

MARK CLARK'S COMMAND OF THE 5TH ARMY AT THE RAPIDO RIVER

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General Mark Clark's command of the 5th Army during the Italian Campaign of World War II is among the most controversial commands of the entire war. The American 36th Infantry division, which was apportioned to the 5th Army, was repeatedly engaged in sharp combat during this campaign. However, their bloodiest fight would come on the 22nd of January 1944 during the attempt to cross the Rapido River. Mark Clark intended to use the already battle weary 36th Infantry Division to make up the main assault that break the Gustav line. This action would not end well as the Germans stopped the assault almost immediately and ended with many casualties without any ground gained. Later, Clark would describe this assault as a distraction for the Anzio landings that were occurring at the same time. After the war, there would be congressional hearings and much controversy stirred up by division commanders within the 5th Army. Major General Fred Walker would give scathing testimony during congressional hearings deciding whether there should be a full investigation of Clark's actions. The vote to start a formal congressional investigation failed, which some historians have used as proof that Clark was justified in his actions. However, these explanations fail to vindicate Clark's decisions during the campaign in Italy, and it remains clear that Clark was negligent in the planning and execution of his plan to break the Gustav line.

After the initial invasion of Italy, the Germans had established a series of defensive lines utilizing the terrain of the Italian peninsula. The Gustav line was one of these formidable defensive works, which the Germans emplaced from Mount Marrone, to Cassino and then to the West of Garigliano to Monte Scauri.¹ Trying to break through this line, General Mark Clark began to develop a plan of attack. Operation SHINGLE was the result of Clark's planning, which called for an amphibious assault at Anzio and an assault across the Rapido River to draw German reinforcements away from the landing site.² However, facing the Allied army was a determined German adversary. There were over 60,000 men under the command of German Field Marshall Albert Kesselring with the German Tenth Army, which included the 15th Panzer Grenadiers and the 3rd

¹ Jon Mikolashek, "Flawed, but Essential: Mark W. Clark and the Italian Campaign in World War II." (PhD diss., The Florida State University College of Arts and Sciences, 2007), 92.

² Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, Kindle (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1993), 8715.

Panzer Grenadiers.³ These forces were dug into the hills that overlooked the Rapido River and would provide a stout defense to any potential attack. Furthermore, the terrain gave the Germans an almost unobstructed field of fire from hidden firing points along the S-curves of the river.⁴ Not only was there no cover for advancing Allied infantrymen to shield themselves during the assault, but the ground itself was unsuitable for any attack. The path chosen by Clark and his planners was impassible for vehicles, making them useless, and forcing the infantry to move on foot through a swamp that the Germans actively patrolled.⁵ The chosen area was not the only place for an assault in support of Operation SHINGLE. According to General Fred Walker, commander of the 36th Division, the area reminded him of the Marne River during World War I where the Americans slaughtered Germans attacking their positions.⁶ Walker suggested another point north of Monte Cassino where there was significantly less prepared German defenses with a smaller river that could be crossed easier.⁷ Clark and his planners dismissed this suggestion with Walker later writing, “They do not understand the problem [of crossing a river under fire] and do not know what I am talking about.”⁸ Given the problems with the site the 36th Division would have to assault, there needed to be solid planning in order to give any hope of success. Walker later wrote in his memoir, “I’ll swear I do not see how we, or any other Division, can possibly succeed in crossing the Rapido River near San Angelo when that stream is included within the main line of resistance of the strongest German position.”⁹ Unfortunately for the 36th Division, Walker’s suggestions were overlooked during planning and preparations by Clark.

Clark and his staff mismanaged the planning for Operation SHINGLE and the assault over the Rapido River. According to General Walker, the Division only received two and a half days from the receipt of the orders to the

³ Ian Blackwell, *Fifth Army in Italy 1943-1945 A Coalition at War* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2012), 156.

⁴ George F. Botjer, *Sideshow War: the Italian Campaign, 1943-1945* (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 2007), 68.

⁵ Carlo D’Este, *Fatal Decision: Anzio and the Battle for Rome* (New York City, New York: Harperperennial, 2008), 80.

⁶ Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, Kindle, 8217.

⁷ Duane Schultz, *Crossing the Rapido: A Tragedy of World War II* (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme Pub., 2011), 126-127

⁸ Schultz, 126-127.

⁹ Fred L. Walker, *From Texas to Tome with General Fred L. Walker: Fighting World War II and the Italian Campaign with the 36th Infantry Division, as Seen Through the Eyes of Its Commanding General*, Kindle. (El Dorado Hills, California: Savas Publishing, 1969), 5460

time of expected execution of the plan.¹⁰ This did not give the 36th Division adequate time to prepare for the assault. In addition, the selection of the unit that would carry out the attack was misguided. The 36th Division, at the time of the attack, was seriously undermanned and not in any condition to conduct an attack. They had just been involved in an offensive in December and suffered many casualties that had not been replaced.¹¹ In fact, in previous engagements they had suffered more casualties than they did at Rapido. According to a later statement from Carl L Phinney, the assistant Chief of Staff G-4, the 36th Division had suffered over 5,000 casualties in combat from Salerno in the weeks leading up to the action at the Rapido.¹² The casualties suffered by the 36th Division in previous combat left the division in a depleted state and would negatively affect their combat performance. Regiments would go into the fight understrength with many new men who had not even had the chance to really meet their leaders and the officers to get a sense of their capabilities.¹³ While going into a fight under strength was not uncommon during the war, the level of depletion was worrisome. Within Clark's 5th Army each regiment was understrength by almost 1,000 men had only received replacements for half of the men that were casualties with those who remained being exhausted from constant fighting.¹⁴ Adding to the problems the Americans faced during the fight, was a lack of coordination between engineers and infantrymen to effectively negotiate the river itself.

The American's coordination between their engineers and infantry caused serious problems for the attack. Clark did not ensure the proper rehearsals took place before engaging in battle to get the infantry familiar with the technical problems of crossing a river. The commander of an engineer battalion, Major Jack S. Berry, who was supposed to support one of the infantry regiments cross the river, was not called for guidance on the rehearsals.¹⁵ Another issue with the engineers that should have alerted Clark to the impending disaster was that the engineers found none of the equipment needed to effectively support the attack.¹⁶ They were short of even the basic equipment required to get the soldiers of the 36th Division across the Rapido, namely the

¹⁰ Report of Interview with Major General Fred L. Walker, Folder 9, Box 39, Mark Clark Papers, Citadel Archives, Charleston, SC

¹¹ D'Este, 79.

¹² Statement of Colonel Carl L. Phinney, Folder 6, Box 39, Mark Clark Papers, Citadel Archives, Charleston, SC

¹³ Edwin P. Hoyt, *Backwater War: The Allied Campaign in Italy*, (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2007), 113.

¹⁴ Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, 8325.

¹⁵ Martin Blumenson, *Bloody River: The Real Tragedy of the Rapido*, (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 1998), 76-77.

¹⁶ Hoyt, *Backwater War: The Allied Campaign in Italy*, 112.

footbridges. Additionally, the engineers were supposed to unload all the supplies at the water's edge, but there were no roads for the trucks to drive. Due to daylight, this exposed them to withering fire, forcing them to dump the equipment several miles from the river.¹⁷ This equipment would have to be carried by the assault troops on their way to attack across the river. The soldiers' only hope would be to have successful coordination with engineers and the British 46th Division's attack on their flanks in support. Otherwise, they were doomed to face the German Defenses alone as Clark preferred to work solely with American troops.

General Clark refused to properly cooperate with the British 46th Division, which would be attacking in support of the 36th Division. In fact, it was more than a refusal to cooperate. It was a refusal to allow British and American soldiers to fight together with the only exception being the fight at Anzio, because Clark's commanders forced him too.¹⁸ At the heart of this refusal to work with the British was his own ego. Clark did not trust General Alexander, the British general, who oversaw the 15th Army Group, which included the British 46th Division; General Alexander was the next level up from General Clark and his 5th Army. Clark was angered at the British performance at Salerno where the Americans fought against a tenacious German defender while the supporting British attack moved too slowly to offer help.¹⁹ What angered Clark more was the British portrayal of the landings after the fighting had stopped. Clark was particularly mad that British propaganda had portrayed Montgomery as coming to the rescue of the American forces, which he believed was not the case and at this moment decided there would be no such confusion over the conquest of Rome, the next step after concluding at Rapido.²⁰

More than just Rome, Clark wanted to ensure his American soldiers got the glory for their victories. This thought was so pervasive that Clark would not consider the better maneuver, which was from the success of the British X Corps' bridgehead at Garigliano. The 36th Division could cross the Rapido from this location and attack there instead of their planned frontal assault.²¹ This would have allowed the Allies to move just south of the Rapido and cross over near Sant Ambrogio and Minturno.²² Though this maneuver would have been difficult to achieve, it was by no means impossible. The problem was that the X Corps was British and the 36th Division was American. Had both these groups

¹⁷ Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, 8285

¹⁸ D'Este, 83.

¹⁹ Dan Kurzman *The Race for Rome*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 17.

²⁰ Kurzman, 17.

²¹ Martin Blumenson, *Bloody River: The Real Tragedy of the Rapido*, (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 1998), 122.

²² Mikolashek, 94

been either British or American the maneuver would have been more feasible.²³ More damning than the refusal to maneuver across zones was the refusal to allow British reinforcements to reinforce American divisions.

After the assault across the Rapido on the 20th of January, the 36th Division was under strength by over 3,000 infantrymen.²⁴ The beleaguered Americans needed reinforcement quickly. Instead of getting whatever forces were available and having them relieve the exhausted Americans, Clark refused troops based on nationality. Clark, being offered a New Zealand Corps by General Alexander and having them placed under his command, refused to allow them to move into the front line.²⁵ Clark wanted the glory of the supposed victory to go to the American forces and no one else, especially the British. In fact, it was only when it became apparent the American's assault was going to fail that Clark allowed them to play a part in the operation.²⁶ The refusal to allow for reinforcement highlights Clark's failure of command and how he could not set aside his personal grievances to aid his own soldiers. Instead, he opted to commit his soldiers to the fight at Rapido piecemeal, which allowed them to be destroyed.²⁷ Mark Clark would defend his actions at the Rapido vehemently, especially after the war, in memoirs and against men who served in his division.

Mark Clark never admitted that his attack at the Rapido River was a wasted effort. He believed his attacks at Anzio, which involved his supporting diversionary attack at the Rapido River, held German troops in the Italian theater and therefore having a strategic impact. However, other commanders from both sides dispute this idea in their separate testimonies. Clark defended his idea that the attack against the Rapido River was necessary to pull German reserves away from the landings at Anzio; however the commander of the German 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, General Heinrich von Vietinghoff, thought little of the attack.²⁸ In fact, he thought it was simply a reconnaissance in force and did not commit any local reserves to resist the attack back.²⁹ Additionally, General Vietinghoff thought Mark Clark's attack did not achieve the purpose of launching the assault to draw forces from Anzio. However, despite the clear operational failure and waste of life, Clark became more entrenched in his beliefs. In his memoir *Calculated Risk* he writes that "I salute them [the 36th Division] for their charge and courage. As for myself, I can only say that under the same circumstances I would have to do it over again – and if I

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ian Blackwell, *Fifth Army in Italy 1943-1945 A Coalition at War*, 188.

²⁵ Blackwell, 177.

²⁶ Blackwell, 177.

²⁷ Blackwell, 178.

²⁸ Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, 8513

²⁹ Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, 8513

am to be accused of something, thank God I am accused of attacking instead of retreating.”³⁰ Mark Clark’s refusal to acknowledge the failure and futility of the assault over the Rapido River demonstrate his ignorance to the actions he ordered his men follow.

Despite the evidence that seems to illustrate Clark’s failure at the Rapido river, there are some who defend his decisions during the battle. Jon Mikolashek, in his doctoral dissertation, argues that the challenges posed by the terrain and a competent defender forced Clark to launch operations under poor conditions.³¹ Mikolashek attempts to explain that no commander would have been able to have more success given the circumstances Clark found himself in. After all, he was facing two well trained and battle-hardened divisions with relatively green troops.³² According to Mikolashek, Clark believed that if the Allies were able to seize the Alban Hills, which was the dominating terrain on the western side of the Liri River Valley, then the entire Gustav Line would have to be abandoned, which made it a decisive point of the operation.³³ The plan was for one force to land at Anzio and one force to attack and break through the Gustav Line in order to link up within a week and move on Rome.³⁴ The Germans, according to Clark, would be forced to give up their positions on the Gustav Line if the Allies seized the Alban Hills in order to avoid being encircled.³⁵ The plan made sense in theory, generally laying out a feasible means of breaking through stout defensive works. Defenders of Clark would include the Secretary of War Robert Patterson and Randolph Churchill, the son of Prime Minister Churchill. Patterson wrote in a letter to the Committee on Military Affairs in 1946 stating that Clark was justified in his actions at the Rapido River.³⁶ He backed up Clark’s claim that the attacks were used to draw German reinforcements away from the Anzio landings and that Clark “exercised sound judgement in planning it and ordering it.”³⁷ Randolph Churchill would say that the crossing was his father’s idea and Winston Churchill insisted on the campaign despite the protests of other Allied leaders, to include President Roosevelt.³⁸ However, there would be an almost insurmountable number of

³⁰ Mark W. Clark, *Calculated Risk*, (New York City, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 282.

³¹ Mikolashek, 88.

³² D'Este, 79.

³³ Mikolashek, 88.

³⁴ Mikolashek, 89.

³⁵ Mikolashek, 88.

³⁶ Letter from Secretary of War Robert Stanton to Committee on Military Affairs, Folder 6, Box 39, Mark Clark Papers, Citadel Archives, Charleston, SC.

³⁷ Letter from Secretary of War Robert Stanton to Committee on Military Affairs, Folder 6, Box 39, Mark Clark Papers, Citadel Archives, Charleston, SC.

³⁸ Mikolashek, 108.

problems that should have killed the operation, which discredits the argument absolving Clark of responsibility for the failure.

The main issue of the operation was the allocation of landing craft to deliver the attack force to the Anzio beach head, which was a key portion of Operation SHINGLE. While the Allies were considering the attacks in Italy, they were also in the midst of planning Operations OVERLORD and ANVIL, which could not be interfered with.³⁹ As a result, there was a serious lack of landing craft that would be able to be provided to the Italian theater of operations. This lack of landing craft limited the amount of forces that could be landed at Anzio. Clark himself realized the operation would be doomed to fail if they could not get enough landing craft and he recommended that SHINGLE be canceled on December 18th, 1943.⁴⁰ Additionally, due to the navy being needed in other theaters, there would be no chance to build up forces at sea with additional support to follow after the initial attack.⁴¹ Essentially, the soldiers landing at Anzio would land and be left to sort out any follow-on situation on their own. This added extreme risk to the operation as if the landings were not successful there would be nothing that could be done to help the forces on the beach.

General Lucas agreed with the idea SHINGLE should be canceled and wrote in his diary that the operation had “a strong odor of Gallipoli and apparently the same amateur [Winston Churchill] is still on the coach’s bench.”⁴² General Lucas was certainly not the only one who had doubts about the operation. In fact, British Brigadier General Kenneth Strong, Eisenhower’s intelligence officer, believed that the Anzio landing would not achieve its goals.⁴³ General Strong argued that the Germans would not abandon Italy the way Churchill thought since Hitler saw Italy as politically important and would simply reinforce Italy with unengaged divisions in France or Yugoslavia.⁴⁴ General Strong coldly predicted that Rome would not be taken by the Allies quickly, and the Allied forces would be forced to fight against a strong German defense.⁴⁵ In addition to these prophetic comments from Eisenhower’s intelligence officer, there were serious setbacks suffered by the units who were to be engaged in the operation. Within three days of the landings there was an accident, which resulted in the loss of more than forty landing crafts that were crucial to the attack, which made even the most ardent believers in the plan lose

³⁹ Mikolashek, 89-90

⁴⁰ Mikolashek, 88.

⁴¹ Mikolashek, 91.

⁴² Mikolashek, 94.

⁴³ Mikolashek, 95

⁴⁴ Mikolashek, 95.

⁴⁵ Mikolashek, 95.

hope, calling it a “suicide dash.”⁴⁶ Clark commented in his memoir *Calculated Risk* that the loss of these vehicles was crucial to the attack on the Rapido River.⁴⁷

Despite the setbacks and concern, Clark initiated the operation anyway.

After the first day, the British who were supposed to seize the high ground, which overlooked the area where the assault over the Rapido River would occur, failed to accomplish their objectives.⁴⁸ The ground the British forces were supposed to take was the high ground that dominated the Liri valley, where the assault forces attempting to cross the Rapido River would be crossing.⁴⁹ Clark knew that without the possession of this ground the attack at the Rapido River would be even deadlier. Still, Clark ordered the attacks forward, disregarding the clear warnings that the attack would fail. At each of these major setbacks there was an opportunity to call off the attack. Each of these issues were not insignificant and turned an already risky operation into a gamble, which should have led to it being called off.

Mark Clark deservedly bears the blame for the casualties suffered by the 36th Division during the battle of the Rapido River. He selected the worst possible location for the assault to take place, across a flood plain, over a river, and into an integrated defense network. He did so with an understrength and combat exhausted division who had not yet integrated the measly replacements they received. Additionally, he did not allow, or even consult, the engineers to properly train the infantry on the complex aspects of crossing a river while under intense fire. Finally, Clark inexcusably refused reinforcements from his British allies because he was afraid he would not get the credit for winning. He also failed to recognize key points during the planning and execution phases of the operation where the attack should have been called off and forced the attack ahead. After all these glaring problems and worse results, Clark says that he would do the whole operation over again. Even after breaking through the Gustav Line, instead of capitalizing on the moment and encircling the German divisions leaving the area, he went for the prize of Rome so he could bask in the glory of taking the capital of Italy. Despite an attempt to absolve General Mark Clark made by some historians and public officials of the time, the facts remain that Clark mismanaged the deployment of his soldiers during the engagement at the Rapido River.

⁴⁶ Mikolashek, 96.

⁴⁷ Clark, 269.

⁴⁸ Mikolashek, 98.

⁴⁹ Mikolashek, 98.