



UNDERSTANDING  
SACRIFICE

# Activity: The Army Engineers: Challenges at the Anzio Beachhead



## Guiding question:

Why was the occupation and maintenance of the Anzio Beachhead so challenging?

### DEVELOPED BY JIM GOODSPEED

**Grade Level(s):** 6-8, 9-12

**Subject(s):** Social Studies, Geography, JROTC

**Cemetery Connection:** Sicily-Rome American Cemetery

**Fallen Hero Connection:** Sergeant Raymond S. Wittbrodt



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## Overview

Using photographs, excerpts from a diary, news articles, and a map, students will gain an understanding of why the invasion of Anzio was challenging for those who served there. Students will work in groups to analyze the documents, using guided questions, and then discuss and compare results before writing a memo explaining the challenges faced.

## Historical Context

Today most Americans are unaware of the battles fought in Italy during World War II. One of the important events in the fight against Nazi Germany in Italy involved the invasion of Anzio in January 1944. From this location the United States pushed north to capture Rome and force an end to the war against Axis forces in Italy. The Allied planners hoped to capture Rome by the fall of 1943, but the Germans mounted a strong defense along the Gustav Line, a defensive perimeter to block access to the capital. It took the Allies 18 months to capture Rome. The campaign forced the Germans to pull soldiers from the eastern theater and take some pressure off the Soviet Union. The geography, mountainous terrain, and weather conditions made this campaign a challenge for Allied forces as they pushed north.

## Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Describe several challenges in creating and maintaining a beachhead; and
- Explain how geography played a role in controlling the beachhead.

## Documents Used ★ indicates an ABMC source

### Primary Sources

Jack Foisie, "Engineers Build Airfield at Beachhead in 4 Days," February 9, 1944  
*Stars and Stripes*

Map, *Allied Strategy in Italy*, January 1944  
U.S. Center of Military History  
[history.army.mil/brochures/romar/map1.JPG](http://history.army.mil/brochures/romar/map1.JPG)

Map, *Anzio, The Landing*, January 22, 1944  
U.S. Center of Military History

Personal Diary of Merlyn M. Ross, 815<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, January 24 to June 6, 1944  
(excerpts)  
Courtesy of James M. Goodspeed

Photograph and Press Release, "With the AAF Engineer Command in Italy..." March 1944  
Courtesy of James M. Goodspeed

Poster, *We Clear the Way*, 1943  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

## Secondary Sources

*Sicily-Rome American Cemetery Visitor Film* ★

American Battle Monuments Commission

[abmc.gov/multimedia/videos/sicily-rome-american-cemetery-visitor-film](http://abmc.gov/multimedia/videos/sicily-rome-american-cemetery-visitor-film)

Raymond Wittbrodt Fallen Hero Profile ★

National History Day

[nhsilentheroes.org/profiles/raymond-s-wittbrodt/](http://nhsilentheroes.org/profiles/raymond-s-wittbrodt/)

## Materials

- Guided Document Discussion Questions Handout
- Strategy Memo Assessment
- Strategy Memo Assessment Rubric
- Computer with projector and speakers

## Lesson Preparation

- Divide students into groups of three to five students per group.
- Make one copy (or share digital copies) of each primary source document for each student.
- Make one copy of each of the following for each student:
  - Guided Document Discussion Questions Handout
  - Strategy Memo Assessment
  - Strategy Memo Assessment Rubric

## Procedure

### Activity One: The Anzio Breakout (45 minutes)

- Project the *Sicily-Rome American Cemetery Visitor Film*.
- Ask students:
  - *What challenges did the United States military face during this phase of the war in Italy?*
  - *What factors caused this phase of the war to drag on for an extended period of time?*
  - *What difficulties did Americans face who landed at Anzio in Italy?*

- Move students into groups of three to five students each.
- Distribute to each student one set of historical documents and one Guided Document Discussion Question Handout.
  - *Teacher Tip:* If desired, a teacher can choose to exclude the Guided Document Discussion Questions if appropriate for older or more advanced students.
- Assign each group a document on which to begin. Students should continue working through documents after they complete the analysis of their assigned document.
  - Give sufficient time for the students to work through all documents as a group.
  - Circulate and answer questions as needed.
- Ask students to share their responses to each document. Correct any misunderstandings and answer any questions as they arise.

## Assessment (30 minutes):

- Distribute one copy of the Strategy Memo Assessment and Strategy Memo Assessment Rubric to each student.
- Review the prompt with students:
  - *Today is March 15, 1944, and you are a second lieutenant in the 815<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion. Your commanding officer has just received a letter from Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, the commander of the Fifth Army, wanting to know what is slowing the progress of the breakout from the Anzio beachhead. Using what you know, draft a memo for your superior officer to send to Lieutenant General Clark. In this memo, you should address three major challenges faced by the Allied military and how your unit has worked to solve these problems as quickly as possible. In your fully developed, one paragraph memo, you must take a stand, explaining the delays and defending the argument with specific evidence from the sources you analyzed.*
- The assessment can be scored using the Strategy Memo Assessment Rubric.

## Methods for Extension

- Students interested in the role of engineers could also compare Anzio to what happened at Normandy in June 1944.
- Students interested in the role of special forces can explore the Fallen Hero profile for Raymond Wittbrodt, who served as a part of the Anzio campaign and is buried at Sicily-Rome American Cemetery.
- The American Battle Monuments Commission maintains U.S. military cemeteries overseas. These cemeteries are permanent memorials to the fallen, but it is important that students know the stories of those who rest here. To learn more about the stories of Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice, visit [abmc.gov/education](https://abmc.gov/education) and [NHDSilentHeroes.org](https://NHDSilentHeroes.org).
- Teachers can enhance students' interest in World War II in Italy by exploring these related lesson plans:
  - [The Bari Incident: Chemical Weapons and World War II](#)
  - [Duty and Dignity: Black Americans and the 92nd Infantry Division Buffalo Soldiers](#)
  - [Traveling with the Troop Carriers: An Overview of World War II in Europe and Beyond](#)

## Adaptations

- Teachers can adapt the project to younger learners by changing the focus of the last activity to a shorter essay or paragraph. It could also be adapted to English Language Learners in a similar way.
- Teachers can annotate primary sources to assist with challenging vocabulary.
- Teachers can provide (or remove) a graphic organizer to help students structure responses.

## Guided Document Discussion Questions

### **Map, *Allied Strategy in Italy, January 1944***

U.S. Center of Military History

### **Map, *Anzio, The Landing, January 22, 1944***

U.S. Center of Military History

1. Geographically, where in Italy is the Anzio Beachhead located?
2. List and describe two geographic features in this area that would make combat difficult for an American soldier.
3. How “deep” (long) is the fighting area from the beachhead to the front? How wide? Hint: use the scales and legends on the maps to help you answer this question.
4. According to these maps, what challenges would a soldier face while fighting on the Anzio Beachhead?

## Guided Document Discussion Questions cont.

**Jack Foisie, “Engineers Build Airfield at Beachhead in 4 Days,” February 9, 1944**

*Stars and Stripes*

1. How was this work at Anzio a feat of engineering?
2. What types of hazards did the engineers face while building the airstrip?
3. Why is the title of this article significant?
4. What challenges did American servicemen face at Anzio?



## Guided Document Discussion Questions cont.

### Poster, *We Clear the Way*, 1943

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

1. What does the engineer carry to defend himself?
2. Describe the attitude that the engineer is displaying in the poster.
3. What is placed in both the lower and right hand corners of the poster? What do you think these symbols represent?
4. Based on this poster, what obstacles or challenges do you think the engineers faced?

## Guided Document Discussion Questions cont.

### Personal Diary of Merlyn M. Ross, 815<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, January 24 to June 6, 1944 (excerpts)

Courtesy of James M. Goodspeed

1. What type of machinery did Ross operate?
2. How were the Germans trying to stop the engineers?
3. What was tragic about the death of R.J. Rolls?
4. From reading the excerpts of this diary, what challenges did the engineers face at the Anzio beachhead?

## Guided Document Discussion Questions cont.

### Photograph & Press Release, “With the AAF Engineer Command in Italy...,” March 1944

Courtesy of James M. Goodspeed

1. According to this press release and photograph, what was this machinery used for?
2. Name three types of machinery that you can see in the photograph.
3. Describe the location of this airstrip in relation to the beachhead.
4. Based on this document, what challenges would engineers have in building the airstrip on the Anzio beachhead?

## Strategy Memo Assessment

Today is March 15, 1944, and you are a second lieutenant in the 815<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion. Your commanding officer has just received a letter from Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, the commander of the Fifth Army, wanting to know what is slowing the progress of the breakout from the Anzio beach head.

Using what you know, draft a memo for your superior officer to send to Lieutenant General Clark. In this memo, you should address three major challenges faced by the allied military and how your unit has worked to solve these problems as quickly as possible. In your fully developed, one paragraph memo, you must take a stand, explaining the delays and defending the argument with specific evidence from the sources you analyzed.

# Strategy Memo Assessment Rubric

	<b>Advanced</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Basic</b>	<b>Emerging</b>
<b>Thesis/Argument</b>	You have taken a stand and included a clearly defined argument.	You have taken a stand and included a mostly defined argument.	You attempt to take a stand yet have an only somewhat defined argument.	Your memo is more summary than analysis and has a largely unclear or unidentifiable argument.
<b>Historical Evidence</b>	In your memo you have included at least four identifiable and well-integrated references to the primary source documents.	In your memo you have included at least three identifiable and integrated references to the primary source documents.	In your memo you have included at least two identifiable references to the primary source documents.	In your memo you have not included sufficient textual evidence from the primary sources to support your argument.
<b>Accuracy</b>	Your memo reveals a deep understanding of the challenges facing the U.S. Army in Anzio in early 1944. There are no factual errors or major omissions.	Your memo reveals a clear understanding of the challenges facing the U.S. Army in Anzio in early 1944. There are few factual errors and/or significant omissions.	Your memo reveals a limited understanding of the challenges facing the U.S. Army in Anzio in early 1944. There are some factual errors and/or omissions.	Your memo reveals a weak understanding of the challenges facing the U.S. Army in Anzio in early 1944. There are several factual errors and/or omissions.
<b>Professional Product</b>	Your memo is coherent and convincing with no spelling or grammatical mistakes.	Your memo is coherent and convincing with few spelling or grammatical mistakes.	Your memo is generally coherent and convincing with some spelling or grammatical mistakes.	Your memo lacks coherence and may not support an argument. There are several spelling or grammatical mistakes.



# Jack Foisie, "Engineers Build Airfield at Beachhead in 4 Days," February 9, 1944

Stars and Stripes

## Engineers Build Airfield At Beachhead In 4 Days

By Sgt. JACK FOISIE  
(Stars and Stripes Staff Writer)

WITH 5TH ARMY AMPHIBIOUS FORCES, Feb. 9—The first Air Force unit to land on the beachhead were men of the soil—the aviation engineers.

They came in D plus five to do a rush job, the overhaul and enlarging of the only landing strip in the area, a small grassy spot at Nettuno which the Italians had used as a takeoff for their observation planes attached to an artillery training school.

Four days later combat planes were landing and the runway now is also suitable for larger planes.

There is no better illustration of the speed of modern war than this feat of engineering. Even this rush job at Nettuno would have taken a peace-time engineer outfit at least ten days, say the engineer officers, many of whom were peace-time engineers.

But the pressure of war demands seemingly superhuman effort, and in this case the demands were met fully. Perhaps the realization of these men of the need for even more complete air cover—they suffered casualties from bombings—spurred them on.

### HIGH PRIORITY

This aviation engineer unit commanded by Lt. Col. George Kumpe, 33-year-old West Pointer, really began the job on D-day when a survey party, headed by Capt. John P. Mason, Houston, Texas, landed to prepare the plans. The group included T-Sgt. Stephen R. Shuhay, Sgt. Eddy C. Heilker and Cpl. Leroy E. Allman.

Meanwhile, Company A, with some additional special equipment attached, were high on the priority list for loading. On the night of D plus three the big tractors, trucks, graders, scrapers and rollers lumbered down to the docks.

First headache arose when it was discovered that the LST could not carry all of the equipment but after laboring for more than 12 hours, the loading crew, under the direction of Lt. Eldridge Chester, squeezed aboard more than the British salts had believed possible. It was a wierd scene, as these giant machines, in the black night with often only flashlights to guide them, were backed onto the carrier and parked just as expertly as a car lot driver parks Fords and Packards.

These privates and T-5s and 4s, most of whom had little or no experience with these unwieldy pieces of engineering equipment

before the army, were doing one of the most skillful, highly-paid jobs in the civilian construction business.

Once they got ashore at Anzio they went immediately into action. The company is commanded by Capt. Arthur Benson, Morgantown, W. Va. Capt. Mason was in charge of field construction, assisted by Lts. Reuben R. Day, Larry Richards and Jack Loeb. NCO's in charge were Staff Sergeants Ralph Horvath, Robert Rollo and Jerome Bryers with their chief as M-Sgt. Leslie E. Dalley.

### SHRAPNEL ON RUNWAY

Their task was to extend a 1,900-foot runway; in order to do so they found it necessary to clear away some already razed buildings at one end and to lay wire matting at the other. Other engineering outfits aided in constructing taxiways and roads and dispersal areas. Even the chaplain, Capt. Philip Oxnam, and the doctor, Capt. Philip L. Campagna, helped, "if only morally."

Two hazards, an open sewer near the runway, and a German minefield between the beach and the runway, had to be dealt with. The Germans, in their hurried departure, had obligingly left signs shouting "achtung minen" around the borders of the deadly plot.

Mobile anti-aircraft stood by while the engineers worked but at night long-range shelling and chance bombing took their toll. In the morning the men went out and dug shrapnel out of the runway. The concussion of explosions had torn tile roofs off nearby barracks and unexploded shells had gone through both walls. War was very close and real to the engineers but they went on working.

The day before the field was officially pronounced ready, Maj. Virgil C. Fields, commander of a fighter unit of the 12th Air Support Command, flew in to "look over the layout" prior to the arrival of his outfit. A service unit headed by Capt. George S. Montooth had already arrived by boat.

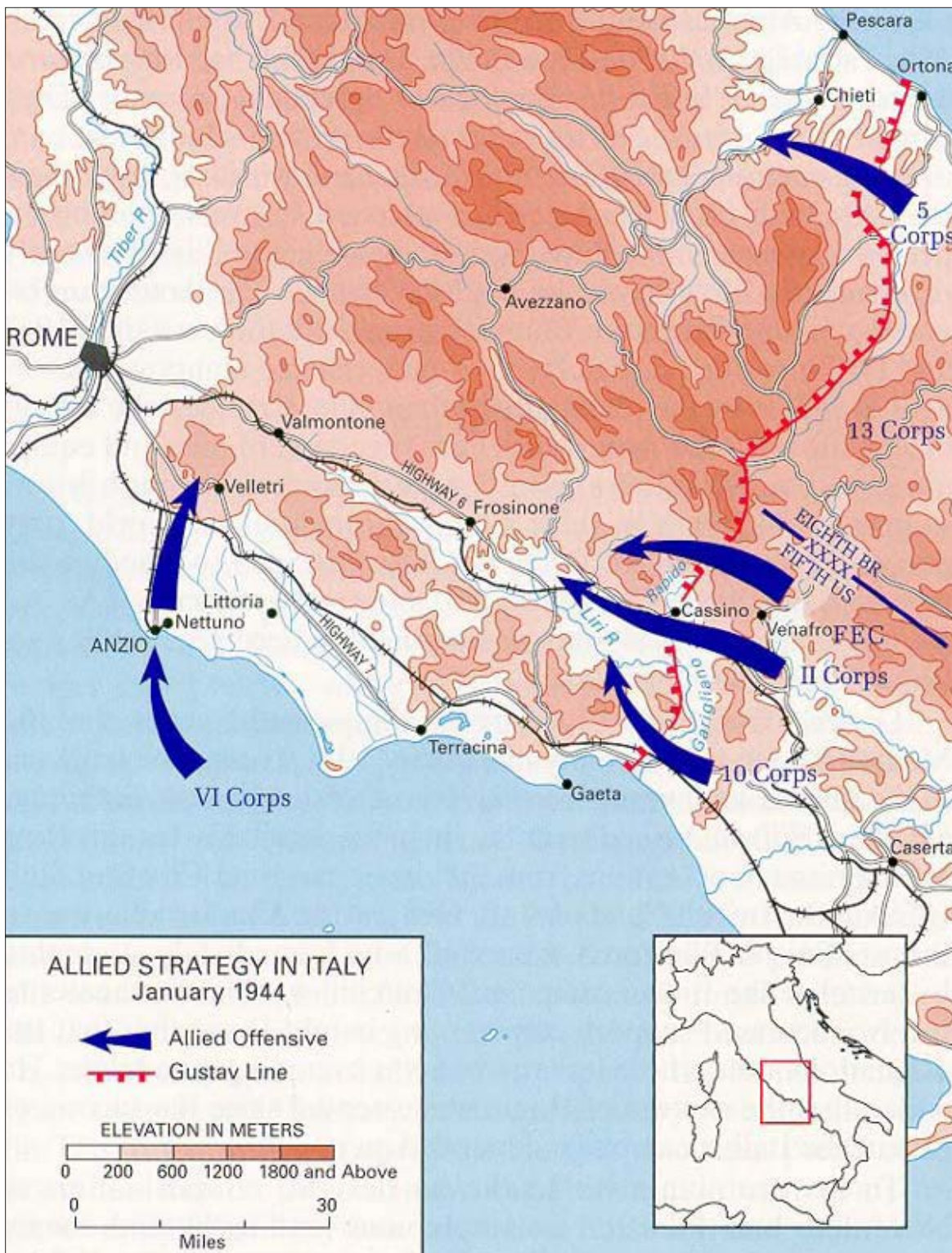
The next day eight transports, escorted by fighters, landed with cargo. The runway was pronounced "bumpy but not bad."

And so an airfield less than 50 miles from Rome had been erected—and the aviation engineers kept right on working.



# Map, Allied Strategy in Italy, January 1944

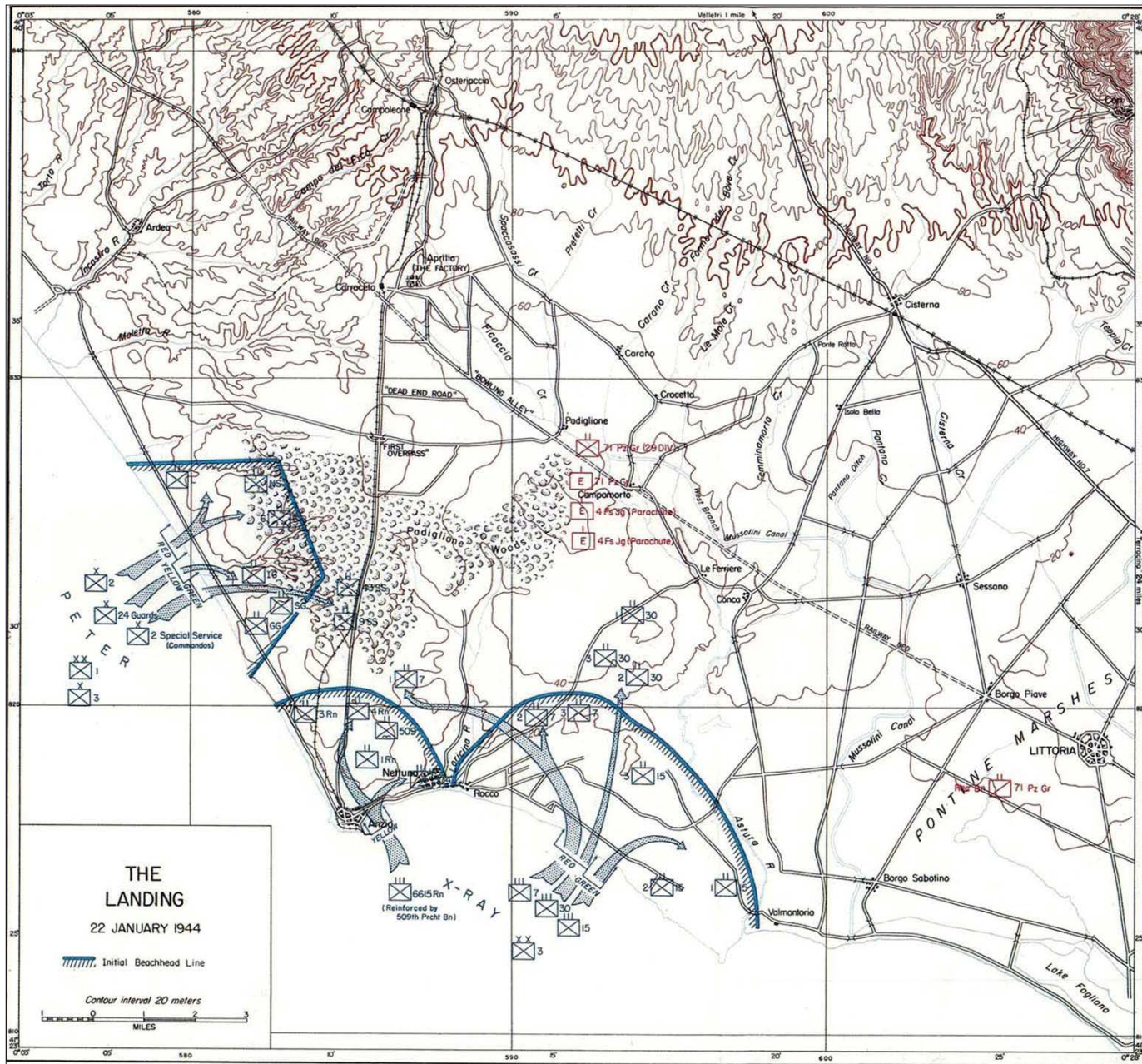
U.S. Center of Military History





# Map, Anzio, The Landing, January 22, 1944

U.S. Center of Military History





# Personal Diary of Merlyn M. Ross, 815<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, January 24 to June 6, 1944 (excerpts)

Courtesy of James M. Goodspeed

*Jan. 24 – Received the order to move (from Naples to Anzio).*

*Jan. 27 – We arrived at the Anzio Beachhead and unloaded just before dark. We had an air raid this afternoon and two bombs landed very close to the boat. I took the bulldozer to the area which was about five miles – had a time finding it.*

*Jan. 28 – We started to build a landing strip. There has been plenty of air activity. I was so tired last night that a bomb which landed very close did not wake me.*

*Jan. 29 – We lost our first man during an air-raid today. The bomb landed about a hundred feet from building where I sleep.*

*Jan. 30 – A rocket bomb hit a ship early this morning and unexploded shells landed in the building where we were sleeping. We moved to a wooded area.*

*Jan. 31, 1944 – The Germans began shelling us today. The first two they sent over landed about ten rods from where I was working with the bulldozer. This was the first time any of us had been under fire.*

*Feb. 5 – A few shells landed on the runway and several of the boys were wounded. I was not on the field at the time.*

*Feb. 7 – A German plane in a dive to hit the runway overshot his target and the bomb hit a hospital. Some of the boys that were wounded the other day were unfortunate enough to be in this hospital. One met death in an effort to protect his brother. My platoon sergeant, R. J. Rolls, was visiting these boys and also met with death. I went through training with him and we have always been the best of friends.*

*Feb. 8 – The ceaseless shelling and the air raids are beginning to show on some of the boys.*

*Feb. 17 – The past week we have been extending the runway. Several formations of bombers went over, and we could see the smoke from the fires they started.*

*Feb. 22 – Fighting has ceased on account of bad weather.*

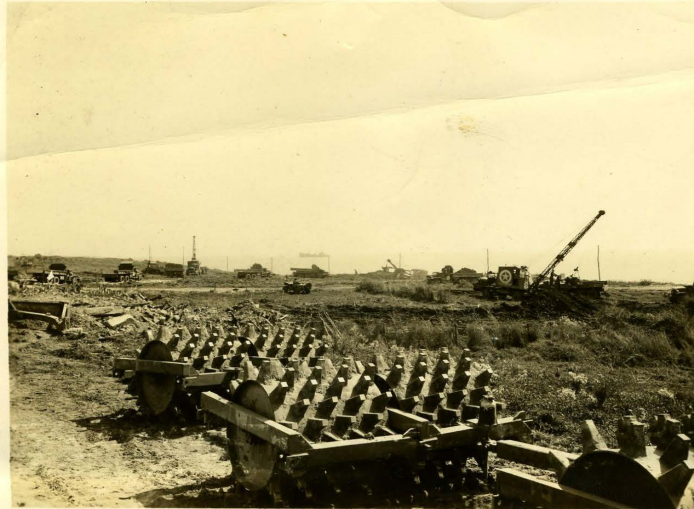
*Mar. 2 – This last week we have been working at the hospital, taking a foot of dirt from under the tents and making a mound at the edge as to protect the patients from shrapnel.*

*Mar. 3 – At the present time we are just outside Nettuno.*

*Mar. 19 – Many of the shells land close to this, but the boys are getting use to them now.*

# Photograph and Press Release, "With the AAF Engineer Command in Italy....," March 1944

Courtesy of James M. Goodspeed



CERTIFIED PASSED BY FIELD PRESS CENSOR

WITH THE AAF ENGINEER COMMAND IN ITALY - This picture shows construction equipment operated by Company "A" of the 815th Engineer Aviation Battalion working on the historic strip on the Anzio beachhead in March 1944. Perhaps the toughest single aviation engineer assignment of the Mediterranean air war, the Anzio field stands as a tribute to the courage and perseverance of the MAAF airfield builders.

AAFEU Photo



# Poster, We Clear the Way, 1943

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

