

February 1944 – World War II at 80

By Ronald P. May
MCC Contributor

February was not the best month for Allied operations on the Italian peninsula in 1944.

Operation Shingle, the U.S. effort to flank the dug-in German forces in Central Italy, was still in its early stages as February 1944 began.

But already things were going poorly.

Losing the Battle of Cisterna

A battle near the town of Cisterna, 15 miles northeast of the coastal city of Anzio, began on Jan. 30 between U.S. and German forces and lasted four days.

The objective was for Army forces to break out of the Anzio beachhead so they could advance to the German Gustav line of defense.

The effort failed ... and at a great cost!

The German forces in Cisterna detected the approach of the U.S. Army battalions — three of which were Army Ranger Battalions — and set up an ambush, which effectively halted their advance.

The result was not only a defeat for the Army, it was also a significant loss of over 760 soldiers — 311 killed and 450 who were captured as POWs.

On a larger scale, the loss meant that U.S. Fifth Army Division was still confined to the Anzio beach, twelve days after landing there.

Bombing Monte Cassino

U.S. Army Air Forces flying over Southern Italy appeared to have fared better than their big brother land forces.

On Feb. 15, the Second Battle of Monte Cassino resulted in major destruction to the Benedictine monastery perched on the peak.

The hilltop abbey was founded in 529 CE and, as a significant Italian religious and historic structure, was placed in a protected zone.

That protection was violated on Feb. 15 when U.S. bombers dropped 1,400 tons of high explosives on top of the abbey, causing major damage to the monastery.

Allied military leaders had mistakenly concluded that Germans were using the abbey as an observation post and that German artillery guns were positioned on the grounds of the monastery and were firing upon Allied ground forces as they attempted to scale the mountain.

Only after destroying much of the monastery did the Allies discover there was no German observation post and no German artillery was firing from inside the monastery but rather from slopes beneath and behind the abbey.

The Germans had left



Frederick Robinson, Jr. served in World War II as a Merchant Marine. He was one of 18 who survived the sinking of his ship, the S.S. *Elihu Yale*. He passed away in 2014. (Ron May photo)

the protected abbey alone.

The U.S. Army Air Forces had not.

No dead German forces were located after the bombing of the abbey, but 230 Italian civilians who had fled to the abbey for refuge during combat were found inside the compound, all of them dead.

What seemed like a victorious Allied bombing mission turned out to be a tragic mistake.

Sinking U.S. ships

Bad luck for U.S. forces was not confined to mountain peaks and land.

U.S. ships resupplying the ground forces off the coast of Anzio were coming under heavy German fire.

Not all of them survived the onslaught.

The *SS Elihu Yale*, a liberty ship built for cargo transport and operated by the U.S. Merchant Marines, was among the ships along the Anzio beach that came under attack by the German Air Force (Luftwaffe).

Frederick Robinson, Jr., of Martinsville, was on board the ship.

The life-long Morgan County resident was born in Centerton in 1924 and enlisted in the Navy in 1943 following high school.

Although he could have received a deferment to help his dad on the farm, he believed he had a responsibility to serve.

Following three weeks of boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, he attended one week of gunnery school in Norfolk, Va., and became a qualified gunner and a member of the Navy Armed Guards, a unit that supplied gun crews on special cargo ships of the U.S. Merchant Marine.

The ships were designed to replace the cargo ships in Europe, many of which were sunk by German U-boats.

The newer cargo ships were outfitted with Navy guns to help defend against German attack.

Robinson was assigned to the *SS Elihu Yale*, which departed from the Brooklyn Naval Yards for Europe on Dec. 24, 1943 — the same day as Robinson's 19th birthday.



Robinson and the crew on board the *SS Elihu Yale* managed to survive the first round-trip delivery of cargo.

But on Feb. 15, 1944, the same date as the tragic bombing of the monastery on Monte Cassino, one of those transits ended in tragedy.

The cargo ship was 1-2 miles off the coast of the Anzio, Italy. German fighter planes and bombers from the Luftwaffe were flying overhead patrolling the coast when one of them released a radio-guided glide bomb — directing it at the ship.

The glide bomb hit the stern of the ship and threw Robinson, who was on the fantail at the time, and many other crew members, into the water.

Of the 45 Navy Armed Guard crewmen on board the ship, only 18 of them survived. Robinson was one of the 18.

He and other survivors were picked up while floating in the sea by a British sub chaser.

They were dropped off on the beach near Anzio.

Members of the Fifth Army Division, who had landed at Anzio three weeks earlier, took care of them, providing food, shelter and clothing.

Robinson and the other survivors waited four weeks before getting on the *USS General A.E. Anderson*, an Army Transport Troopship, to catch a ride back to the United States.

His survival was a fitting symbol that U.S. forces in Italy would also persevere and see better days ahead.

Next time: April 1944

Learn more about Ronald P. May and his books at <https://ronaldp-may.com> or contact him at ron@ronaldp-may.com. View his videos on his YouTube channel: *World War II History & Stories with Ron May*.



TOP: The S.S. ELIHU YALE (Liberty Ship) is seen off the Anzio Beachhead on March 2, 1944. (National Archives / Public Domain) // MIDDLE: The ruined monastery and only surviving wall at Cassino, Italy, is photographed on May 19, 1944. (National Archives / Public Domain) // BOTTOM: A B17 is seen bombing the Abbey on Monte Cassino on Feb. 15, 1944. (Army Air Force photo / Public Domain)

NOTICE TO BIDDERS

The Trustee of Clay Township of Morgan County of Indiana is accepting bids for the following cemeteries: Robb Hill Cemetery (Cemetery behind Fire Station at corner of Robb Hill and Beech Grove Rd) and New Butterfield Cemetery on Centerton Rd. Bids are for the

lawn care maintenance of the cemeteries for bi-weekly maintenance and holidays for the 2024 season year. All bids are to be sent to the Trustee of Clay Township of Morgan County at 3411 E. Centerton Rd, Mooresville 46158. All bids must be sealed and will be opened by the

Trustee and the Township Board. All bids must be received by 9 p.m. on March 6th, 2024. If you have any questions or request for bid forms, please contact Clay Township Trustee William Mitchell 317-831-7313 or Secretary Pamela Mitchell cell/text 317-727-8643.

Centerton Cemetery Association is accepting bids for Centerton Cemetery. Bids are for lawn care, maintenance of the cemetery for bi-weekly maintenance and holidays for 2024 season. Past companies have averaged 6 man hours with 2 people per mow. Mail all bids to Centerton

Cemetery Association, 510 S Graham St, Martinsville IN 46151 All bidders must be licensed/insured and have proof of worker's comp or exemption. All bids must be received by March 8th 2024, point of contact Robbie Stephey 765-346-5533.

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