**A mighty coalition? The Allies and the Battles of Monte Cassino**

**[Slide 1: Title Page]**

The allied military coalition in the Italian campaign must rank as the most multinational force ever assembled. Their two armies in Italy alone consisted of soldiers from 26 separate nations. Four nations other than the United States and the United Kingdom contributed enough troops to form army corps.

**[Slide 2: image of Corps Commanders]**

These were the French Expeditionary Corps, the 2nd Polish Corps, the New Zealand Corps, which consisted of New Zealand, Indian and British Divisions and the 1st Canadian Corps. In addition to these army corps, formations from South Africa, Brazil, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Greece and Italy fought with the allied armies during the Italian campaign. A breakdown of allied air assets reveals an equally broad coalition force. As Carlo D’este has noted, the Mediterranean Allied Air Force (MAAF) – consisted of ‘the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), Royal Air Force, US Army Air Force (USAAF), South African Air Force, Rhodesian Air Force, Royal Australian Air Force, Free French Air Force and several Greek and free Polish air squadron.

It was certainly a mighty coalition ranged against the German forces in Italy and as John North has commented:

**[Slide 3: John North quote]**

‘we are unlikely to see such an array again take the field under one command.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

This paper examines the performance of the allied coalition and some of the nationalities that formed it. It outlines some of the problems all wartime coalitions face and looks at some of the remedial action taken to solve or at least soften the effects of these problems. It concludes by trying to answer the fundamental question: how effective was the allied coalition against the Germans during the Cassino battles and in the Italian campaign in general?

In the Italian campaign the purpose of forming this great coalition was clear to all its partners. It was to engage the German forces there, keeping them away from other theatres of operations and destroying them in the process. The advantages of fighting as a coalition force are many. Not only does it imply a type of moral legitimacy as a group of ‘United Nations’, the resources that a coalition can put into the war effort are considerably greater than any one nation could provide.

The forming and maintenance of a coalition of forces has been crucial to the outcome of all the major conflicts of the twentieth century. Indeed for smaller nations like Australia, Canada and New Zealand coalition warfare has become their ‘way of war.’ Even for more powerful nations like the United States and the United Kingdom, coalitions have been vital to their success in war. Gary Sheffield has gone so far as to say that:

**[Slide 4: Gary Sheffield quote]**

“Building and sustaining coalitions have been fundamental tasks for British politicians and military leaders over the last three hundred years.’[[2]](#endnote-2) Nor should it be forgotten that the British Empire and later the British Commonwealth, as epitimised by the Eighth Army in Italy, was always ‘something of a coalition’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Coalition warfare has never been nor will ever be easy. There are two fundamental reasons for this. The first is that war is always a cultural expression for each nation involved. As nations have distinct different cultures, they also have distinct ways of how they will wage or want to wage war. This cultural expression or way of war is seldom shared and must be subsumed or subordinated to the coalition’s governing apparatus for it to work. As Richard Holmes astutely noted about wartime coalitions: the ‘difficulties involved in keeping everyone pulling in the same direction should not be underestimated.’[[4]](#endnote-4) Second is the fact that coalitions are never partnerships amongst equals. Some actors in coalitions are much more powerful than others and as such believe they should be calling the shots. This power arrangement may not be stable and can change during the life of the coalition. Conversely, smaller nations while contributing as much as they can are always acutely aware of the small part they are playing. Nevertheless they will still want their voices to be heard or, at the very least, expect to be consulted before any significant decisions are made.

There are also the basic technical problems caused when nations do things differently. Using different weapons systems, eating different food, and operating different equipment placed a huge strain on the logistical effort needed to keep the coalition functioning. Without the sinews of war, as logistics are often referred, the simple fact is that wars cannot be fought. Commenting on the coalition’s diversity after the war, Jacob Devers stated:

**[Slide 5 Jacob Devers quote]**

‘We had every nationality in the world in those armies [the Fifth and Eighth Armies]. … and they all ate something different. They had all they could do with what they were doing in keeping them supplied and replaced.’[[5]](#endnote-5)

Little wonder that so many historians, military commanders and politicians have commented and written at length on the great difficulties of coalition warfare. Napoleon’s misquoted aphorism about not being an ally, but fighting them is often quoted and Mark Clark, one of the army commanders in Italy was very fond of using it. He told an interviewer in 1972:

**[Slide 6: Mark Clark quote]**

It was only natural that there was a little friction. Remember Napoleon; one of his maxims was, “Don’t be an ally – fight them”. I thought of that a million times during the war. The problems of being an ally. Because you had different ammunition, different equipment, different food, different customs, different beliefs and Gods, different languages, you didn’t have a homogenous force like the Germans did that could be moved around at will. We could never do it.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Many of these commentators , including Clark, missed the irony in Napoleon’s (mis)quote though.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**[Slide 7: Napoleon and Waterloo]**

Napoleon Bonaparte was without doubt one of the great military commanders in history. But it was only through the combination of powerful, often fractious, coalition that Napoleon was eventually defeated; the turning point being the battle of Leipzig in 1812 which is often referred to as the ‘Battle of the Nations’ because of the multinational force arrayed against the Emperor of France. And it is often forgotten too that while the United Kingdom may have been primarily responsible for Napoleon’s ultimate defeat at Waterloo in July 1815, it was only the belated arrival of the Prussians on the field of battle that eventually sealed what even the Duke of Wellington admitted had been a close run thing. The despised coalition warfare proved to be Napoleon’s downfall. Churchill’s less quoted wisdom is much nearer the mark.

**[Slide 8: Winston Churchill quote]**

As Churchill well knew: ‘There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies – and that is fighting without them.’[[8]](#endnote-8)

**The USA**

**[Slide 9: the USA]**

The United States provided considerable air, naval and ground forces to the Italian theatre. These forces were hampered in their efforts by two key factors often overlooked by military historians. The first is that the United States and its senior commanders were never keen on the Italian campaign preferring instead to put their efforts into a cross-channel invasion of France as soon as possible. They never saw this theatre as their main effort in Europe and sought to move assets from it as soon as possible.

**[Slide 10: USA = reluctant allies]**

Coupled with this reluctance to become entangled in the Italian theatre was the fact that the United States in 1943-44 had no tradition or liking for coalition warfare. The United States had fought alongside allies before but primarily through necessity, never through choice. The war of independence could not have been won without the assistance of Britain’s hereditary enemy, the French, but the Monroe Doctrine which followed specifically warned against the dangers of being in an alliance with a foreign power. Even in its most recent experience of coalition warfare in the First World War, the US had resisted becoming involved until belligerent acts by Imperial Germany forced its hand. Even then the USA insisted on being regarded as an Associated Power rather than as an ally and insisted on taking to the field as an independent army with its own separate area of operations.

**[Slide 11: USA wants quick results]**

There are many elements to the American ‘way of war’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Suffice to say here that a key difference with its allies, and linked to the two factors above, was that in Italy the US was in a hurry. It wanted quick results for the considerable resources being reluctantly committed there. This made the US far more likely than its allies to take risks and to incur the possible heavy casualties such risks entailed. They drove their junior officers and men hard often to the point of exhaustion. When the New Zealand brigadier Howard Kippenberger visited the front line at Cassino he thought that the US infantry were worn out and in need of a good rest although their own officers were ignorant of the state of their soldiers.[[10]](#endnote-10) A US sergeant described the situation of his soldier upon its eventual relief there:

**[Slide 12: combat exhaustion quote below]**

My ass was dragging just like everybody else. But as I was a first sergeant I took a responsibility, so I was going to be the last one off. I watched them come down and I can’t imagine men being in any worse shape than that bunch. They were like zombies shuffling along. They were just absolutely exhausted, and it was not our company alone; it was all of them. It was just continual lack of sleep, continual pounding, continual action. It was a nasty, nasty battle in a nasty, nasty war.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Despite driving their soldiers hard, certainly for the first part of the Italian campaign, and especially during the Cassino battles, the skill levels of the US ground forces was not high. While the courage of US soldiers and officers was unquestioned, they appeared to be poorly led with low levels of tactical skill. This is what one New Zealand officer recorded:

**[Slide 13: Mick Hanan quote]**

We could hear them coming about a mile away, talking at the top of their voices, weapons rattling, boots crunching on the metal and rubble on the road. But to make matters worse, they were coming down the road ‘en masse’ not in small batches or well spread out as I had suggested, but in one great heap as though out for a jaunt.

The officer, MickHanan had earlier warned the American officer how to approach the German lines but it was now ‘too late to caution them further’. He sent a sergeant back to tell his section to stay below ground level and watched the results:

**[Slide 14: Mick Hanan quote below]**

When the Americans were about 400 metres away we heard the enemy Nebelwerfers begin their mournful braying as they were wound up. The first salvo of about 20 bombs landed in the middle of the Americans. For a moment there was silence as they scattered to each side of the road, then in the confusion, they stupidly returned en masse and crowded around the casualties in a congested heap of men.

There were screams, yells and shouts of ‘Abe’s been hit, Joe’s been hit, Steve’s hit, “so and so” has been killed.’

Gone was any semblance of order or discipline as they milled around. Then for good measure, the Germans slammed 20 more mortar bombs into the middle of the crowded road. This time they scattered and except for the moaning of the wounded, there was silence.[[12]](#endnote-12)

As Rick Atkinson has noted, this was a US army in its early days of battle.

While it had gone beyond being ‘an army at dawn’, it still had much to learn.

**[Slide 15: Alexander’s opinions of USA soldiers below]**

There were exceptions. General Harold Alexander, the 15th Army Group commander, regarded the US ground forces in Italy as ‘generally good’ but singled out three formations which had particularly impressed him. These were the 3rd Division, raised and trained by Lucien Truscott, the 88th Division and the 10th Mountain Division. All three Alexander ‘thought highly of’ especially as they had all been ‘very well trained.’[[13]](#endnote-13) Alexander’s choice of the 88th Division is interesting. The 88th Division was the first US all-conscript formation to go into combat in the Second World War. Its soldiers came from all over USA but most from New England and the mid-Atlantic states. Advance elements of this formation had taken part in the fighting around Cassino in February-March 1944 but the division is best known for its part in the drive on Rome when it became the first allied formation to enter the eternal city on 4 June 1944.

**The United Kingdom**

**[Slide 16: The United Kingdom]**

The other nation to provide considerable air, naval and ground forces to the Italian theatre was of course the United Kingdom. The British way of war was different to that of the USA. Primarily a naval power the British favoured an ‘indirect approach’ when it came the use of their land army.[[14]](#endnote-14) This usually involved an attack on the enemy’s flanks while Britain’s allies engaged the main enemy force elsewhere. In many ways the Italian campaign was an example of this ‘indirect approach’ which is why so many senior US commanders opposed it. As Mark Clark later recalled, Italy was far from the ‘soft underbelly of the crocodile’ as Winston Churchill had sold it to the allies:

**[Slide 17: UK indirect approach/Churchill quote]**

(I can see him before the map) the North African thing with the slitting of the soft underbelly of the Mediterranean, (I think that was the term he used), and the thought I had as we hit Italy; that it was a tough old gut that we were trying to slit, instead of a soft underbelly. At any rate Mr. Churchill prevailed.[[15]](#endnote-15)

In its use of land forces this British way of war was cautious, avoided unnecessary risk where possible, depended heavily on the efforts of allies and did not seek a quick outcome. And always in the back of their minds was the experience of the terrible carnage of the Western Front, a situation to be avoided at all costs. As John North noted in Alexander’s *Memoirs*, the caution shown by senior British commanders ‘no doubt results from our experiences in the First World War, when our enormous casualties … gave us nothing more than a few square miles of French territory’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Such an approach was bound to frustrate their American allies.

The experience of the First World War did have one positive outcome in relation to the British style of command.A prevalent myth from that earlier war was that senior British officers did not serve near the front line but were content to stay safe miles away from the danger while ordering thousands of men to their death. This ‘Chateaux Generalship’ while patently untrue did much to shape the British army’s attitude to leadership. Any hint of it was anathema to them which is why senior British officers from Alexander down were seen in and around the frontline positions. Conversely, as Parker has noted, American GI’s were often surprised and impressed to find very senior British officers in dangerous frontline positions. Some US riflemen ‘didn’t even know the name of their regimental commander, and few had any love for their generals’.[[17]](#endnote-17) The absence of senior US officers from the frontline and their ignorance of the condition of their troops had appalled Brigadier Howard Kippenberger. It was, he noted, ‘a very different system of command’.[[18]](#endnote-18)

British Divisions did not just serve in the British Eighth Army. During the Cassino battles and at Anzio, the US VI Corps always contained British Divisions. From the middle of 1943 the United Kingdom was running short of men to fill its armed forces and to keep British industry functioning. As a result in Italy the army formations from the United Kingdom were seldom at full strength. Finding reinforcements for those killed, wounded, missing and sick was a constant problem.As the British official history admits:

**[Slide 18: British official history quote]**

The troops had been a long time in the line. … 56th, 46th and Fifth Divisions had been in the face of the enemy for four months, one indeed had spent in combat 115 days out of the 122 since its arrival in Italy.

Not much could be done to ‘rest and refresh’ the troops … [but] great efforts were being made to this end. The continual drain of casualties led to an acute problem of reinforcements for the infantry.[[19]](#endnote-19)

This combination of cautious approach, low strengths and declining quality did have a serious effect on the performance of the UK divisions in Italy. Truscott noted when taking over VI Corps: ‘This relative weakness of British divisions, with its psychological effect, upon British leadership and tactical methods placed serious limitations upon the ability of British units to undertake offensive operations.’[[20]](#endnote-20) General Marshall recalled after the war how serious the situation had become:

**[Slide 19: George Marshall quote]**

But in Italy, the fighting spirit and aggressive quality of British divisions began again to decline, and for the reason of the sheer factor of exhaustion. The British simply could not keep their battalions up to strength and it was very depressing to their men. They had no replacements. The two British divisions at Anzio simply had no punch: it was a very serious situation.[[21]](#endnote-21)

With a different way of war and style of command and, given the limitations of the British divisions mentioned above, it is hardly surprising that US senior officers have left a record that is a litany of complaint about their British allies.

John P. Lucas, the VI Corps commander relieved at Anzio, complained loudly and often about the performance of the British divisions in his corps. During the course of the Anzio operations Lucas lost complete confidence in the British divisions and its commander. He recalled:

**[Slide 20: John Lucas quote]**

They seemed unable to make even a simple reconnaissance without getting into trouble. They would advance with the greatest possible bravery but always with heavy losses, which could not be replaced, and always on a narrow front which gave the enemy an opportunity for his favorite “pinching-off” tactics. I was convinced that, should the enemy launch a determined counter-offensive, and his build-up in strength could have no other object in view, it would strike in the direction of Anzio and the Port, in which case its principal weight would fall on the British.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Other US commanders shared Lucas’ concerns and opinions. Ben Harrell who served as Truscott’s G3, a principal staff position, at Anzio stated after the war that ‘the British bothered me a lot because they would commit so little’. He was especially concerned with their caution and their constant ‘bickering’.[[23]](#endnote-23) US Major General Fred Walker’s commented that his British allies were great diplomats but couldn’t be counted on ‘for anything but words’.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Nor was it only the Americans who had serious doubts about their British allies. After witnessing a British division in action a French officer had:

**[Slide 21: French officer’s quote]**

‘a very distinct impression that our allies, despite the means at their disposal, were not committed to going all-out to destroy the enemy, but preferred to wear him down’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Juin too, complained long and loudly about the British Eighth Army’s slow progress during the May battle.[[26]](#endnote-26)A strategy of attrition, at times the approach seemingly preferred by the British and certainly reflected in the tactics during the Cassino battle, was anathema to American commanders. George Marshall was absolutely clear on this when asked why the British placed such a high priority on the Italian campaign. Marshall replied:

**[Slide 22: Marshall quote]**

It was partly political, but partly because of their sincere belief in that strategy. But once you start on attrition you are lost, you are ruined. Gen. Clark kept pushing the fighting, and rightly so. If you keep the initiative, total losses are less than with the accumulation of losses in a campaign of attrition.[[27]](#endnote-27)

As stated at the outset of this chapter forming and maintaining a wartime coalition has never been easy. The unequal balance and different ways of waging war ensures that some degree of conflict or friction is always present. That between the USA and the UK in Italy was always to be expected although there was certainly justification in some of the US complaints about the slowness and lack of punch of the some of the British divisions in Italy.

Now what about the Poles and the New Zealanders?

**The Polish Corps**

**[Slide 23: The Polish Corps]**

The Polish Corps has a special place in the story of Monte Cassino battles. No history of the fourth battle or of the Italian campaign would be complete without discussing the contribution of the Poles.

In May 1944, for the fourth battle of Monte Cassino the Eighth Army had moved the bulk of its forces from the Adriatic coast to the centre where it would have the task of capturing Cassino town and the monastery. Included amongst its four corps was a new contingent of allied soldiers: some 56,000 Poles grouped in two under strength infantry divisions and one armoured brigade. These formed the II Polish Corps commanded by General Wladyslaw Anders.

**[Slide 24: image of Anders with the quote below]**

In many ways Anders reflected the spirit of the Poles and their national tragedy of the Second World War. Anders, has been described as ‘a slender, handsome cavalryman with the “ardour of a boy,” … and the grit of a man intent on settling scores.’[[28]](#endnote-28)

In 1939 Anders fought against both the Germans and Russians when these countries invaded his homeland. Wounded three times and captured on crutches, Anders spent nearly two years in Soviet prisons often in solitary confinement. When Hitler invaded Russia, Anders was released and allowed to join the allies where he set about forming the Polish corps in time for it to fight in this last battle of Cassino. The Polish soldiers had suffered as much as their commander. Many were also ex-Soviet prisoners some from camps as far away as Siberia. Other Poles had escaped from central Europe to join the corps. A nucleus had been formed around the Polish brigade that had fought with the Eighth Army in North Africa. In 1969, Devers explained to LTC Palmer how Anders was given his corps against the opposition of many allied commanders. According to Devers:

**[Slide 25: image of the Poles at Monte Cassino]**

The other thing “Jumbo” Wilson did with me involved the Poles. The Poles had been under General Anders. They had been fighting outside of Warsaw--the Germans one morning and in the afternoon they were turned around fighting the Russians. They were captured and interned, and finally the Russians got General Anders to take all these Poles down across Russia and Syria into Cairo--men, women, and children; thinking that, I suppose, they’d die on the way. But, anyhow, General Anders got them to Cairo and the British picked them up there. They had about 32,000 soldiers, two divisions in numbers, well trained. The British equipped them and they had the finest personnel of any of our troops. The women that accompanied them were magnificent. All the skills, all the professions, that were just the best out of Warsaw; musically inclined, doctors, mechanics, everything, and when General Anders thought that they were ready to go into battle, he came up to see “Jumbo”. We had a conference room and I’ll always remember that conference because the Staff recommended that they be one division and that they use the rest as replacements. General Anders sat there in all his dignity and pride and said, “Sir, it has to be a Corps and I have to be the Corps Commander. Don’t worry about replacements.” And I think I almost quote him verbatim.

He said, “Just put me in line against those Germans in Italy and I’ll get all the replacements I need from that time on--and don’t worry about me on replacements--but I have to have a Corps and I have to have two divisions.” And “Jumbo” went for this.

Then he sent me up to see the Poles. “See that they are taken care of,” he said. “You can do a lot of things for them. You can give them jeeps when they need them and anything you can do to satisfy them--and improve their training”.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Polish soldiers were united by a burning hatred of the nation that had brought so much suffering to their homeland and they longed for revenge. They were also determined to capture the monastery at Monte Cassino as a demonstration of Polish spirit and national pride. They saw it as a way of showing the world that the Polish nation still lived. Capturing the monastery atop Monte Cassino became much more than a military objective for the Poles. It was a matter of national honour and the Polish soldiers actually ‘drew lots to see which would have the privilege of liberating the abbey itself.’[[30]](#endnote-30)

For Ander’s Poles the war had become a holy crusade. Their attitude towards their German foes can be summed in two words: ‘intense hatred’. As John Ellis has commentedtheir hatred of the Germans was ‘that intense it might even have taken the French aback’. The Poles now wanted retribution and revenge over a nation they regarded as their ‘hereditary enemy’.[[31]](#endnote-31)This attitude often alienated the Poles from their comrades in the Eighth Army. The British nonchalance and casual approach to what they viewed as a holy crusade angered many Poles. As Fred Majdalany, Lancaster Fusilier officer and a historian of the Cassino battles recalled that the Poles ‘thought we were far too casual about everything because we didn’t breathe blind hate all the time’.[[32]](#endnote-32)

What the allies did not fully understand at the time was that for the Poles taking Monte Cassino would have international repercussions out of all proportion to the scale of the military action involved. This would be the first time Polish divisions would be engaged against the German army since the defeat of 1939. This military action would counter the stinging Soviet propaganda of the past which had claimed that the Polish Army was not willing to fight the Germans. The outcome of this battle would also give a considerable boast to the morale of the underground ‘Home Army’ in Poland. These were serious matters for General Anders and his corps. They were reflected in Ander’s address to his soldiers on the eve of the fourth battle:

**[Slide 26: Anders and the quote below]**

Soldiers! The moment for battle has arrived. We have long awaited the moment for revenge and retribution over our hereditary enemy … Trusting in the Justice of Divine Providence we go forward with the sacred slogan in our hearts: God, Honour, Country.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Unfortunately, the intense hatred of the Germans when combined with these

serious international considerations had the effect of making the Poles reckless

in their combat operations. Ian Gooderson has commented, the Poles’

‘keenness to get to grips with the Germans bordered on the foolhardy’.[[34]](#endnote-34) It is

interesting to note that when asked for his assessment of Polish troops after the war General Alexander restricted his description to just one word: ‘solid’.[[35]](#endnote-35)

**[Slide 27: Alexander’s assessment of the Poles]**

Jacob Devers, however, was much more effusive in his praise of the Poles. According to Devers, not only were the Polish soldiers ‘well trained’ but they had:

**[Slide 28: Devers assessment]**

the finest personnel of any of our troops. The women that accompanied them were magnificent. All the skills, all the professions, that were just the best out of Warsaw; musically inclined, doctors, mechanics, everything.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The Poles did take the Monte Cassino monastery but only after repeated frontal

assaults had failed to do so. These cost the Poles enormous casualties and did

not shift the Germans there from their defensive positions. Some 800 German

defenders had driven off attacks made by the two Polish divisions which had

suffered 3,800 casualties at Monte Cassino; almost 50 per cent of their

attacking force.[[37]](#endnote-37) In the end the Germans withdrew from the monastery after

the FEC had pierced the Gustav line and the German defenders were in danger

of being encircled. The monastery could have been masked or even bypassed

but the operation had assumed a psychological, emotional and political rationale

and many Polish soldiers willingly paid the price for this.

But taking the monastery was a victory for the Poles however Pyrrhic; one that was filled with emotion and has become an essential part of Poland’s military heritage. It was made a cultural rallying point; an expression of Polish nationalism and determination to resist against external oppression.

At the foot of Monte Cassino where so many young men are buried in the military cemeteries is one cemetery for Polish soldiers. On a stone monument topped with a cross is the inscription:

**[Slide 29: Polish mounument and words below]**

We Polish soldiers

For our freedom and yours

Have given our souls to God

Our bodies to the soil of Italy

And our hearts to Poland.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Sadly, not many of the Polish soldiers who served Monte Cassino ever returned to their homeland. After the war the dictates of international politics forced the allies to abandon the Poles and their country lived for more than 40 years as a prisoner of the Soviet Empire. Most of the Poles forced from their homes in 1939 remained in exile seeking new lives in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US or Britain.

**2nd New Zealand Division**

**[Slide 30: 2nd NZ Division in Italy]**

When the New Zealand Division was transferred to the Fifth Army for the fighting around Cassino its reputation was very high. Its commander, Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg VC had a formidable reputation and had recently been labeled by Winston Churchill ‘the Salamander of the British Empire’.[[39]](#endnote-39)

**[Slide 31: image of Freyberg with heading ‘The Salamander’]**

Having fought on Greece, Crete and throughout the North African campaign the 2nd New Zealand Division was experienced, battle hardened and regarded as thoroughly reliable. In fact both the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 4th Indian Division were regarded as elite formations, amongst the very best in the British Army. The Germans rated them highly too. Major Rudolph Bohmler serving in the elite 1st Parachute Division, believed that the New Zealand Corps of the 4th Indian Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division, and the 78th ‘Battleaxe’ Division were ‘the finest weapons in the whole of Alexander’s armoury’.[[40]](#endnote-40) Kesselring rated both the New Zealanders and the 4th Indian Division as ‘the best British assault divisions’.[[41]](#endnote-41) General Alexander’s comments about the New Zealand Division were praising and astute.

**[Slide 32: Alexander’s assessment of NZ Div]**

Alexander said that the New Zealanders were ‘the best troops the 8th Army had on an exploitation – they didn’t like a slugging match – felt it wasn’t worth it because it would cost them heavy casualties’.[[42]](#endnote-42) In a secret memorandum to a US senator outlining the problems of campaigning in Italy, General Marshall singled out the New Zealanders amongst all the British colonial troops and described them as ‘exceptional’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The New Zealand Division had an unusual structure. In North Africa the division had been overrun by German tanks on two occasions and had narrowly escaped being surrounded and annihilated on another. The decision was taken to provide the division with its own armoured force under command. At the end of the North African campaign the New Zealand Division had converted to an armoured division with an armoured brigade of 164 Sherman tanks and 60 Staghound armoured cars. It was a powerful force, one shaped for highly mobile, fast moving operations. Both Montgomery and Alexander regarded it as a perfect ‘Corps de Chasse’, the force to unleash on a retreating enemy. Outflanking movements and rapid exploitation were its specialties. This was to be the New Zealand Division’s original role when it moved to the Cassino area.

The New Zealand Division was not structured for the role it was eventually allocated at Cassino. In southern Italy though the defensive terrain limited the use of armour and as the New Zealand official historian noted, it ‘sets a premium on hardy and skilled infantry trained in mountain warfare’.[[44]](#endnote-44)But the 2nd New Zealand Division was considerably weakened in infantry nor had it trained for mountain warfare. This is one reason the New Zealand Division struggled at Orsogna in late 1943 and would do so again during the Cassino battles. The solution in the end, done in January 1945, was convert the Division’s cavalry, its machine gun battalion and motorized battalion into infantry to form an additional infantry brigade.

Lieutenant Mark Clark was not pleased to have the New Zealanders nor their famous commander at Cassino as part of his Fifth Army. To him they were ‘unwelcome intruders’.[[45]](#endnote-45)

**[Slide 33: Clark’s views of Freyberg and the New Zealanders]**

Freyberg was ‘a prima donna’ who had to be ‘handled with kid gloves’.[[46]](#endnote-46)In fact it was after meeting with Freyberg and resenting the lack of consultation about the New Zealand Corps’ role that Clark first alluded to Napoleon’s views on allies. He recorded in his diary:

**[Slide 33: add the quote on Napoleon to Slide 33]**

‘And thus I was about to agree with Napoleon’s conclusion that it is better to fight allies than be one of them’.[[47]](#endnote-47)

The two New Zealand attacks made at Cassino failed to attain their objectives. There were many reasons but poor planning, lack of coordination and a failure to commit adequate force, primarily enough infantry troops, were the primary causes for the 2nd New Zealand Division’s failure at Cassino. Nor was their failure the sole responsibility of Mark Clark, their US Army commander. The New Zealand corps and divisional commanders, those responsible for the tactical planning and implementation of both battles must share in the responsibility for this failure. For the New Zealanders, their time at Cassino was the low point of their campaigning in the Italian campaign. The New Zealanders did recover from this failure and their mauling at Cassino. After a period of rest and retraining in the later half of 1944 and into 1945 the 2nd New Zealand Division again proved themselves the masters of rapid exploitation and the mobile battle.

**[Slide 34: Peter McIntyre painting of Monte Cassino]**

While Cassino was the low point of their campaigning in Italy, the two battles there have resonated in the New Zealander’s public consciousness. It is a peculiar national characteristic of New Zealanders that the military campaigns which attract most public attention have all been military defeats. As Michael King has commented, the actions on which they [New Zealanders] have dwelt most considerably in retrospect –Gallipoli, Crete, Cassino – were not even victories’.[[48]](#endnote-48) To this list can now be added the 1917 battle of Passchendaele an experience to which the battles of Monte Cassino have often been compared. Cassino, then, has become an essential part of this New Zealand war remembrance.

**The Coalition**

**[Slide 35: The Coalition heading with image]**

The performance of the allied coalition at Cassino and during the Italian campaign has been condemned by many historians as poor. John Ellis is probably the coalition’s harshest critic with his summation of the Cassino battles in the title of his superb study *Cassino: The Hollow Victory*.

**[Slide 36: John Ellis quote]**

Ellis is emphatic that the battles of Cassino were: ‘a sorry example of coalition warfare’. Evidence of this was that the orders of the general in charge were ignored, that Britain and the USA **‘**seemed to have little regard for the other nationalities that were fighting under the Allied banner’ which were ‘often sent into action in a somewhat cavalier fashion’. As examples of this Ellis notes that New Zealanders and Indians were expended in ‘tactically hopeless, head-on assaults’, the Poles were used in a bloody attack that was **‘**devoid of any real strategic rationale’ and that in the final push to Rome hundreds of Canadians died ‘in front of barbed wire and machine guns’ in an attack that ‘was as shoddily orchestrated as it was careless of the losses in men and equipment’.[[49]](#endnote-49) It is a damning indictment.

Some of those who participated at the time recognised that the coalition was performing badly. Denied permission to cut Route 6 behind the Senger Line some 12 miles ahead of Eighth Army, Juin made an often quoted, telling comment about the allied coalition:

**[Slide 37: Juin quote below]**

Once again we have run into one of the stumbling blocks of coalition warfare. The Allies cannot come to an agreement and co-ordinate their efforts. At the present juncture, questions of prestige are shaping events, each one wanting to make the entry into Rome. History will not fail to pass severe sentence.[[50]](#endnote-50)

History and historians have certainly passed a severe judgment on the allies’ performance at Cassino and during the Italian campaign.

Other commentators have extended this poor performance to that of the allies in general. Norman Davies is one. He writes:

**[Slide 38: Norman Davies quote]**

When the armies of democracy clashed with the Nazi legions in Italy or Western Europe, the former did not perform particularly well. It is arguable that technology and air power, rather than top-class soldiery enabled the British and the American to compete on equal terms.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Matthew Parker agrees with this assessment stating that the allies won in Italy as mainly through the weight of logistics they had. He notes that in May 1944 for the fourth battle, the allies had 2000 tanks, the Germans just 450. In any tank action the Germans would run out of ammunition before the allies ran out of tanks. And after Rome, the fighting in Italy ‘limped on rarely on the front pages but always hard and bloody’ as ever.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Yet the allied coalition at Cassino and in Italy should not be so roundly condemned. The coalition was one of the most diverse ever assembled and as stated at the beginning of this chapter coalition warfare has never been nor will ever be easy. Lack of a coalition tradition, power inequity, ethnocentric, stubborn commanders, differing perceptions about how to fight the war; all this and much more conspired to prevent the allies from achieving a unity of purpose in the first half of 1944. As Jacob Devers astutely noted after the war:

**[Slide 39 Devers quote]**

We failed at Cassino and this was due to the kind of troops we had. The command had been changed. We weren’t quite a team.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Building an effective team takes time and effort, but time was not something the allies in Italy had.

While the allies dominated the seas and skies of Italy on land it was a different matter. At its maximum, for the May battle, the allies fielded some 28 divisions in central Italy. Twenty-three German divisions, including many of the best in the German army, were committed there.

**[Slide 40: 28 Allied versus 23 German Divisions and Carlo D’este quote]**

As Carlo D’este has noted, this was a bare numerical superiority over the Germans **‘**at a slender one and one-quarter to one’.[[54]](#endnote-54) So in Italy the allies were attacking the most effective army of the Second World War in terrain that favoured the defensive. Even though they had failed to take Cassino in the first three battles, the allies were still successful in their aim of keeping German divisions fighting here and away from the other theatres of war.

Of course the allies in Italy could have done things better. So could the Soviets on the Eastern front. Rick Atkinson commented on the allied performance at Salerno at the very beginning of the campaign:

**[Slide 41 Rick Atkinson quote]**

‘Certainly Salerno was inelegant and brutal, a fitting overture for the Italian campaign that followed.’[[55]](#endnote-55) The Cassino battles were also inelegant and brutal but so were most battles of the Second World War. What should be recognised are the enormous difficulties under which this mighty coalition was forced to wage war in Italy against the most deadly foe. What also needs to be acknowledged is the allies dogged determination to win at Cassino and in the Italian campaign in general. That deadly foe needed to be fought wherever possible and defeated whatever the cost. This is what in the end the allied coalition achieved.

**[Slide 42: image of German surrender and heading ‘Questions/comments]**

1. John North (ed.), *The Alexander Memoirs 1940-1945,* London, Cassell & Coy Ltd, 1961, p.155. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gary Sheffield, ‘Not the Same as Friendship’: the British Empire and Coalition Warfare in the Era of the First World War’, in Dennis and Grey (eds.), p.39. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gary Sheffield, ‘Not the Same as Friendship’: the British Empire and Coalition Warfare in the Era of the First World War’, in Dennis and Grey (eds.), p.50. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Holmes, p.120. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jacob Devers, interview with Forrest C. Pogue, 12 August 1958, p.103, Oral History No.68, Marshall Center, Lexington, Va. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. General Mark Clark, interviews, LTC Forest S. Rittgers Jr., 21 November, 1972, Tape 3, side 1, p.20, The Mark W. Clark Papers, AHEC. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. What Napoleon actually said was: ‘It is better to have a known enemy than a forced ally.’, Napoleon *Political Aphorisms, 1848,* quoted in Peter G. Tsouras (ed.), *The Greenhill Dictionary of Military Quotations*, Greenhill Books, London, 2000, p.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Winston S. Churchill, quoted in Tsouras (ed.), p.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The classic work on the ‘American way of war’ is Russell F. Weigley’s *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, Macmillan, New York, 1973. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Kippenberger, pp.350-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Sergeant Hoagland, quoted in Parker, p.151. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. quoted in Williams, pp.207-08. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Field Marshal Harold Alexander, Answers to George Howe’s questions for Alexander, Reel 321, Item 5007, p.11, Marshall Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The classic works on the ‘British way of war’ are Sir Basil Liddell Hart’s Strategy*. The Indirect Approach*, 3rd Revised edition, London, Faber and Faber, 1954 and *The British Way in Warfare: adaptability and mobility*, London, Faber and Faber, 1932. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. General Mark Clark, interviews, LTC Forest S. Rittgers Jr., 21 November, 1972, Tape 3, p.10. The Mark W. Clark Papers, AHEC. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. John North, p.156. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Parker, p.46. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Kippenberger *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.350-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Molony, p.602. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Truscott, *Command Missions*, p.352. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. General George C. Marshall interview with Dr. Matthews, Majors Lemson and Hamilton and Dr. Howard Smyth, 25 July 1949, Verifax 530, Item 5008, Marshall Library, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. John P. Lucas, Anzio book 3, p.346-7, Lucas papers, AHEC. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ben Harrell, A Study of the Career of General Ben Harrell, USA, Retired, by Colonel Robert T. Hayden, Senior Officer Debriefing Program, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, p.37. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Walker, quoted in Parker, p.109. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. quoted in Ellis, p.446. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ellis, p.447. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. General George C. Marshall interview with Dr. Matthews, Majors Lemson and Hamilton and Dr. Howard Smyth, 25 July 1949, Verifax 530, Item 5008, Marshall Library, p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Atkinson, p.511. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Devers interview with Lt. Co. Palmer, 25 March 1969, Tape 1, Side 2, pp.21-22, Box 82, Devers Papers, York Historical Society. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Atkinson, p.511. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ellis, p.314. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. quoted in Parker, pp.303-04. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. quoted in Parker, p.304. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Gooderson, p.99 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Field Marshal Harold Alexander, Answers to George Howe’s questions for Alexander, Reel 321, Item 5007, p.11, Marshall Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Jacob Devers, interview with LTC Palmer, 25 March 1969, Tape 1, Side 2, p.21, Box 82 Devers Papers, York Historical Society. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Parker, p.373. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. quoted in Parker, p.374. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Covell, *Freyberg: Churchill’s Salamander*, Century Hutchinson, Auckland, 1989, p.2. A Salamander is a mythical creature that can live in fire. Freyberg initially thought Churchill had called him a cooking pot. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. quoted in Parker, p.157. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Albert Kesselring, *Kesselring: A Soldier’s Record*, William Morrow & Company, New York, 1954, p.237. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Field Marshal Harold Alexander, Answers to George Howe’s questions for Alexander, Reel 321, Item 5007, p.11, Marshall Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. General George Marshall, Secret Memorandum for Senator Joseph C. O’Mahoney, 29 March 1944,Natioanl Archive Cards, Xerox 2519, Marshall Papers, Marshall Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. N.C. Phillips, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45. Italy Volume 1, Sangro to Cassino*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1957, p.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ellis, p.162. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. General Mark Clark, interviews, LTC Forest S. Rittgers Jr., 21 November, 1972, Tape 3, p.114. The Mark W. Clark Papers, AHEC. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. quoted in Parker, p.165. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Michael King, *New Zealanders at War*, Auckland, Heinemann Publisher, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Ellis, p.XV. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Holmes, p.126. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Norman Davies: *Europe At War 1939 – 1945*, London, Pan McMillan, 2006, p.487. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Parker, p.358. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Jacob Devers, interview with Colonel E. Griess, 29-31 July 1969, Tape 10, Side 1, p.190, Box 84 Devers Papers, York Historical Society. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. D’este, p.331. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Atkinson, p.236. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)