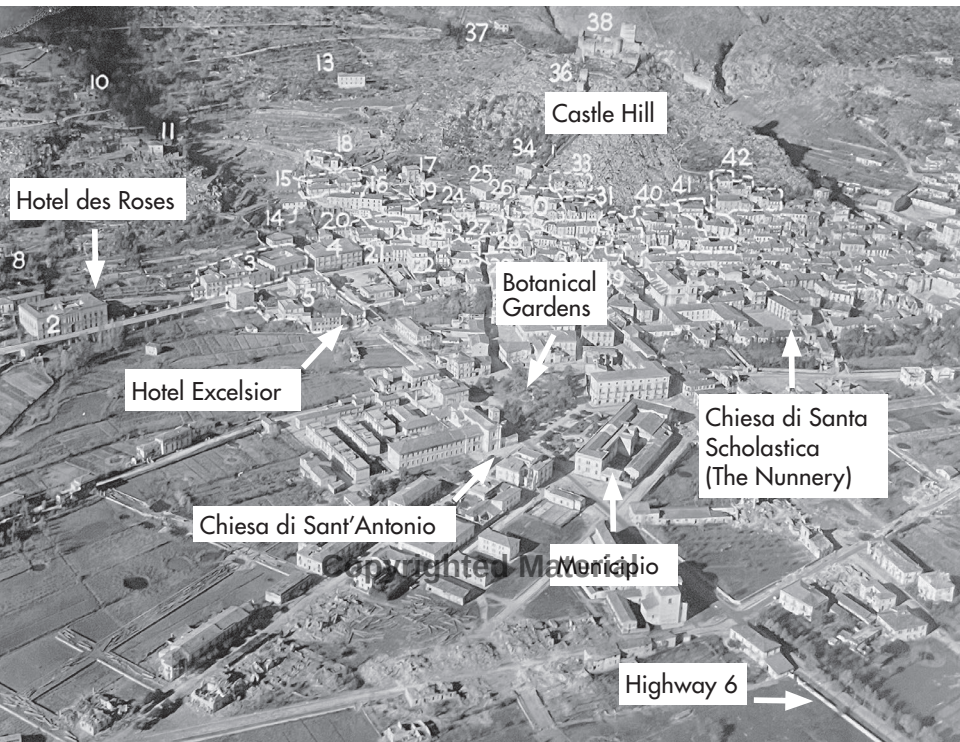


Above: Cassino and Highway 6

Below: Cassino, November 1943



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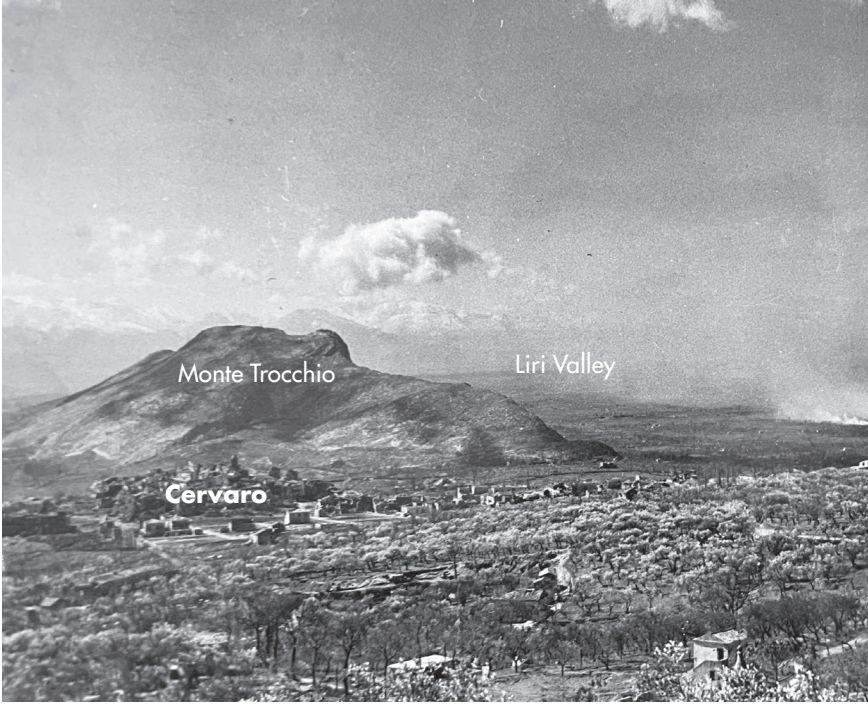

Monte Cassino Panorama



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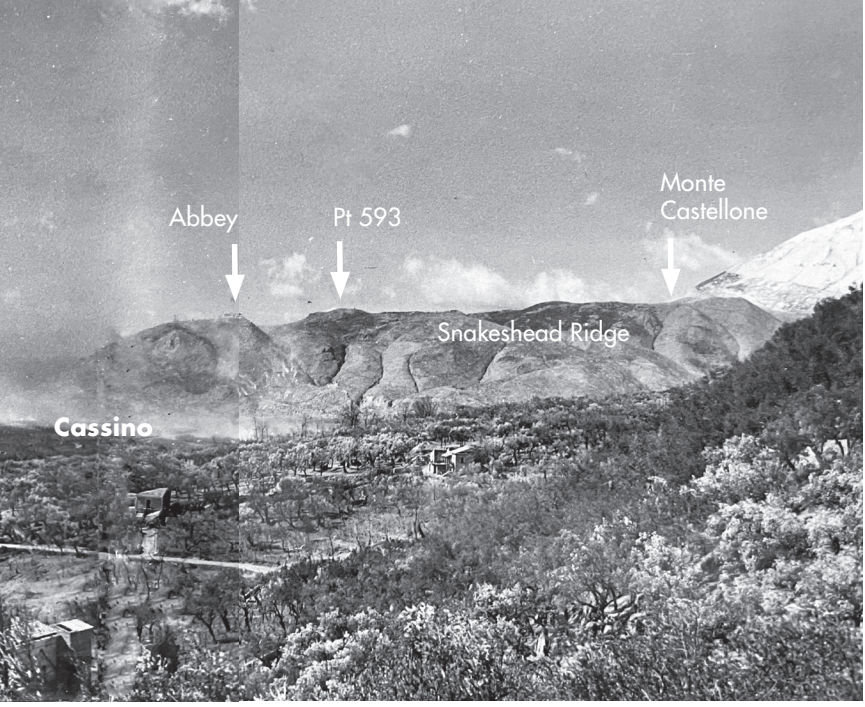
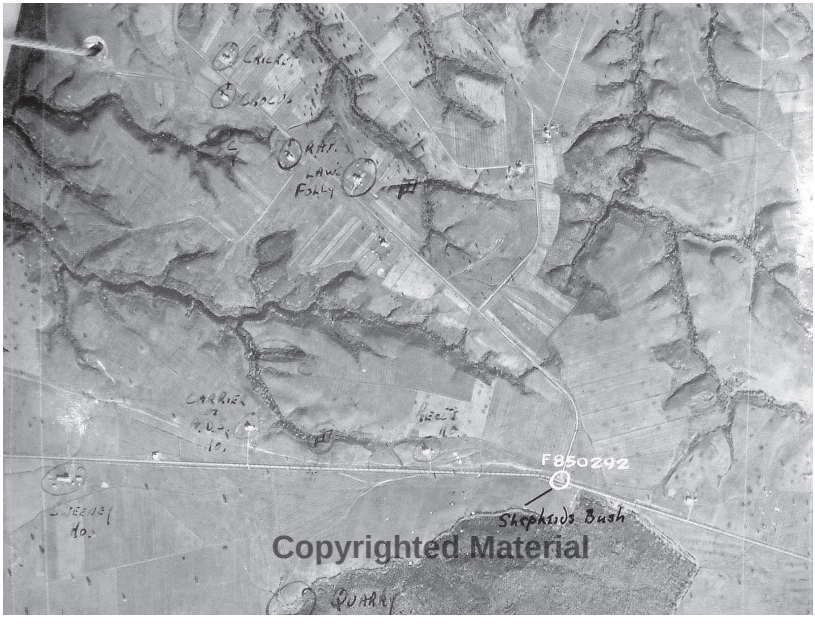
The Factory and Overpass


Abbey
Pt 593
Monte
Castellone
Snakeshead Ridge
Cassino

The Wadis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Shepherds Bush
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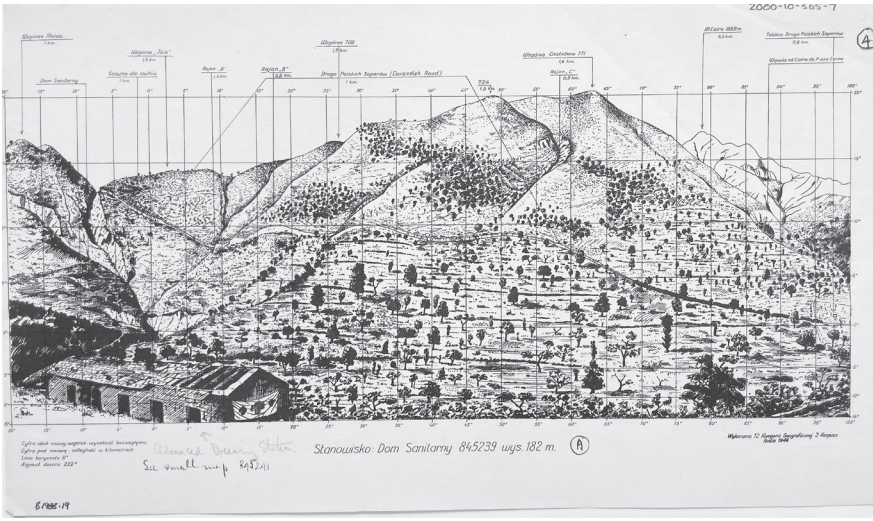
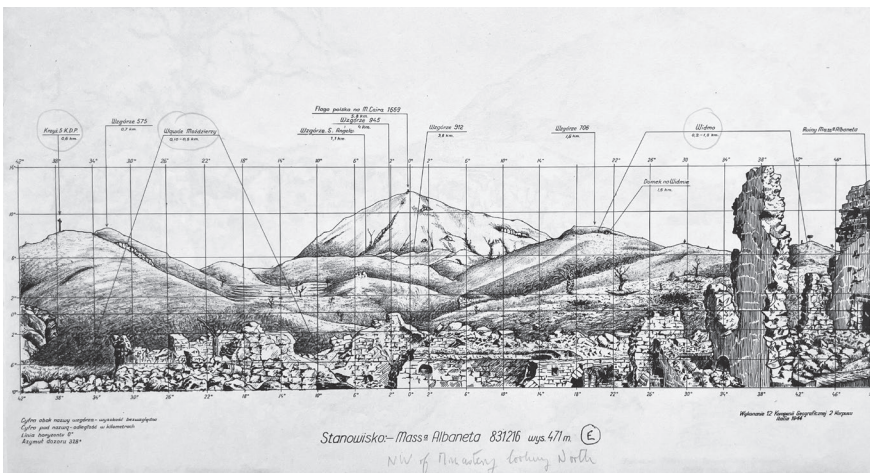
SKETCH MAPS OF THE MONTE CASSINO MASSIF

Prepared by Polish II Corps



Cavendish Road



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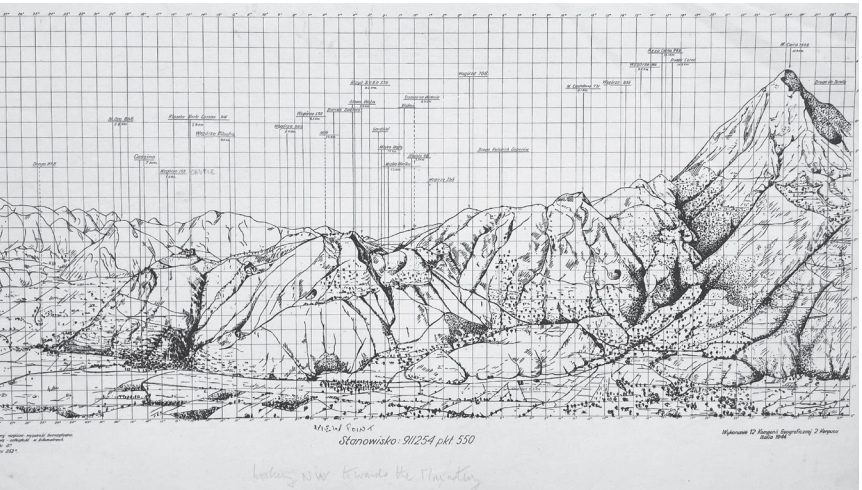
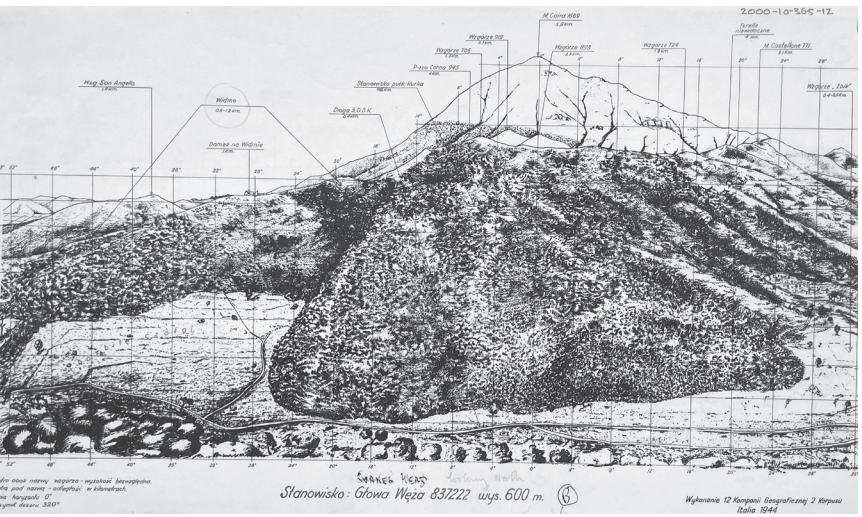
Colle Sant'Angelo from Albaneta



Monte Cassino Massif in Profile



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Snakeshead and Monte Cairo



A B-26 Marauder attacking railway lines during Operation STRANGLE.

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Principal Personalities

American

Sergeant Maurice 'Frenchy' Bechard
Company A, 16th Engineer Regiment, 1st Armored Division

Lieutenant Harold L. Bond
Mortar Platoon, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th Infantry Division

Sergeant Ross C. Carter
Company B, 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment

General Mark Clark
Commander, US Fifth Army

Colonel William O. Darby
Commander, Army Rangers

Captain Roswell K. Doughty
Intelligence Officer, S-2, and commanding officer of Intelligence & Reconnaissance Platoon, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th 'Texas' Division

Lieutenant-General Ira Eaker
Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Allied Air Forces

Colonel Hamilton Howze
Commander, 13th Armored Regiment and later Howze Force, 1st Armored Division

Captain Klaus H. Huebner
Battalion Surgeon, 3rd Battalion, 349th Infantry Regiment, 88th Infantry Division

Lieutenant Ralph 'Lucky' Lucardi
64th Fighter Squadron, 57th Fighter Group, USAAF

Major-General John Lucas
Commander, VI Corps

Sergeant Audie Murphy
Company B, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division

Private Frank Pearce
Company C, 111th Engineer Battalion, attached to 143rd Infantry Regiment, 36th Infantry Division

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Sergeant Ralph B. Schaps
Company H, 2nd Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment, 34th 'Red Bulls' Division

Captain Felix Sparks
Commander, Company E, 2nd Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th 'Thunderbirds' Division

Captain Robert Spencer
Commander, Company F, 2nd Battalion, 143rd Infantry Regiment, 36th Infantry Division

Lieutenant T. Michael Sullivan
Bombardier, 429th Bomb Squadron, 2nd Bomb Group, Fifteenth Air Force

Major-General Lucian Truscott
Commander, 3rd Infantry Division then US VI Corps

Lieutenant Robert A. 'Smoky' Vrilakas
P-38 pilot, 94th Fighter Squadron, 1st Fighter Group

Australian

Major Lawrence Franklyn-Vaile
1st Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers, 38th Irish Brigade, 78th Infantry Division

British

General Sir Harold Alexander
Commander, 15th Army Group

Brigadier Donald Bateman
Commander, 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, 4th Indian Division

Lieutenant David Cole
Battalion Signals Officer, 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 13th Infantry Brigade, 5th Infantry Division

Guardsman Edward Danger
5th Battalion, Grenadier Guards, 24th Guards Brigade, 1st Infantry Division

Captain Michael Doble
2nd Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery

Captain Leonard Garland
70th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery

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Major Michael Gordon-Watson
Second-in-command, 1st Battalion Irish Guards, 1st Infantry Division

Lieutenant-General John Harding
Chief of Staff to General Alexander, 15th Army Group

Sergeant Norman Lewis
British intelligence officer with 312th Field Security Section

Harold Macmillan
Minister of State

Captain John Strick
Intelligence officer then D Company, 1st London Irish Rifles, 168th Brigade, 56th Division

Major-General Francis Tuker
Commander, 4th Indian Division

Corporal Harry Wilson
Cipher clerk with 8th Indian Division HQ and later 17th Indian Brigade

Lieutenant Ted Wyke-Smith
281st Field Park Company, 214th Field Company Royal Engineers, 78th Division

Canadian

Major the Reverend Roy Durnford
Padre, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 1st Canadian Infantry Division

French

Capitaine Jacques Denée
9ème Compagnie, 2ème Bataillon, 4ème Régiment de Tirailleurs Tunisiens, 3ème Division d'Infanterie Algérienne, CEF

Commandant Paul Gandoët
Commander, 3ème Bataillon, 4ème Régiment de Tirailleurs Tunisiens, 3ème Division d'Infanterie Algérienne, CEF

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German

Feldwebel Rudolf Donth
6. Kompanie, 2. Bataillon, 4. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment, 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division

Generalleutnant Valentin Feurstein
Commander, LI Gebirgs-Armeekorps

Oberleutnant Hans Golda
Commander, 8. Batterie, 71. Werfer-Regiment, 15. Panzergrenadier-Division

Hauptmann Jürgen Harder
Staffelkapitän 7. Jagdgeschwader 53, then Gruppenkommandeur of I. JG53

Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring
Oberbefehlshaber Süd

Unteroffizier Jupp Klein
2. Kompanie, 1. Pionier-Bataillon, 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division

Major Rudolf Kratzert
Commander, 3. Bataillon, 3. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment, 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division

Gefreiter Hans-Paul Liebschner
Kampfgruppe Gericke

Dr Wilhelm Mauss
Chief Medical Officer, XIV Panzerkorps headquarters

Obergefreiter Karl Müller
6. Kompanie, 2. Bataillon, 4. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment, 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division

Oberfeldwebel Felix Reimann
StuG commander in Kampfgruppe Gräser

Generalleutnant Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin
Commander, XIV Panzerkorps

Major Georg Zellner
Commander, 3. Bataillon, 44. Reichs-Grenadier-Regiment, 44. 'Hoch-und-Deutschmeister' Division

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Italian

Viviana Bauco
Civilian living in Ripi

Carla Capponi – 'Elena'
Member of Rome-based partisan movement Gruppi di Azione Patriottica

Count Filippo Caracciolo
Member of the Partito d'Azione based in Naples

Pasqualina 'Lina' Caruso
Civilian living in Eboli

Dom Eusebio Grossetti
Benedictine monk at the Abbey of Monte Cassino

Dom Martino Matronola
Benedictine monk at the Abbey of Monte Cassino

Pasua Pisa
Civilian living on Monte Rotondo near Amaseno

New Zealander

Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg
Commander, New Zealand Corps

Sergeant Roger Smith
A Company, 24th Battalion, New Zealand Expeditionary Force

Polish

Lejtnant-General Władisław Anders
Commander, Polish II Corps

Lejtnant Władek Rubnikowicz
12th Podolski Reconnaissance Regiment, 3rd Carpathian Division, Polish II Corps

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Isaac Akinaka



General Sir Harold Alexander



General Władysław Anders



Carla Capponi



Filippo Caracciolo



Ross Carter



Ottavio Cirulli



General Mark Clark



David Cole

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William O. Darby



Mike Doble



Rudolf Donth



Roswell Doughty



Ira Eaker



General Valentin Feurstein



Lawrie Franklyn-Vaile



Paul Gandoët



Leonard Garland

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Mike Gordon-Watson



Jürgen Harder



General John Harding



Klaus Huebner



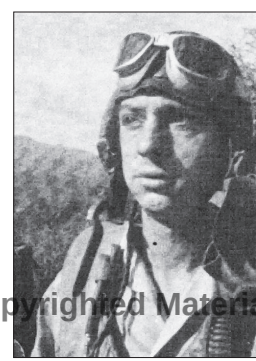
Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring



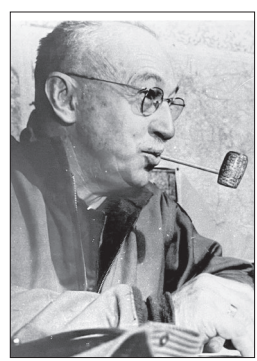
Jupp Klein



Rudolf Kratzert



Ralph 'Lucky' Lucardi



General John Lucas

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Harold Macmillan



Wilhelm Mauss



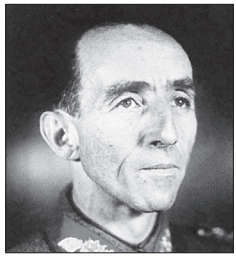
Audie Murphy



Władek Rubnikowicz



Ralph Schaps



General Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin



John Strick



General Lucian Truscott



Francis Tuker



Robert A. 'Smoky' Vrilakas



Harry Wilson



Ted Wyke-Smith

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Note on the Text

Writing a campaign history such as this is a complicated undertaking, but although dealing with American, British, Canadian, German and Italian units across the armed services, I've tried to keep the numbers of unit names as low as possible. To help distinguish one side from another, I have used a form of vernacular – styling German units more or less as they would be written in German and likewise with the Italian units. This really is not to be pretentious in any way, but just to help with the reading and cut down on any confusion.

For those who are not familiar with the scale and size of wartime units, the basic fighting formation on which the size of armies was judged was the division. Germans had panzer divisions, which were an all-arms formation of motorized infantry, artillery and tanks; they also had Panzergrenadier divisions, which had fewer panzers – tanks – and more motorized infantry: a grenadier was simply an infantryman who was provided with motor transport to get from A to B. German infantry divisions tended to have much less motorization by 1943.

As a rule of thumb, a division was around 15,000 men, although some divisions could have as many as 20,000. Two divisions or more made up a corps, usually denoted in Roman numerals to distinguish them. Two corps or more constituted an army, and two armies or more an army group. Going back down the scales, American, German and Italian divisions were divided into regiments, while British, Canadian and New Zealand divisions were divided into brigades. Regiments and brigades were much the same, consisting of three core components which, in the case of an infantry regiment/brigade, were three battalions. An infantry battalion was around 850 men, divided into companies of some

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120 men, which in turn broke down into three platoons and, finally, to the smallest formation, the ten-man squad, Gruppe, or section, depending on the nationality. I hope that this and the Glossary that follows help.

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Glossary

ACC	Allied Control Commission
AFHQ	Allied Forces Headquarters
A Echelon	immediate logistical support for a front-line unit, providing ammunition, rations etc.
AF	air force
AMGOT	Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories
AOK	Armeeoberkommando – German army command
AWOL	absent without leave
BAR	Browning Automatic Rifle – a light machine gun
B Echelon	less urgent logistical support for a front-line unit, usually based several miles behind the immediate front line
BG	Bomb Group
Bn	battalion
Bren	British light machine gun
CEF	Corps Expéditionnaire Français
CLN	Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale – the National Liberation Committee
CP	command post
DF	direct fire
DUKE	Dominion, UK and Empire forces
DUKW	an amphibious six-wheel-drive truck, pronounced 'duck'
FDL	forward defence line
Feldwebel	staff sergeant
FG	Fighter Group
FJR	Fallschirmjäger-Regiment
FOO	forward observation officer

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FMCR	Fronte Militare Clandestino della Resistenza
FS	Fighter Squadron
GAP	Gruppi di Azione Patriottica, partisans operating in Rome under the command of CLN Military Council
Gefreiter	lance-corporal
GNR	Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana – National Republican Guard, a Fascist militia force of the RSI
Grenadier	private in a grenadier unit
HG	Hermann Göring
Jabo	Jagdbomber – German slang for a fighter-bomber or any low-flying Allied aircraft
Jerry	British slang for a German
Kraut	American slang for a German
LCA	landing craft, assault
LCVP	landing craft, vehicle, personnel
LCT(R)	landing craft, tank, fitted with rocket projectors
LOB	left out of battle
LSI	landing ship, infantry
LST	landing ship, tank
MAAF	Mediterannean Allied Air Forces
MACAF	Mediterannean Allied Coastal Air Force
MASAF	Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Forces
MATAF	Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Forces
MG	machine gun, in German Maschinengewehr
MG42	Maschinengewehr 42 – German rapid-firing light machine gun
MO	medical officer
MP	Military Police
NASAF	North African Strategic Air Forces
NATAF	North African Tactical Air Forces
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
Obergefreiter	corporal
OB	Oberbefehlshaber – commander-in-chief
Oberfeldwebel	sergeant-major

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OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht
OP	observation post
PG	Panzergrenadier – motorized armoured infantry
PIR	parachute infantry regiment
PSP	pierced-steel plating
POW	prisoner of war
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAP	regimental aid post
RCT	Regimental Combat Team
RHQ	Regimental Headquarters
RSM	Regimental Sergeant-Major
RSHA	Reichssicherheitshauptamt – Reich Security Main Office, run by the SS and incorporating all police, secret police and Nazi intelligence services
RSI	Repubblica Sociale Italiana – the Italian Socialist Republic, the new puppet Fascist state set up under Mussolini by the Germans
SD	Sicherheitsdienst – the SS intelligence agency
STD	sexually transmitted disease
SOE	Special Operations Executive
Ted	from Tedeschi – Italian for Germans
Tommy	German slang for DUKE forces
Unteroffizier	sergeant
USAAF	United States Army Air Force
Zug	German word for platoon

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Prologue

The headquarters of the US Fifth Army had one of the very best addresses in all of southern Italy: the largest palace ever constructed and one that utterly dominated the otherwise rather small town of Caserta. It stood on a flat coastal plain, one of the few such areas in Italy, some twenty miles or so north of Naples, with the backdrop of the jagged ridge of the 1,800-foot-high Monte Tifata and Monte Longano rising steeply behind it – a barrier, in many ways, that hid the Bourbon royal palace from the current battle raging thirty miles to the north.

Vast it may have been, with an astonishing 1,200 rooms – more than enough to house the headquarters of several armies rather than just one – but it was not the way of Allied generals in this current war to live in luxury when the men they commanded were suffering so many privations up the line at the front. And so General Mark Clark, the Fifth Army commander, had instead made use of the nearly 300 hectares of its magnificent grounds. Here, near the mighty palace but most definitely not within it, were a collection of tents, specially adapted trucks and vehicles, sheltered by umbrella pines and camouflage nets. 'Have my camp in a new grove of trees,' he wrote to his wife, Renie, on 23 October 1943, just a week or so after moving his headquarters there. 'It's quite nice.'

Sergeant William C. Chaney was running the general's mess. A black technical sergeant, he had joined Clark's staff when the Fifth Army commander had been a lowly lieutenant-colonel and newly arrived in Washington DC to take up an instructing post at the US

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Army War College. When Clark had been posted to Britain as the youngest major-general in the US Army, Chaney had asked if he could go too. The pair had not been separated since. And it was Chaney who not only ran the mess but oversaw the construction of Clark's immediate encampment. 'Am having a portable hut put up about 50 yards away,' Clark wrote in the same letter to Renie, 'under a tree, where I can hold conferences when it gets cold and where we can sit in the evening and have a fire.' The idea was for it to be flat-packed into a truck if and when they moved their headquarters.

By the beginning of December he was also using this hut as a makeshift cinema. Since every day was a working day in Italy, Clark was keen to make Sundays a little different whenever possible and so had begun showing films in the hut on Sunday evenings – just for his immediate staff officers; the army commander understood as well as anyone the importance of morale. Of course, his staff were not in quite the same physical danger as front-line infantrymen, but they were not immune in a war zone, were expected to – and did – work incredibly long hours, and the pressure on all of them was considerable. The lives of many young men – and civilians of all ages, both men and women – depended on their decisions, attention to detail and assiduousness. Furthermore, most were living out of tents in one of the worst winters ever experienced in Italy.

It was impossible not to be awed by the extraordinary landscape in which they were now living and fighting. There was no view anywhere in this long, narrow peninsula that did not include mountains; even from the few flat plains, distant peaks loomed magnificently and with an immutable sense of menace. And while these immense heights were home to innumerable villages, hamlets and farming communities on their lower slopes, it was in the valleys below that most of the 40 million Italians lived, crammed into towns and cities of impossibly narrow streets and through which the few main roads, originally built in the time of the Romans, snaked their way north and south: the Via Emilia along the Adriatic coast; the Via Appia, which ran from Rome to Brindisi in the south-east heel of Italy; the Via Aurelia running down the western, Tyrrhenian coast; and the Via Casilina, which linked the cities of Naples and Rome. Ancient

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routes trod foot-swift, footsore, for millennia. This latter road passed through Caserta and on, north, through a narrow valley overlooked by mighty 3,000-foot peaks. It then hugged the next massif of Monte Cassino, with its sixth-century Benedictine abbey perched atop, before emerging into the wider Liri Valley that led onwards to the capital, Rome, a little over seventy miles further north.

General Clark was certainly struck by the extraordinary landscape in which he and Fifth Army now found themselves. 'Wish you could see this country,' he had written to Renie back on 19 October. 'It certainly is mountainous and difficult to fight through.' A few weeks later, he wrote again of the challenges of fighting through such difficult terrain, which so favoured the defender because the Germans could watch the Allies coming. Observers on the mountain peaks could relay to their own artillery details of Allied troops moving towards them. All roads – not least the main routes north such as the Via Casilina – could be zeroed by German guns, ready to drop shells on predetermined spots the moment the Allies tried to use them. The only way to stop this was for the Allies' own artillery to blast any suspected German positions and for the infantry to climb the mountains and prise enemy artillery observers and the infantry protecting them from these heights.

A Herculean task in any conditions, but even harder in the rain and in the increasingly cold and miserable winter. Allied armies were highly mechanized, but Clark's men had been clambering up these mountains on their own two feet and with mules to carry much of their supplies. It was the only way. And once they did crest one of the peaks they found themselves confronting an enemy that had been able to see them coming and which was already behind prepared positions, be it a stone sangar – barricade – or something more substantial. Hence the defenders held all the aces.

To make matters worse, the Allies were struggling to use their air forces. The German air force, the Luftwaffe, was by now mostly defending the Reich; its planes were few and far between in southern Italy. Allied air forces ruled the roost, but obviously only when weather conditions permitted. Overwhelming the enemy with

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firepower was very much the Allied way of war, designed to keep the need for, and demands on, the infantry to a minimum. Artillery would pummel the enemy from the ground while bombers and fighter-bombers would sweep in from the air, strafing targets below. At the end of November the British Eighth Army, on the eastern, Adriatic, coast, had launched an assault across the River Sangro. For once, there had been two days of clear weather, Allied air forces had been able to support the ground forces in strength, and the German 65. Division had been largely destroyed. It had made all the difference.

Frustratingly, relentless rain and heavy cloud cover had turned earthen airfields into a morass and prevented aircrew from spotting targets even if they did manage to get airborne. The Allies had worked out their way of war in North Africa and Sicily: to use mechanization, technology and immense firepower to do a lot of the hard work so that the infantry and armour – tanks – had an easier time of things. That had simply not been possible here in this wet, cold, immensely mountainous country. Rather, every yard had to be prised by the foot-sloggers, the put-upon PBI – the poor bloody infantry. Crawling up mountains, battling over the rocky terrain, wading through mud, being rained on, shot at and blasted. And when one mountain was taken, there up ahead was another. And another. And yet another. Always another bloody mountain.

The fighting in Italy was utterly, miserably relentless.

Yet this had been supposed to be an easy victory, which is why, compared with Allied forces on Sicily, for example, Clark's men, and those of Eighth Army too, were so under-resourced. When the Allies had invaded in September they had confidently expected the Germans to fall back some 200 miles north of Rome to a defensive line that ran across the peninsula from Pisa in the west to Rimini in the east. That was what a scrap of intelligence picked up the previous May had suggested, and what the Italians, former allies of Germany, had told them was still very much the German plan during their armistice negotiations back in August. Clark had expected his army to face a tough fight initially but then to meet little more than rearguard actions all the way to Rome. This was

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what the intelligence picture suggested and was the basis on which his superiors had backed the campaign: General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean, and above him the Combined Chiefs of Staff, the most senior military men in the United States and Britain. Rome by Christmas was the expectation.

Rome comfortably by Christmas.

The Allied invasion of Italy had been undertaken on this very simple presumption, and while the German Führer, Adolf Hitler, had indeed initially planned to retreat way to the north he had soon changed his mind, as was so often his wont.

In other words, an overly optimistic and very risky plan, based on hope more than concrete evidence, had been undertaken without the resources and supplies available to contest a tougher fight than expected. It wasn't a lack of manpower that was the issue, or even guns or ordnance; it was the means of getting them there, because for all the many shipyards in the United States – and Britain, for that matter – there was simply not enough shipping being produced for the demands of a truly global war: supplying the Soviet Union; sending vast amounts of aid to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese Army to fight the Japanese; the Indian Army's campaign in Burma and the Americans' across the Pacific. Then there was the primary effort in Europe: the future cross-Channel invasion of Normandy, Operation OVERLORD, due to take place at the beginning of May 1944. Priority of shipping – both merchant shipping and assault shipping for landing on beaches – was for OVERLORD, not Italy. Troops were already training for amphibious assaults and readying for D-Day.

And even here, in Italy, the tyranny of OVERLORD was hampering the work of the Allied armies as efforts were under way to establish the Fifteenth Air Force at Foggia. Capturing this rare area of completely flat terrain on the eastern side of the leg had been one of the prime reasons to invade mainland Italy. From here, Allied four-engine heavy bombers could further tighten the noose around the Reich and specifically bludgeon the German aircraft industry. Clearing the skies over Normandy and a huge swathe of north-west

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Europe was a prerequisite for any cross-Channel amphibious assault. This was because the Allies had to hinder the Germans' ability to reinforce Normandy the moment landings were made; the success of OVERLORD was dependent on the Allies winning the race to build up decisive amounts of men and materiel in the bridgehead. The way to slow down the Germans was to bomb bridges, railways, marshalling yards and locomotives. To do so successfully required precision bombing which could only be done at low level and as long as no enemy Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs were hovering above them ready to pounce.

The Luftwaffe needed to be smashed, and the way to do that was by bombing factories and assembly plants, most of which were deep in the Reich, drawing fighter planes into the fight and then shooting them down. The US Eighth Air Force and RAF Bomber Command in England were doing their best, but the Foggia area was far closer to the Nazi aircraft industry in Bavaria and Austria than was England. And so what had originally been conceived as just six heavy bombardment groups operating from the Foggia airfield complex had swiftly ballooned into twenty-one – all of which were due to be operating from there by March 1944. Twenty-one bomb groups was a very heavy commitment in terms of aircrew, ground crew, maintenance, ordnance, fuel, food and a host of other facilities from tents to typewriters to technical supplies. A logistical undertaking that was competing with the ground forces for resources.

Despite Hitler's change of intention to fight it out in the south, despite the rain and increasingly challenging conditions, despite the endless mountains, rivers and mud and despite the competition for shipping space and supplies, the Allied war leaders, British and American, still expected the Allied armies in Italy to hurry up and get to Rome. And, specifically, for Fifth Army to get to Rome. That meant their eyes were not only on General Sir Harold Alexander, C-in-C of 15th Army Group in Italy, but also on General Mark Clark.

Clark was only forty-seven, young for an army commander. He stood at six foot three, which meant he towered over most of his superiors, peers and subordinates. He was handsomely lean too, and

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slightly hawkish. One of a comparatively few in the US Army who had seen action in the last war, in France, he had been wounded when a shell had exploded nearby. By the war's end he was a captain, a rank he kept for a further ambition-sapping sixteen years, and yet his self-belief and determination kept him going throughout that long spell in the military doldrums – and his patience paid off. In 1933, his fortunes began to change with promotion and time spent at both the US Command and General Staff College and the Army War College, which suggested he was being marked out for future high command. He was with 3rd Division by the summer of 1937, where he renewed a friendship with an old West Point colleague, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and in 1940 was promoted again, albeit still only to lieutenant-colonel, and posted as Chief of Staff to General Lesley McNair, the man appointed to completely rebuild the US Army. This was unquestionably a golden opportunity for Clark and he made the most of it, swiftly demonstrating his exceptional aptitude for planning and organization. He was smart, quick-thinking, had immense energy and resourcefulness and soon caught the eye of General George C. Marshall, who in September 1939 became Chief of Staff of the US Army, its most senior figure. In 1942 Clark, by then a brigadier-general, was sent to Britain with Eisenhower to arrange for the reception and training of US troops and to begin preparations for Operation SLEDGEHAMMER, the proposed cross-Channel invasion already being formulated at that time. After Allied efforts were redirected to North-west Africa, Eisenhower was made C-in-C with Clark as his deputy. Overseeing the planning of three separate invasion forces, two from the UK and one from the USA, was left to Clark and he did it supremely well. At the time, Operation TORCH was the largest-ever amphibious operation mounted in the history of the world – and was a terrific success for the Allies. TORCH significantly enhanced Clark's reputation, not just for its preparation and execution but also because he had risked his life by clandestinely travelling to Algeria in a submarine and secretly meeting with French Vichy officials ahead of the landings.

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While his credentials as a planner and diplomat were well proven, he desperately wanted a field command and pressured Eisenhower

to allow him to create, train and lead the first American army to be formed outside the United States. Fifth Army was activated on 5 January 1943, and although it was Seventh Army, under Lieutenant-General George S. Patton, that was later the first to go into action in Sicily, Fifth Army was given the lead role for Operation AVALANCHE that followed, the main assault for the invasion of mainland Italy.

Clark had been dealt a tough hand for this in an operation that set the pattern for the rest of the campaign. The invasion of Sicily, where the Allies had faced no German troops at all along the assault beaches and only two German divisions further inland, had been supported by a huge armada of 472 warships, 3,500 aircraft and 1,743 assault craft. AVALANCHE, on the other hand, in the Bay of Salerno, had been mounted with 71 warships, 670 aircraft and a mere 359 assault craft. Directly facing them and watching every move was the German 16. Panzer-Division, while a further five divisions and elements of a sixth were hurriedly sent against Clark's meagre invasion force of just four American and British divisions and a handful of US Army Rangers and British Commandos. While he was given highly effective support from further warships and air forces that were swiftly sent to Salerno, he had managed his troops deftly with skill, steely resolve and no small amount of imperturbability. AVALANCHE had been a baptism of fire for a young, new army commander who had not led troops in battle since being a captain on the Western Front in 1918, let alone a multinational coalition force with all the complications and diplomacy that handling it required.

Despite a strong counter-attack by more than six German divisions, Clark – and his men – had held their nerve, forced the enemy back and won the day. Very much against the odds, AVALANCHE – always a gambler's roll of an operation – had been a success. By 27 September, the British Eighth Army, landing in the heel of the largely undefended south-east of the leg of Italy – as most German troops were at Salerno – had captured Foggia, the single most important objective of the campaign, which meant the heavy bombers would soon be on their way. Then, a few days later, on 1 October, Fifth Army had swept into Naples, Italy's third-largest city and a vital port.

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By the middle of the month they had faced the River Volturno, a major obstacle and one that threatened to hold them up for quite some time, partly because it was easy to defend and partly because incessant rain was severely hindering Fifth Army's ability to manoeuvre. Yet Clark's troops had got across and surged northwards until they hit the next and much more formidable defensive position, the Bernhard Line, or Winter Line as the Americans called it.

The position was formed along vast 3,000-foot-high peaks. The Via Casilina passed through here at what was known as the Mignano Gap, overlooked by the two giant sentinels of Monte Sammucro and Monte Camino, on top of which were German artillery observers surrounded by protective infantry. And it was prising the enemy off these peaks that was proving so challenging to Clark's men now that it was midwinter, cold, dark and wet. Every aspect of the Italian terrain and winter conditions favoured the enemy and yet, despite having little more than parity of infantry, his men were gaining ground. This was no small achievement in itself.

None the less, the pressure was unquestionably on Fifth Army, and specifically Clark, to deliver Rome. And imminently.

Clark was ambitious, although he was hardly unique among generals in having that character trait. He could be vain: he had adopted a studied image in which, when photographed, he liked to be wearing a standard field jacket and a field cap rather than a helmet or officer's peaked hat. It was a smart look, and he was always spick and span, but informal too, as though he were still very much one of the guys. He also preferred being photographed from his left side so that his slightly skewed nose didn't show. Again, a touch of vanity – yet something he shared with many of his peers. Clark could be moody and prone to snap, and he unquestionably had a chip on his shoulder about his comparative lack of experience. He had total faith in his own capabilities and believed he deserved the elevated position he now held, but many of his subordinates were some years older than him and most of the British commanders had a wealth of battlefield experience with which he simply could not compete. He understood the importance of

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being a team man, yet sometimes could not help imposing himself perhaps more than he needed to; Clark might be younger, less experienced, but he was the army commander and no one should forget it.

In truth, he had deserved his elevated position and shouldered the immense burden of high command well and stoically, was unafraid to make tough decisions, worked like the devil and had an enviable grasp of detail and an innate ability to cut through the chaff. He also understood the importance of being a visible army commander; much of his time was spent at the front line. And while he was deadly serious about war and the task facing him, he did not lack humour. 'That's one reason why I am anxious to get this thing over and get back to see you,' he wrote to his daughter, Ann, 'and have a good old laughing contest.'

There was nothing to laugh about by the second week of December 1943. Casualties had been appalling, especially since coming up against the Winter Line, and there was now more than a whiff of faltering morale; some forty men of the 34th Red Bulls Division had just deserted and headed to Naples. All had been caught and several tried and convicted for 'misconduct in the face of the enemy'. Clark had been furious and had immediately warned the divisional commander, Major-General Charles 'Doc' Ryder, to get a grip of his men. Casualties in the Red Bulls were no worse – in fact, they were marginally better – than those in the 3rd and 45th Infantry Divisions, for example, each suffering nearly 2,000 casualties since Salerno but with the number of KIA – killed in action – a little better for 34th Division.

Yet this struck at the heart of the dilemma facing Clark and his fellow senior commanders: how to motivate men and keep them going? Why should a young man from the Midwest of the United States, thousands of miles from home, keep slogging up a mountain in far-flung Italy, in December, only to risk being blasted to bits or crippled, just so they could get a few yards closer to Rome? To what end? The United States was better than any other armed forces in the world in keeping its men well fed, amply supplied with chocolate, gum, cigarettes, rest camps, mobile cinemas, Coca-Cola and

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even ice cream, and, most crucially, regular mail from home, despite the logistical challenges of billions of letters being dispatched all around the globe in a time of war. Yet no amount of mail or even turkey dinners at Thanksgiving could counterbalance the ghastliness of mountain fighting in winter in Italy.

And what was the point when the Allies had achieved three of the four goals for invading Italy in the first three weeks of the campaign? After all, Italy was out of the war, huge numbers of German troops had been drawn off the Eastern and Western Fronts – a big tick for OVERLORD – and the all-important strategic bomber airfields at Foggia had been taken. Only Rome eluded them, and so what? Let the Germans keep hold of it. Rome was only another stinking Eyetie city, goddammit.

It could be argued, as Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, had, that as Rome was a major – and ancient – capital city, its capture would have a powerful psychological benefit. Allied troops triumphantly entering Rome would offer tremendous photographs and film footage that could be shown all around the world. The Allies getting ever closer to the heart of the Reich. The vile Nazis now in irreversible retreat.

There was certainly something to be said for this view, but in truth the number-one reason for reaching Rome was because all roads led there and the Allies then desperately needed to push on beyond and create a protective buffer far ahead of the Foggia airfields. There was no point in investing in the construction of airfields, fuel pipelines and all the huge logistics of bringing twenty-one heavy bomb groups into the theatre if the Germans counter-attacked and retook the area. General Alexander concluded in early October – and the Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed – that the Allied armies in Italy needed to drive the enemy at least fifty miles north of Rome to ensure the long-term security of the airfields. In any case, by attacking, the Allies would maintain the initiative, something that was considered of vital importance now they held the southern two-fifths of the leg of Italy.

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This, however, put commanders like Clark between a rock and a

hard place. His masters were urging him on, desperate for Rome to be captured at the earliest moment possible and for Fifth Army to then drive on even further north, yet they had never given him sufficient resources to achieve this – not initially, when he landed his army at Salerno, and not at any point since. His men were exhausted, understrength and morale was dipping worryingly.

What was needed now, in light of the desertions, was a bit of stick and carrot, although this was a very difficult balance to strike. Yet in the first instance, having spoken personally to General Doc Ryder, Clark decided to draft a memo that he wanted to be widely circulated to all senior officers. A memo from the heart. One written with barely contained anger and frustration. The war in which they found themselves was, he admitted, a grim and bitter business, brought upon decent and kindly peoples by a rogue nation that had deliberately abandoned humanity and friendship. 'The mission of our forces is to end this war as quickly as possible,' he wrote on 12 December, 'and to do it in such a way as to prevent another such destructive world upheaval; to make it impossible for the perpetrators of this world war and the last one to repeat their crimes; to insure, in fact, that after this war the people of our country will be able to live in their chosen manner without either restriction by bandit nations abroad, or the necessity of fighting those nations periodically; in short, to win this war for keeps.'

So how, he asked, could this mission be achieved?

By crushing the Germans militarily. 'The military beating which is given to them must be so violent and terrible as to provide a permanent lesson of the folly of provoking a war with the United States. We of the Fifth Army', he continued, 'must drive our attacks into the Germans with such relentless and smashing force as to implant for all time in the minds and memories of the German Army and people an indelible respect for our military ability and power.' Only by this means, he fervently believed, would a future war be prevented. He was appalled by Nazi cruelty and ideology: the murder of so many, the looting, the disregard for civilians. Some people believed the Germans were fundamentally decent people and shouldn't be blamed for their despicable leaders; Clark did not

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agree. 'A nation always gets the leaders it wants and deserves,' he wrote, and because of the ruthless ambitions of their foe his soldiers had been forced to leave their homes and loved ones, head overseas and fight. Only by killing as many Germans as possible, he wrote, would they be able to return home again. Every soldier in Fifth needed to realize and understand this. 'We have not been sent here to give the Germans a fair chance. When did they ever give anyone a fair chance? We have been sent here to kill them. Our men must kill Germans as they would kill rattlesnakes or scorpions. We must DESTROY THE ENEMY wherever we find him.' Only those German troops who surrendered would be spared.

He now got to the crux of the matter. Americans, by nature, he knew, were peace-loving folk, and, of course, a huge amount was being expected of these young men now in Fifth Army's ranks. But this was all-out war and his Fifth Army forces needed to be utterly determined in their quest to beat the enemy. 'All of our personnel', he continued, 'must understand that the winning of the war is the paramount consideration of our government, and must be that of every individual who is privileged to be an American citizen; that everything else must give way to this; that the authorities directing the all-out struggle must employ our shipping and our troops in such manner as to produce the maximum effect in a global war; that scores of units at home will have their roles to play in an overall plan.'

Only by smart and persistent application of this message to the front-line troops would those thinking of desertion decide against it; troops had to understand the vital moral imperative of what they were doing. Yes, the infantry, especially, had pulled a short straw, but someone had to do this filthy job, and they had to stick at it so future generations would not have to suffer the same. 'If', he finished, 'these issues are clearly understood by the Fifth Army, nothing can stop us from reaching the goal of real and complete victory.'

A few days later, on 17 December 1943, his men finally broke through the Winter Line. Whether his note had stiffened backbones was not clear; it was more a cathartic expression of his own frustration and grim determination than anything else, but there was no doubt that this was a considerable victory in which, man for man,

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his American, British and, more recently, French troops had bested the Germans dug into their mountain bastions.

The trouble was, in the ruins of San Pietro, Cervaro and San Vittore and in the mud, rain and freezing cold it didn't feel much like a victory. Rome was still seventy miles away and before them, just a few miles ahead, lay the Germans' next defensive position: the Gustav Line.

And this was an even tougher nut to crack than the Winter Line that had already cost so much blood.

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A US mortar team in action.



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