



# Cassino War Cemetery

Originally selected for a war cemetery in January 1944, the site was impossible to use until the fighting in this region subsided when the Germans withdrew five months later. As the area saw some of the fiercest action of the Italian Campaign, the Cassino War Cemetery is the second largest Second World War cemetery in Italy. More than 4,200 Commonwealth graves are located here, of which 200 are unknown and 855 are Canadian, including seven pilots.

Also in the cemetery is the Cassino Memorial, unveiled in 1956, which commemorates the more than 4,000 Commonwealth war dead of the Sicilian and Italian campaigns who have no known grave. The names of 192 Canadians are inscribed on its 15-foot high slabs of green marble.

Cassino was a German stronghold along the Gustav Line. Both the town and particularly its hill (Monte Cassino) provided the enemy with dominant defences against Allied assault. Attempts by American and New Zealand troops in January and February of 1944, respectively, bombardment and artillery fire leading up to the latter assault destroyed the ancient monastery on Monte Cassino (it has since been constructed). An attack in mid-March reduced the town to rubble, although most of it was now in Allied hands. However, this latest assault was abandoned and a period of stalemate ensued.

A new, grander offensive was planned to conquer the approaches to Rome. The Allies misled the Germans into believing a seaborne invasion would be conducted north of Rome. The real attack began the night of May 11. By the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Germans had retreated to the Senger Line, as Moroccan, Algerian, French and other Allied forces were breaking through the Gustav Line and swiftly advancing. By the 17<sup>th</sup>, the Polish forces were moving in on Cassino. Initially, they had been driven back from their objective northwest of the monastery, however the next morning the Polish standard was raised over the ruins of the hill.



Among the Canadian units that had participated in this offensive were the tank regiments – the Three Rivers, Calgary and Ontario regiments – which supported Indian soldiers across the Gari River. The enemy counterattacked, but within four days a bridgehead was established and the Germans had retreated to the Adolf Hitler Line. In the midst of this action, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps, which had recently been shifted into the Liri Valley, relieved the Indian Division. In difficult fighting on the 17<sup>th</sup>, they took 200 prisoners.

The Hitler Line was successfully breached by nightfall on May 23, despite a tremendous enemy artillery barrage. The Canadians had delivered the main attack, which resulted in the 5<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division advancing through the gap. By noon of the 24<sup>th</sup>, the German line was clear except for Aquino. Small battles continued throughout the remainder of May as the Germans tried to escape the Liri valley and retreat to the north yet again.

The Cassino War Cemetery is located in the commune of Cassino in the province of Frosinone, approximately 120 kilometres southeast of Rome. It is overlooked by Monte Cassino, a dominant hill topped by a monastery founded by St. Benedict in the year 529.