The sixth century Abbey of Monte Cassino was the cradle of the Benedictine monastic order. In February 1944, the fortified town below the Abbey was a critical part of the German Gustav line, and consequently was holding up American Lieutenant General Mark Clark’s 5th Army from advancing to Rome.

Indian troops under the command of New Zealand Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg were directed to attack the town of Monte Cassino. Afraid that German troops were watching from the Abbey, and would direct artillery fire upon them, Freyberg requested that the Abbey be bombed.

General Clark resisted the bombing. He argued that it was not reasonable to attack the building because military necessity did not require it. Clark argued that the monastery should not be bombed because: (1) of the Abbey’s importance as a cultural and religious monument; (2) there was no credible evidence it was being used for military purposes by the enemy, and; (3) if reduced to rubble in an attack, the ruins would be occupied by the Germans, who could construct almost impregnable defensive positions.

Clark’s hand was forced, however, by Freyberg, who was supported by British General Harold Alexander, Clark’s superior officer in the combined command
arrangement. The Abbey, occupied only by monks and civilians (who had taken refuge there to escape the fighting), was demolished in a series of air raids.

Not a single German soldier was killed—as none were near the abbey. The Vatican called the bombing “a piece of gross stupidity.” Professor (and USCMH member) Allan R. Millett called it “one of the most inexcusable bombings of the war.”

This paper will discuss the principle of “military necessity” in the attack on Monte Cassino. Was the bombing of this historic religious site justified by military necessity? What about its importance as the cradle of the Benedictine monastic order? To what extent does a structure’s cultural significance preclude its destruction in combat? Did Freyberg’s belief that the abbey was an enemy position, or might become an enemy position, mean the attack on Monte Cassino was reasonable? Or did Clark’s reasons for declining to attack the cultural icon make it unreasonable to bomb it? Finally, what does the Law of Armed Conflict say about the attack on the Abbey?

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