

## **The OSS and Italian Partisans in World War II**

*Peter Tompkins*

“  
**The partisans' success was largely attributable to the arms and supplies parachuted to them by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the OSS and to the brilliance of the intelligence networks developed by members of the Resistance.**  
”

---

**Peter Tompkins** served in the OSS and spent five months behind German lines in Italy. He is the author of two books on OSS activities in Italy.

The contribution of Italian anti-Fascist partisans to the campaign in Italy in World War II has long been neglected. These patriots kept as many as seven German divisions out of the line. They also obtained the surrender of two full German divisions, which led directly to the collapse of the German forces in and around Genoa, Turin, and Milan.

These actions pinned down the German armies and led to their complete destruction. Throughout northern Italy, partisan brigades in the mountains and clandestine action groups in the cities liberated every major city before the arrival of combat units of Fifteenth Army Group, a mixture of American, British, French, and Commonwealth divisions, to which was added a smattering of Royalist Italians.

The partisans' success was largely attributable to the arms and supplies parachuted to them by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the OSS and to the brilliance of the intelligence networks developed by members of the Resistance in constant touch with Fifteenth Army Group headquarters via secret radios.

Intercepted German signals and the Ultra deciphering at Bletchley Park in England went far toward assuring final victory, but little credit has been given to the vast amount of detailed intelligence collected and rapidly transmitted by individual partisan spies in Italy. Strategically, Ultra may have saved the day, but tactically its information was far slower in getting

to where it was needed in the field than agent signals.

During the crucial battles of Anzio in January and February 1944, for example, Ultra signals warning of Hitler's plans and of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring's attacks would arrive regularly at Allied headquarters in Caserta as many as three days after the attacks had already taken place. On the other hand, extremely accurate information gathered by the partisans, often directly from Kesselring's own headquarters, was sent via a secret OSS radio in Rome, on the air as many as five times a day, to be received simultaneously in Caserta and on the beachhead in time to repel these attacks.

After Rome's liberation, as Kesselring retreated to his mountain defenses straddling the Apennines from Carrara on the Tyrrhenian to Rimini on the Adriatic, a barrier known as the Gothic Line, intelligence became a priority for Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander, who was intent on launching an attack against these defenses. Gen. Mark Clark, whose Fifth Army would have the job of cracking Kesselring's mountain strongholds, exhorted partisans operating further north to increase their activities.

To organize such operations, the OSS infiltrated individual Italian partisan agents by submarine behind the German lines, landing them along the Adriatic coast at the mouth of the Po River. One agent, 20-year-old Mino Farneti, set up a secret radio in the foothills of the Apennines, just south

Italy, 1944 (U)



Unclassified

743255 (R01816) 7-97

“

**The 36th Garibaldi Brigade, armed by several OSS drops, had become a disciplined group of 1,200 men commanded by an artillery lieutenant codenamed Bob, renowned for his courage, astuteness, and the red shorts he always wore into battle.**

”

of his native city of Ravenna. From there, he organized parachute drops of weapons to pinpoints in the mountains, enabling growing groups of partisans to attack the Germans behind their lines and in Ravenna and other lowland towns.

### The Gothic Line

As Alexander prepared to launch his major attack in September of 1944, his G-2 thirsted for intelligence details of the Gothic Line. One of Farneti's colleagues, who had already managed to protect and smuggle back across the fighting lines five Allied general officers captured by the Germans, obtained a key piece of information. Reconnoitering behind the Gothic Line, his men intercepted and shot a German major traveling by sidecar; the major's briefcase contained a complete set of plans for the eastern half of the Gothic Line defenses. To get the plans for the Allies, another agent took them to Milan, where they were forwarded by courier to Allen Dulles, head of the OSS in Switzerland.

Meanwhile, another young OSS agent, Ennio Tassinari, was informed that partisans in Lucca, close to the Tyrrhenian, had obtained a complementary set of plans for the western half of the Gothic Line. He personally smuggled a copy of the plans in the soles of his shoes to the OSS in Siena, and from there the plans were rushed to General Clark's G-2. The plans showed that the weakest spot in Kesselring's defenses was at Il Gigo Pass, at the juncture of his Tenth and Fourteenth Armies. Clark therefore shifted the main attack of his II Corps eastward to the area indicated by the partisan intelligence. If Clark were to break through to the foot of the mountains, he would be in position to

trap and destroy Kesselring's forces by cutting the flatland Route 9 from Bologna to Milan.

On 17 September, II Corps broke through the Gothic Line, causing the whole German line to fall back. Clark then brought forward his 88th Infantry Division, considered the best American division in Italy, and Allied commanders became confident that the Fifth Army would soon sweep into the Po Valley, where Gen. Sir Oliver Leese's Eighth Army attacking along the Adriatic could roll back the whole German Tenth Army past Bologna.

### Partisan Attacks

By dawn on 21 September, the US 350th and 351st Regiments were advancing up narrow mountain trails through intermittent rain and fog to attack Monte Battaglia, the last remaining obstacle. Ahead of them, behind the German lines, the 36th Garibaldi Brigade, armed by several OSS drops, had become a disciplined group of 1,200 men commanded by an artillery lieutenant codenamed Bob, renowned for his courage,

astuteness, and the red shorts he always wore into battle. As a result of the partisans' daring and courage in the area immediately behind the Germans' main Apennines battleline, German units were unable to move freely without danger. Kesselring's intelligence officer reported that the partisans killed 5,000 Germans and wounded from 25,000 to 30,000 between June and August.

Bob was determined to attack the Germans on Monte Battaglia, the most sensitive area, where Kesselring's 4th Parachute Division was all that blocked the Fifth Army. On the night of 25 September, 400 partisans reached Monte Battaglia just as the Germans were beginning to fortify it. They killed an unspecified number of Germans; the rest fled down the mountain. To clear the way to Monte Battaglia for the Americans, the partisans then saw that they first had to remove the Germans from neighboring Monte Carnevale. The partisans came under heavy mortar and machinegun fire from retreating Germans and from American artillery protecting its advancing troops, unaware that partisans had already liberated Battaglia. Pressed along the crest of Carnevale, the Germans, caught between two fires, realized their predicament and broke.

Kesselring failed in his efforts to retake Monte Battaglia, and Clark could now push down the Santerno Valley. The Fifth Army's historian expressed the opinion that if General Clark had chosen to pour in fresh troops to expand the salient into a breakthrough to Imola and Highway 9, he could have posed a genuine threat to the Germans. But Clark feared that the narrow valley road that snaked its way down along the Santerno River to Imola would not carry more than a single division at a time.

“

**The 28<sup>th</sup> Garibaldi  
Brigade . . . was  
commanded by a  
brilliant partisan  
incongruously  
codenamed Bulow,  
who had sent a  
message by secret OSS  
radio to OSS at Eighth  
Army headquarters . . .  
suggesting a way to  
save [Ravenna].**

”

According to the historian, Clark failed to understand that “the German command was unable to afford more troops, and those that had been doing the fighting were close to collapse.”

Kesselring took advantage of the unexpected respite to reinforce his front, thereby eliminating any chance for an Allied breakthrough. He then launched an all-out attack on the partisan formations that had inflicted losses on his forces. His reprisals against the civilian population were as brutal as any in World War II.

### Stalled Offensive

On the Adriatic front, just as Leese's Eighth Army was on the verge of a similar vital breakthrough, Leese made an error in judgment as disastrous as Clark's. The San Fortunato Ridge, the last ridge protecting the last German defenses before the flatland of the Po—the Rimini Line—rose southwest of the coastal summer resort of Rimini. German General Herr, defending the Rimini Line, could see no other solution but to withdraw. But Kesselring ordered Herr to stay put. A brigade of the British 1st Armored Division, following textbook policy to defend this flank, turned away from the reeling Germans and headed toward heavily defended San Fortunato Ridge, where it ran into a hail of high-velocity anti-tank fire.

In short order, 24 Shermans were knocked out and 64 crewmen lay killed or wounded. Once more, Kesselring was saved as a series of rainstorms turned the whole area between Rimini and Bologna into an impassable swamp. From the mountains, torrents surged down to sweep away bridges and roads. Leese's infan-

try and armor on the plain floundered in a sea of mud. With Alexander's concurrence, Clark and Leese decided to call off their offensive toward Bologna until spring.

### Liberating Ravenna

There is no better textbook example of cooperation between mainline troops and partisan auxiliaries than the liberation of Ravenna. To hold this ancient city, renowned for its treasures of Byzantine art, the Germans had formed defense lines along its two rivers manned by three infantry divisions supported by tanks and 88mm guns. This meant that if the Allies were to bombard from air, sea, and land, as was their practice before attacking with men and tanks, they would destroy much of the city's incomparable art.

In the meantime, Mino Farneti, whose radio operator had been caught and shot, received another parachute drop 10 miles north of Ravenna. It included

two radios, a new operator, and a large consignment of weapons for the 28th Garibaldi Brigade. This tough unit was commanded by a brilliant partisan incongruously codenamed Bulow, who had sent a message by secret OSS radio to OSS at Eighth Army headquarters in Cattolica suggesting a way to save the city.

Such a brazen move by a partisan leader might have been discounted had it not been for the presence with the Eighth Army of Col. Wladimir Peniakoff, the daredevil commander of his own special unit known as Pop-sky's Private Army, a highly select group of commandos used for raids behind the German lines. During several raids north of Ravenna, Pop-sky's forces had been greatly helped by Bulow and his men, and he enthusiastically recommended them.

Intrigued, the Canadians sent a submarine to pick up Bulow for further discussion, but the impatient Bulow took off in his own boat, accompanied by two downed American pilots, a few pistols, and a large keg of wine. He and his companions were rowed by a dozen fishermen through a moonless night some 30 miles down the coast to the Canadian command post at Cervia.

Colonel Tiehle of the OSS was amazed to see in Bulow a scrawny lieutenant in his late twenties, the son of Romagna peasants. Tiehle nevertheless whisked the shavetail partisan to Eighth Army headquarters, where Bulow's plan to save Ravenna was so professionally traced on operational maps he was soon conferring with the Army's chief of staff, its chief of operations, and its new commanding general, Sir Richard L. McCreery.

Bulow counted on a surprise attack by his partisans from the rear of

“

**A new form of partisan warfare was being developed by another OSS mission across the country in the Piedmont region's foothills to the Alps around the industrial center of Turin.**

”

Ravenna while his Garavini detachment led an Allied attack from the south and Popsky's pirates came in from the east. More partisans would attack across the flatland north of Ravenna. Meanwhile, townspeople led by clandestine action groups in neighboring cities would harass the Germans' flank along their only route of escape.

McCreery approved the plan. Two days later, Bulow was back with his frog-like units in the swamps north of Ravenna accompanied by an official Eighth Army observer, Canadian Captain Healy.

On 29 November, Bulow split his forces into three sections and began moving them by night along pre-arranged routes where the peasants had locked up their dogs and left their doors open for emergency refuge. Bulow's plan called for a concentration of 650 partisans in the valley north of Ravenna, and of 1,250 more near the Reno River, supported by local action squads from Alfonsine and Ravenna armed by the OSS. On 3 December, Eighth Army radio broadcasted another message to inform Bulow of another parachute drop that night. The next message Bulow received over the OSS radio was simple and direct: "Attack. Good luck!"

At 3 a.m. on 4 December, 823 partisans of the 28th Garibaldi Brigade armed with one 47mm antitank gun, four mortars, and a dozen heavy machineguns set off along sandy footpaths to their jumping-off positions to attack 2,500 Germans holed up in concrete bunkers, protected by tanks and artillery. At 5:30 a.m., Bulow's men took the enemy by surprise. All across the area north of Ravenna, various partisan units went after different

German strongholds, many of which surrendered after finding themselves surrounded.

The Germans in Ravenna moved forces out of the city to counterattack in greater strength. At that point, Canada's 12th Royal Lancers, led by one of Bulow's detachments, entered the city from the south as Popsky's pirates stormed in from the east to find the Germans fleeing. With the exception of one section of blown aqueduct, the city was intact.

At 4:30 p.m. the OSS radio was able to send a succinct message: "British in Ravenna. Regards to all."

The Germans, as Bulow envisaged, evacuated along the road to Ferrara, their exposed flanks "massaged" by Bulow's happy warriors. From the Eighth Army, Bulow obtained official permission for his 800-man brigade to join the line as a regular fighting unit under his own command, armed and equipped by the Allies.

### **Two Key Cities**

By this time in northern Italy, a new form of partisan warfare was being developed by another OSS mission across the country in the Piedmont

region's foothills to the Alps around the industrial center of Turin.

On 17 March 1944, a three-man team had been dropped high into the Alps close to the French border. Their 35-year-old leader, Marcello de Leva, was the son of an Italian admiral and a great-grand-nephew of the poet Shelley. His number two, Riccardo Vanzetti, had, like de Leva, served in the war as an Air Force engineer. The team's third member, a young radio operator, was a southerner who had never been in the Piedmont, and he had trouble with his skis on the Alpine glaciers.

Arriving in Turin at the end of March, de Leva set about creating an intelligence network while Vanzetti, remaining in the country, placed the radio in a flourishing beehive. From that unlikely hiding place, the radio operator transmitted safely until the end of the war, often with Germans in the same farmhouse he was staying in. Vanzetti, with time on his hands, trained teams of saboteurs to disrupt German communications in the flatland. He also developed a novel system of partisan warfare based on mobile units in the flatland, equipped first with bicycles, then with cars, then with trucks, and, finally, with tanks, all captured from the enemy.

These aggressive mobile units were steadily on the attack, and they soon were operating against enemy centers of production on the very outskirts of Turin. Constantly collecting OSS parachute drops to widely scattered pinpoints, Vanzetti was gradually elevated by his fellow partisans to command a group of divisions in preparation for the final attack on Turin.

But before this could happen, events had to mature in Genoa. To help arm

“

**Clandestine action  
squads in Genoa  
mushroomed from  
5,000 to 20,000 men  
and women, young and  
old, armed with  
weapons seized from  
Fascist forces.**

”

an insurrection in that seaport, and to serve as a link by secret radio with the Fifteenth Army Group, another OSS mission, codenamed Apple, was parachuted into the Val Pellice to be forwarded to Liguria. The team consisted of an aspiring doctor, Cippi; a medical student, Alfa; a biologist, Minetto; and a radio operator, Gardella. All were from Genoa and all were devout Catholics, which earned them in training school the sobriquet of “novices.” To code and decode for the mission, they took along Vanzetti’s 16-year-old brother, Adriano, the youngest OSS agent in the field.

Their primary objectives were to collect intelligence from Genoa along the Ligurian coast to France, to contact and coordinate their activities with the Committee of National Liberation (CNL) in Genoa, and, most important, to select pinpoints for parachute drops to arm the groups of partisans organizing in the Ligurian hills surrounding Genoa.

The port, firmly in German hands, was heavily garrisoned with strong naval units, but, despite a ferocious gang of Nazi-Fascist counterintelligence sleuths, the city remained anti-Fascist. Resistance in the city, however, was a dangerous business: one by one, heads of the CNL were picked up by the Fascists and the SS, and shot or deported. The only group with a radio in touch with SOE was captured in its entirety. Minetto’s job was to re-establish contact with the underground and prepare the way for Cippi’s intelligence operations. He then set off with the radio and its operator in a horse and buggy to join the best partisan group in the hills, the Cichero Division, successfully smuggling baggage, weapons, and radio right through German units

whose startled members merely glanced at so strange a conveyance, letting it by unchallenged.

Finding the partisans well organized and in harmony with the local population, Minetto set up his radio in a hilltop castle and then went on an inspection tour to apprise a network of partisan informers of just what was needed and how it should be speedily couriered to the radio. Minetto also turned to organizing saboteurs, training and arming two brigades of the Cichero Division, and supplying them with 135 plane-loads of material, including bazookas and 61mm mortars. Elected to command the Arzani brigade, Minetto obtained the German surrender of a series of strongpoints, capturing more than 1,000 prisoners, all the time preparing his men for general insurrection.

### **Uprising in Genoa**

In Genoa, Minetto’s old comrades in the CNL had for some time been preparing the citizenry politically and militarily for insurrection. The German general in command of the city, Reinhart Meinhold, was apprehensive about the partisans despite his two full divisions. He informed the Cardinal Archbishop of Genoa that if his forces were allowed to leave unharmed, they would abandon the

area and even the province within four days and cause no destruction.

By this time, the Germans had placed charges throughout Genoa and the entire port area. All main bridges and five tunnels had been heavily mined. Water and power plants and all the main industries had been prepared for demolition. Ships, piers, and cranes in the port had been mined to render it unusable.

The heads of the CNL, unshaken by the threat, replied that they would make no deals with the untrustworthy Germans. They decided instead to implement their plan for insurrection. By 4 a.m. on 23 April, the first shots could be heard in the city; then the uprising spread. By 10 a.m., the insurgents had seized city hall, the telephone exchange, police headquarters, and the prison.

With equal speed, clandestine action squads mushroomed from 5,000 to 20,000 men and women, young and old, armed with weapons seized from Fascist forces. The Germans continued to threaten tough reprisals if not allowed to withdraw as planned, but their situation soon deteriorated.

Action squads blew up enough powerlines to paralyze electric-train transport from Liguria toward Piedmont; nor could the Germans use steam engines from which saboteurs had long since removed essential parts. Unable to move, the Germans dug in, firing their antitank guns point-blank at attacking students.

### **Partisans Prevail**

By early morning of the 24th, partisan groups held all the neighboring

boroughs. The Fascist forces garrisoning Genoa fled that same day. Many areas had been cleared of Germans, but they still held out, especially in the highway tunnels, armed with tanks, artillery, and heavy machine-guns. They also held the entire port with its heavy cannons. Meanwhile, another danger loomed in the form of the Germans' 146th Infantry Division, which was reported to be advancing toward Genoa intent on rescuing its trapped comrades.

With the Americans still more than 100 kilometers away, and the partisans moving on foot down the mountains unable to reach the city before the night of the 25th, one or the other of the relief forces had to arrive or Genoa risked suffering the fate of Warsaw.

The Germans then announced that they had seized 20 women and children whom they threatened to kill if not allowed to leave freely. The city's CNL commanders answered that in reprisal they would kill the 1,000 German prisoners already in their hands and execute all those taken thereafter as war criminals.

As a last resort, General Meinhold threatened to pulverize the city with heavy artillery, but the Cardinal somehow persuaded him to delay the bombardment.

A group of civilians, daring the crossing of German batteries, meanwhile captured the city's radio station to inform the world that the city was in the CNL's hands. The news boosted the morale of the insurgents while further deflating that of the Germans, by then dreading the imminent arrival of partisan formations from the mountains. Worse news for the Germans came when their division en route to

Genoa was waylaid by partisans from the mountains, surrounded, and obliged to surrender.

At 9 a.m. on the 26th, Meinhold surrendered, the first time in Italian history that a fully equipped army corps laid down its arms to civilians. Not all the Nazi units agreed to obey. Two naval officers from the port informed the CNL they were preparing to bombard the city and had condemned Meinhold to death on Hitler's orders.

At that point, the first partisan units from the mountains marched into town. United with the citizens of Genoa, they launched a final attack against the Germans, obliging them to surrender. When the American 92nd Division arrived on the night of 26 April, it was amazed at what the partisans had accomplished.

The two fully armed German divisions in Liguria that were to fall back to the Po River to defend Turin and Milan had been neutralized for the price of 300 partisan dead and 3,000 wounded. The German forces in the Piedmont thus found themselves isolated and open to attack by local partisan formations, which now came in for the kill.

### Retaking Turin

In Turin, de Leva moved the secret radio and its operator from his country apiary to a well-stocked apartment to be in constant touch with the advancing Allies. The Germans had planned to destroy the city's transformer stations, its central telephone exchange, the radio station, and the principal factories. A battalion of 700 sappers, specially trained in demoli-

tion, had been assigned by Hitler to Turin.

On 20 April, the CNL in Turin ordered a general strike. On the night of 25-26 April, joint squads of civilians and workers attacked the Germans. Within two hours, Vanzetti's mobile forces, armed with captured German tanks, entered the city, fighting street to street and house to house. By the night of 28 April, nearly all of Turin was free, and the Germans had withdrawn to the nearby hills, waiting to surrender to the Allies.

### Allied Advances

Alexander, who had been waiting for enough sunshine to dry out the Po Valley, finally launched his spring offensive, with Clark in command of a retrained and refurbished Fifteenth Army Group. From the Tyrrhenian to the Adriatic, across the rugged dorsal of the Apennines, 21 Allied divisions faced the 25 German divisions of Kesselring's Army Group "C"—perhaps the best fighting unit left in the German Army—supported by five mediocre Fascist divisions.

The Fifth Army moved down the Apennines toward Bologna, while the Eighth Army put pressure on the enemy across the flatland northwest of Ravenna. The object was to catch the German Tenth Army in a pincer movement that would destroy Army Group "C" before it could retire northward into the Alps. To prevent this would require the cooperation of partisan units in the Piedmont to the Alps.

On the night of 15 April, preceded by 75,000 rounds of artillery fired in

“

**The OSS team leader in Milan . . . had been the link between the partisan command and Fifteenth Army Group, transmitting a huge volume of intelligence, receiving instructions, and relaying messages to partisan units in the mountains.**

”

30 minutes, Lt. Gen. G. Keyes's II Corps on Clark's front advanced into heavily mined and strongly fortified terrain heading for Bologna.

In Bologna, the insurgent partisans were handicapped by the loss of their secret radio, the execution of their top commander, and the capture of the liaison officer crossing from the Allies to alert them. They were left with no better warning than a special message from the BBC: "There will be racing at the Hippodrome tomorrow."

So they rose up on their own on 19 April, accounting for 1,300 Germans dead or captured and salvaging the city's electric, gas, and waterworks. By 21 April, two divisions of the Fifth Army reached the city gates from the west as Polish forces of the Eighth Army entered from the east.

With the German lines broken south of the Po, both Allied armies now sought to encircle as many units as possible before Lieutenant General von Vietinghoff—who had inherited Army Group "C" from Kesselring after its veteran commander was called to the Western Front to try to stem Eisenhower's advance—could withdraw them north of the Po.

On that day in northern Italy all railroad workers went on strike, paralyzing the rail system. Early the next day, all military supplies and equipment on German trains were seized and turned against the enemy.

### **A String of Victories**

In Milan, the CNL ordered a general insurrection for all of northern Italy. Partisan and action squads redoubled their attacks on trapped and fleeing enemy units, forcing them to fight or

surrender. Throughout the plain, battalions of partisans were capturing and eliminating larger and larger German groups, preventing the destruction of bridges vital to the Allies. Soon all the great cities of the valley were in Allied hands, liberated by partisans. And the main body of the Eighth Army was advancing on Venice and Trieste.

On 27 April, the German command in Venice issued an ultimatum to the local CNL threatening to destroy the city's key installations, unless the partisans agreed to allow withdrawal of the German garrison of 2,300 troops plus 1,800 Fascists. All this destruction was avoided by OSS mission "Margot," which had received 23 successful parachute drops to arm and equip the local Venetian partisans. Also on 27 April, the mission's leader threatened the Germans and the Fascists with annihilation by 4,500 partisans massed in the area, unless they rescinded their plans for destruction. As a result, the Germans surrendered the city and port intact.

The moment arrived for Milan, seat of the CNL in north Italy, as the US 1st Armored Division approached

that Longobard capital. The OSS team leader in Milan, Enzo Boeri, for some months had been the link between the partisan command and Fifteenth Army Group, transmitting a huge volume of intelligence, receiving instructions, and relaying messages to partisan units in the mountains.

Just before dawn on 25 April, orders to go into action were issued by the joint partisan command in Milan. The Germans had entrapped themselves by occupying primarily the business and residential center, entirely ringed by working-class districts with nodal strongpoints. By noon, the Germans were unable to move.

Everywhere, Fascists were fleeing for their lives. By afternoon, CNL police units were patrolling the city while Committees of Justice were meeting to maintain a continuity of judicial procedures.

The situation was becoming critical for the Germans. In the afternoon of 25 April, the German Consul General informed the CNL that if German forces were allowed to leave Milan and all of Lombardy unmoled, they would not cause any damage. The CNL demanded that the Germans lay down their weapons.

### **Enter Mussolini**

That same afternoon, Mussolini—who had arrived from his Salo headquarters a week earlier, along with his top henchmen—appeared at the residence of Milan's Cardinal Schuster. He was accompanied by Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, head of all Fascist forces, hoping to negotiate some sort of deal. Mussolini was told by the CNL's delegated lawyer, Marazza,

“

**An OSS mission... and a renowned Communist partisan leader... together organized a vast intelligence service.**

”

that only unconditional surrender was acceptable.

Graziani reminded Mussolini that negotiating would mean betraying the Germans. Marazza, with a smile, inquired if Mussolini was not aware of the secret negotiations carried out by SS Gen. Karl Wolff with Allen Dulles in Switzerland. Stunned, Mussolini muttered angrily, "They have always treated us as slaves. I will now resume my freedom of action."

Although the city already was firmly in the hands of the partisans, the situation for the partisan command remained potentially critical. If the Germans were to erupt from their strongholds, they might still overwhelm their opponents with superior firepower.

The partisan command could not understand why the leader of the Communist brigades in the mountains northeast of Milan had not yet appeared at the gates with his divisions, which had been heavily armed by the OSS. Some months earlier, an OSS mission consisting of an Italian Air Force engineer, Luigi Vestri, accompanied by his girlfriend and a radio operator, had been accepted by a renowned Communist partisan leader, Vincenzo Moscatelli, commander of all the Garibaldi Brigades in the north. Together they had organized a vast intelligence service. They also developed a foolproof system for

receiving drops without losing a single weapon; they directed battery-operated car headlights at the sky, visible only from above.

Two of Moscatelli's brigades set off for Milan, but they encountered strongly armored German forces trying to retreat to the border. By the afternoon of 25 April, they had managed to defeat these German forces, but they still were far from Milan just as Mussolini, outraged at being abandoned by the Germans, secretly headed for escape across the Swiss frontier.

Playing his last card, Mussolini attached himself, along with his girlfriend, Claretta Petacci, to a strong German convoy of 30 SS trucks protected by armored cars heading for the Brenner Pass. Trapped by a Moscatelli roadblock near the lakeside town of Dongo, Mussolini was discovered and executed with his girlfriend on unanimous orders from the partisan high command.

### The Battle Ends

On 28 April, after neutralizing several thousand Germans, Moscatelli reached Milan at the head of 2,000 well-armed troops, riding in captured trucks and protected by captured tanks and armored cars. The partisan leader, who was to become the first minister of defense in liberated Italy, paraded into the city to be welcomed by the partisan high command.

That same morning, Piacenza, the last German-held big city in the area just south of the Po, was taken over by its partisans. On 29 April, the entire 6,000-man German 232nd Division was captured, including its commanding general and his staff. Allied forces entered Milan on 29 April, the day Hitler killed himself in his Berlin bunker.

On 2 May, at noon, hostilities officially ceased in Italy, with Alexander declaring that almost a million Germans had surrendered with all their equipment and accessories. That same day in Berlin, the garrison laid down its arms and the German capital passed to the Red Army.

Two days later, General von Senger und Etterlin, after fighting from Sicily to Bologna, arrived at Gen. Clark's headquarters to sign the unconditional surrender. By 4 May the battle for Italy was over.