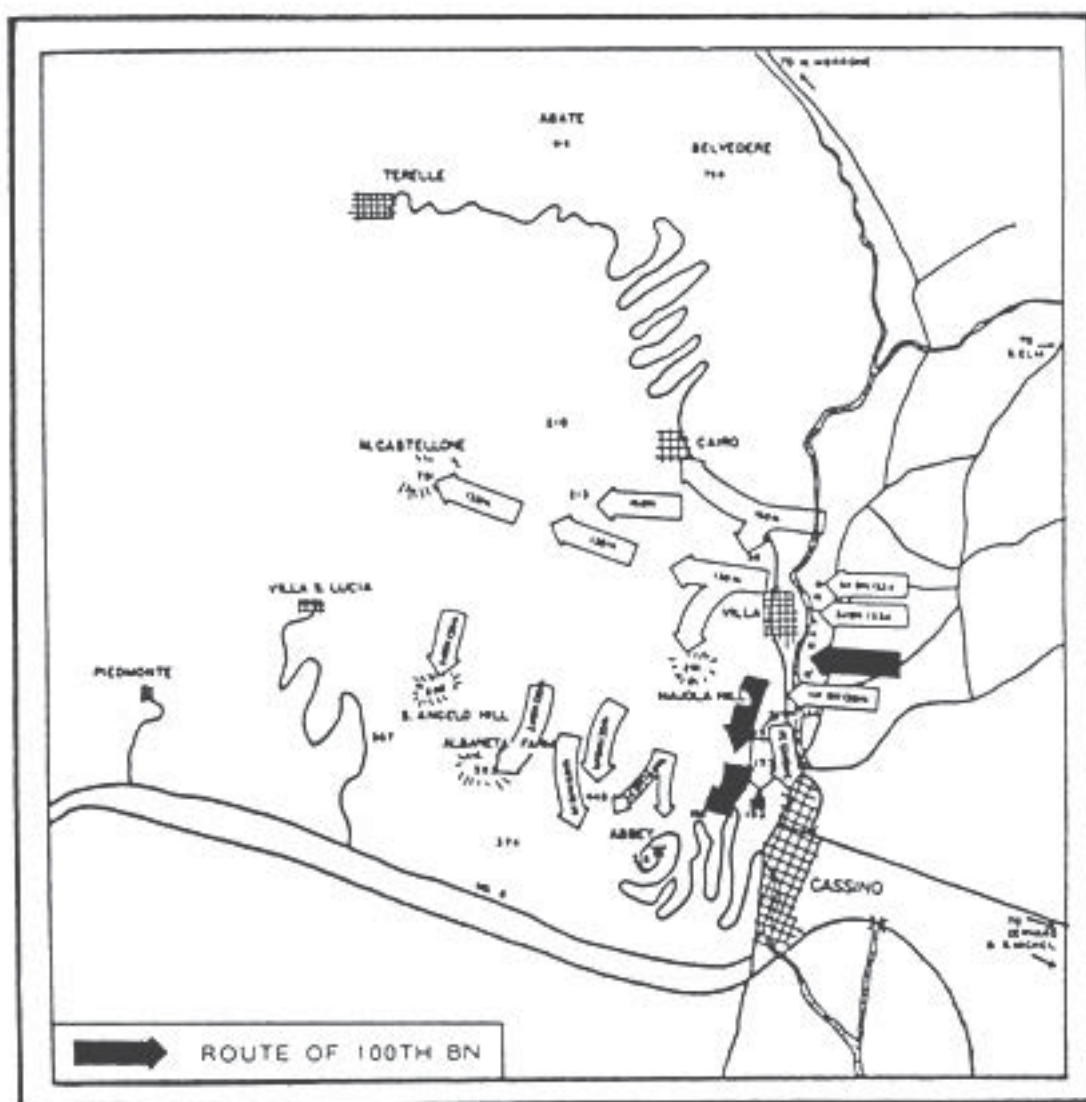




Monte Cassino



The 34th Division at Cassino

Cassino, the 100th's Toughest Battle

On New Year's Day, 1944, the 133rd Regt. was on the march again, going north after its long, restful camp near Alife. Ahead lay more fighting in the rugged hills, the last obstacles before the Rapido River valley.

For this campaign, the 34th Division was detached from the VI Corps and transferred to the II Corps. The VI Corps had left to prepare for the amphibious assault landing at Anzio. The 34th moved into an assembly area near Presenzano in a blizzard on New Year's Eve, and pushed on to Ceppagna, an advance assembly point.

On January 5, the 1st Bn. of the 133rd was detached to serve as a reserve for Task Force A. The remaining 100th and 3rd Bns. of the 133rd were placed under the command of Col. Robert T. Frederick of the 1st Special Service Force which, together with the 36th Division's artillery, became Task Force B. The next evening, Task Force B's 3rd Regt. captured Mt. Majo after some tough fighting but spent the next three days beating off counterattacks by the enemy trying to retake that hill complex. The 100th and 3rd Bns. followed the 3rd Regt. onto Majo from which the 100th advanced west on the night of the 7th to take Hill 1190.

Here again, difficulty in transporting heavy weapons and other supplies into the hills put the 100th and the other units at a severe disadvantage. In some cases, unarmed former Italian soldiers were used to move pack trains to carry food, armor and other supplies to the troops fighting in the mountains. Often times enemy mortar scared the mules and porters off the trail and they were lost. In such situations, the only reliable way to replenish supplies and ammunition was to have the troops of the 100th go down the hill and carry the supplies up the hill on their backs at night when it was safe.

The climb toward Hill 1190 was slowed by total darkness along steep trails and rocky slopes. There was snow on the hill. It was such a hazardous mission that the men held hands in a line to prevent anyone from losing his footing and falling. The enemy had zeroed in on the trail, and total darkness alone kept them from firing at the 100th. Despite the dangers, the men reached their objective on the third day after a firefight with the enemy. The reverse slope tactics utilized by the enemy slowed the final securing of the summit. This mission was time consuming, but by January 13, the enemy retreated from the Majo hill complex and the 100th and 3rd Bns. mopped up scattered resistance downslope toward the Rapido River valley.

Evacuation of the wounded from the mountains was a formidable and hazardous task. The walking wounded had to back track slowly on the same narrow and rocky mountain trails, still subject to enemy fire. The more seriously wounded were carried by litter bearers day and night as expeditiously as possible to get emergency medical care. To accomplish this feat, the medical section of the 100th established relay stations along the way, where the barest of emergency care was administered, including transfusion of blood plasma and injection of morphine to minimize pain. There were times when the 100th was so far in front of its own emergency station that more than 10 four-men litter teams had to relay a single seriously wounded soldier between isolated stations along the evacuation route. For having established the evacuation system, the men of the 100th are eternally grateful for the skilled and caring medics under the leadership of Capt. Isaac Kawasaki, assisted by Capt. Richard T. Kainuma and Capt. Katsumi Kometani, all of Honolulu.





*Brief respite in high mountains - just before Cassino
L-R: S. Hamamura, R. Hamada, Sgt. Saito*



The Flooded Cassino Flats

Task Force B was dissolved on January 13, but the 133rd's 100th and 3rd Bns. continued their pace forward as a unit. On the following day, the 3rd Bn. took Hill 692; the 100th went down into the valley the day after, and occupied San Micheli, which had been abandoned by the enemy except for one soldier who was happy to surrender. This action marked the disintegration of the enemy's defensive position known as the Winter Line. San Micheli was a pleasant interlude for the men who relished the chance to bathe and change their clothes. They found some good red wine in the town and enjoyed a relaxing evening, feeling human again after engaging in one of their toughest battles. The 10 days of fighting in the Majo hills were every bit as tough or worse than 100th's recent battles for Hills 841 and 920. As feared, casualties were high.

The bitter campaigns in the southern Italian hills were but the preliminary rounds against the wily enemy. Ahead lay Cassino and the Benedictine Abbey on the hill that was going to prove an almost impregnable fortress. The Germans had had time to prepare a well-engineered, superb defense system, making maximum use of terrain that was suited for such purpose. This was known as their Gustav Line.

The importance of Cassino lies in its strategic position. In his book, "The Battle of Cassino," Fred Majdalany likens Monte Cassino, where the abbey was located, to Gibraltar. One can see why by checking the geography of that area. The Rapido is a small and swift flowing river in a narrow valley that runs west in the beginning and bends southward where it passes the town of Cassino. A short ways downstream the Rapido meets the Liri River which flows down from the north. The Liri valley is the traditional gateway to Rome, once used by the Roman legions. The meeting point of the Liri and Rapido becomes the Garigliano River all the way to the Tyrrhenian Sea.

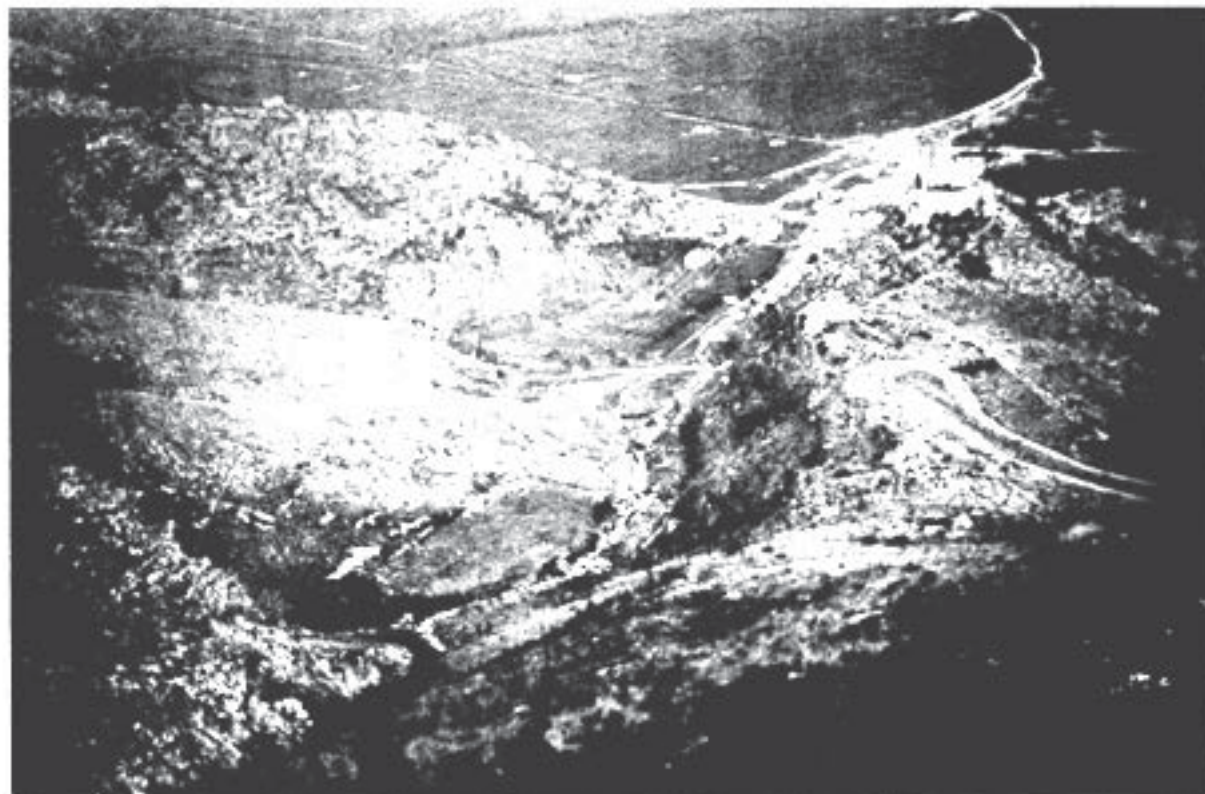
Monte Cassino ranges between 1,300-1,400 feet in elevation, and rises on the northeast side of the Rapido-Liri intersection. It is a perfect point from which a trained observer can spot just about any movement in the narrow Rapido and Liri valleys below. The Allied forces faced the bleak prospects of having to pierce this formidable Gustav Line to break through into the Liri Valley if they were to advance toward Rome. And this was the major road that led to Rome.

The 200-mile defense line was built by the Todt Organisation, founded by Dr. Fritz Todt. Todt built the German autobahns in the 1930s and also the Siegfried Line, according to George Forty in his book, "Fifth Army at War". The Germans used 15,000 Italian laborers. One of the deadly weapons on the Gustav Line was the 75mm Panther gun; its turret was imbedded in concrete in steel shelters.

In addition, the Germans had dammed the upper Rapido and flooded the opposite bank of the river all the way down past Cassino. The resultant mud lakes made it very difficult for the Allied troops to advance, and impossible for tanks and other transport to cross without laying steel matting for support. All the trees had been cut down to provide the defenders excellent fields of fire. The enemy's heavy artillery was well positioned in mountain locations, and their observation posts could direct fire to any point in the Rapido and Liri valleys. They also had built well-protected forward positions strategically placed all over the flatland, foothills, in the Italian Barracks and in Cassino.

In addition, both sides of the Rapido River and the approaches to the hills and Cassino were heavily mined, and coils of barbed wire barred their side of the Rapido river bank. Besides these man-installed obstacles, the Rapido was narrow, deep and swift – the water flow estimated at eight miles per hour. That is fast for a soldier trying to cross the river in pitch darkness, carrying back pack and weapons to be kept dry in freezing water up to his chest. The





Castle Hill, January - February 1944



Castle Hill, 1992

wall at the edge of the river was high, making it difficult for the troops to climb over and into the water.

These natural and man-made hazards set almost impossible odds. However, the stone wall along the Allied side of the Rapido proved to be a blessing for the 100th for it served as a protective barrier from deadly enemy fire. Without it, the 100th might have been annihilated in its first attempt to cross the Rapido.

With the Winter Line eliminated, the big task now was to break through the much tougher Gustav Line. Lined up against this formidable enemy front were the British X Corps on the west from the Tyrrhenian coast up the Garigliano River through San Ambrogio, the U. S. II Corps across from Cassino, north to the big bend in the Rapido leading toward San Elia, and the French Expeditionary Corps on the right flank.

The Fifth Army's 34th and 36th Divisions were given the assignment of leading the crossing of the Rapido to take Cassino. The 36th was lined along the Rapido slightly downstream of Cassino, and the 34th was up-river to the right of that major objective.

The British X Corps started the big drive on January 17. It crossed the Garigliano and secured a beachhead but this took about two weeks to accomplish. But the British could not make any headway after that, indicating the kind of resistance the Germans were putting up along the Gustav Line.

The 36th was set to make the first crossing of the Rapido on January 20 and establish a bridgehead. The Air Corps flew several hundred sorties and the artillery of both the 34th and 36th blasted away to soften up enemy positions. The 34th also diverted enemy attention by its other actions. Some of the men of the 100th recall that they went down stream and manned smoke pots near the crossing site to give the 36th some cover during its crossing. However, the wind direction changed during the crossing and the full effect of the smoke cover

was lost, to the great detriment of that operation. At the appointed hour, units of the 36th moved out into the muddy flats to grope their way to the river bank. Although a lane had been cleared in the mine field earlier, for some unknown reason, the units of the 36th encountered the deadly explosives in the supposedly safe zone. Some of the men did make it across the river but the devastating fire from the well-concealed enemy drove them back with heavy losses. Their second attempt to cross the Rapido also ended with tragic results.

On January 24, all three battalions of the 133rd Regt. were ordered to cross the Rapido from their assigned sectors and to secure bridgeheads. All three units were to be at the river bank at an appointed time. The 1st and 3rd were on schedule but the 100th, bringing up the left flank, was delayed briefly due to friendly artillery fire falling short and landing right in front of the men.

The 100th's B Co. had secured the line of departure and A Co., under command of Capt. Mitsuyoshi Fukuda of Honolulu and C Co. under Capt. Richard Mizuta, also of Honolulu, moved ahead at 11:30 p.m. In an interview by John Tsukano (D Co., 100th) in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin of Feb. 19, 1985, Capt. Fukuda described the action that followed:

"We started about midnight from an olive grove before the mud flats, with Charlie Co. on one side of us. We crawled through the mud in pitch black darkness. Yet the Germans were shelling us as they had pre-targeted certain areas. Finally we got to the edge of a ditch, the area most heavily mined. I called on the Pioneer Platoon guys to clear the mines.

"They had to crawl on their stomach and feel for the mines in the darkness. We got to the river wall but lost a hell of a lot of men. Artillery, mortar and machine gun fire was intense. At daybreak we could see from the safety of the river wall our guys who had been wounded during the night strewn all over the mud flats. Every time they moved, the Germans would shoot at them.





Jack Johnson

"We couldn't do a thing to go to their aid because the Germans were shooting from their concealed positions in the hills. The only chance for the wounded to survive was to play dead. Some of them had to wait for two nights before being evacuated. That was a painful thing to see."

The second night, Fukuda went back to battalion headquarters with his messenger to report the situation. What he found was a sharp disagreement between Maj. Clough, commander of the 100th, and Col. Marshall, the regimental commander. Clough refused to commit his B Co. across the mud flats at daybreak as ordered because he said it was suicidal. LTC Moses, 1st Bn. commander, also refused to commit his reserve company into battle the next day for the same reason. Clough continued to refuse the order and at midnight, he was relieved of his command. Maj. Dewey, the regimental operations officer, was appointed to take Clough's place.

Maj. Dewey was then ordered to take Maj. Jack Johnson, the executive officer and the operations officer and go back to the front with Capt. Fukuda and 15 litter carriers to assess the situation. In the same Star-Bulletin interview, Capt. Fukuda said:

"Just as we got to the ditch and were looking for the marked path through the minefield, the machine guns and artillery opened up on us. Maj. Dewey was badly wounded. Maj. Johnson was also wounded, but then tripped a mine, took a direct hit and died later in the aid station. His was a great loss for he was well liked and respected by the men."

Johnson was captain of the University of Hawaii's football team of 1935 and was known for his punting – up to 70 yards. His first job after graduation was as a luna at McBryde Sugar Co. on Kauai. On one of his first weekends at New Mill, where McBryde Sugar is headquartered, he came across a group of kids practicing baseball in the

small field that was sandwiched between the movie theater, lumber yard and garage on the west side, and the plantation store, plantation office and dispensary across the road on the opposite side. Johnson walked into the group and said he wanted to catch for them. He took the old beaten catcher's mitt from Fatso, squeezed his huge hand into it, and crouched behind home plate. Looking at the pitcher, he yelled, "Get 'em down the old fat," as he targeted the mitt over the plate. That was a new expression the kids had never heard before. The blonde giant was real friendly and they wondered who he was. One of the boys whispered, "He's Jack Johnson." That was a very well known name even in the sticks and the boys just couldn't believe that the great Jack Johnson was amongst them. What would a big football star be doing in a little plantation camp like New Mill on a Sunday afternoon? The news of his death certainly brought sadness to this community.

Capt. Fukuda, continuing the interview, said, "In an instant, I lost all my battalion commanders." The next morning, he witnessed another futile attempt to cross the river. "In broad daylight, 46 men of B Co. came across the mud flat carrying ladders in order to scale the wall at the river bank. The Germans picked them off one by one. Capt. Sakae Takahashi, B Co. commander, made it to the river wall with about a dozen guys. Some were saved by jumping into an irrigation ditch and staying there in the cold water the entire day. It was painful to watch them being killed like that and to see them going down and not giving up and keep charging and not retreating no matter what."

Takahashi later said that he agreed with Maj. Clough that the frontal attack in broad daylight was suicidal, and was ready to ignore the order. But he conferred with his platoon leaders to see how they felt. They agreed that they should at least make an attempt to cross the flats toward the battalion objective. And so they did.

After that failed operation, the 100th was pulled back to San Micheli on January 26 and put





*Was the bombing necessary?
the debate continues---*

into regimental reserve for some needed rest. Maj. Lovell was welcomed back after recuperating from his earlier injury and took over command of the battalion.

It was back to the front on February 8 to attempt another crossing of the Rapido, but this time it was further upstream. The 168th Regt. had crossed the river upstream from where the 100th was poised to start its drive. The river was almost dry at this point and enemy resistance was not as heavy as it was during the first attempt downstream.

The 100th turned west soon after crossing the Rapido and advanced down the road toward Cassino and Castle Hill back of the town. They fought their way to occupy one side of Castle Hill (so called because of an old building on the ridge) with the Germans still holding on to the opposite side of the hill and all of the adjoining heights. Men of C Co. even fired 60mm mortars, without using sighting equipment, and lobbed mortar shells over the crest to the opposite side to hit enemy positions only a short distance away.

This was effective at first, but the German snipers on higher ground kept C Co. pinned snugly against the hillside. The safety corridor from sniper sight was a very thin one. One man unwittingly let his arm down and lost part of a finger to sniper fire. The most tragic case was that of a recently assigned officer to D Co. He dozed off and when his head slumped down to be exposed sufficiently, a German sniper shot him in the head.

The men were trapped in this thin pocket for four days because the ground had to be held at all cost. Sgt. Kiyoshi Maeda of A Co., who grew up in Honolulu, remembers it was cold and the men couldn't sleep due to the thin safety zone. "We just dozed off, catching a few winks, and that was sufficient," he said. "Our biggest concern was water, which had to be conserved," Maeda explained. "We hardly ate. Cold C rations were not my idea of food

and, anyway, the fighting was so intense that we didn't even think about food." One big worry among the men was developing trench foot. Wearing tight boots and not moving around is a good way to get it. Maeda said he normally wears an E width but had received a pair of triple Es which helped in preventing the malady. Toilet was another problem. The men had to do it at night, going down the hill from the safety corridor and do it behind rocks.

In the action that marked the farthest advance in the saddle between Castle Hill and Monte Cassino, Pvt. Masao Awakuni got his second tank with his trusty bazooka. C Co.'s Sgt. Mike Nobuo Tokunaga of Lahaina and Tech Sgt. Johnny Miyagawa of Sprecklesville had advanced to a shack on one of the upper terraces on Castle Hill, about 75 yards from the old castle. Maj. Lovell was a couple of terraces below with the other men. Soon a German tank emerged from the old castle and proceeded down the lower terrace. Awakuni took his position and fired a blast. It hit the track but didn't disable the tank. Tokunaga and Miyagawa yelled to Awakuni to aim underneath the tank. He did, and the explosion stopped the tank, and its occupants came out and ran. From their higher perch, Tokunaga and Miyagawa got them with their rifles. But Maj. Lovell was wounded by machine gun fire and had to be evacuated. Tokunaga observed that had it not been for Awakuni's hit, they could have been wiped out. The 100th's "tank killer" was later awarded the DSC for his feat.

After three days of fighting, the 100th was pulled back into regimental reserve but had to leave one platoon from B Co. behind as support for the 3rd Bn., the relief unit. The platoon holed up in the partly destroyed church in the north sector of Cassino for four days. One of the men remembers that on February 15 while in that church, they heard the Air Force bomb the Benedictine Abbey on Monte Cassino. For about half an hour, they could hear the





After the bombing of Monte Cassino, February 1944

whistling sound of the bombs falling, followed by the concussion after each explosion. The Allies had finally decided to destroy the Abbey which they claimed was being used by the Germans for military purposes. The Germans vehemently denied this.

From its reserve position, the 100th was pulled back to a rest camp near Alife for some hot food and entertainment by the USO. In the fighting along the Rapido and in Cassino, the 100th lost four officers and 44 enlisted men, 12 officers and 122 men wounded, three officers and eight men injured, and 75 men hospitalized for trench foot and other reasons. When the battalion moved to San Giorgio near Benevento on March 10, it was joined by the first replacements of 10 officers and 151 men from the 442nd Regimental Combat Team from Camp Shelby. Thus reinforced, the 100th headed for a new assignment at Anzio.

Even though the fighting around Cassino was very tough, the men of the 100th remember the fighting on Castle Hill as the toughest, most difficult of the entire Italian campaign.

