Chapter 23

The Soft Underbelly

My name is David Collins. I have blond hair and brown eyes. I was 19 in 1943.

The wind and rain whipped all around on me as the ship sailed north and east from its original port in North Africa. The other G.I.’s had defeated the forces in North Africa along with our British friends. I just got over here from basic training back in the States, and not long ago, I was still in high school. I’m only a private being so young, but I can fight just the same as any of these other boys being shipped off to fight the Krauts. The Italians are soft-bellied things so it should be easy to take their little island and mainland. At least it will be for me since I grew up on an island myself. I grew up on the meanest island of New York in New York City, but you survive if you're smart about where you go and what you do.

Back at home in the little apartment my dad barely can afford, I got my momma and my two younger brothers who are still stuck in high school. I don’t want them to join up in this war, and my momma begged me to stay out of it. She thinks I’m too young to be fighting over here when there are plenty of other good men to fight. My dad left right when Pearl Harbor was bombed so he could go fight those no good Japs. Every paycheck he gets goes back home to help with rent, and so my momma doesn’t have to work extra long shifts at the plants to feed us. That was nearly two years ago when my dad left and we haven’t seen him since. I tell my mom I’m helping her if I sent my pay back here, too, and that she won’t have to feed me either but that the army will do that. I think I broke my momma’s heart when I left off to fight the Germans that day.

The rolling and pitching suddenly of the ship brought me out of my thoughts, and it nearly threw me into the frame of the door I was next to. Soon we would be boarding the landing craft to secure the beaches and head on to the rest of Europe. The nerves I felt now were something I had never felt before, and I hope to never feel them again like this after this day.

Finally boarding and sailing off from the transport ships, on July 9/10, all the Allied troops landed on the beaches of Sicily. The bad weather surprised the Axis defenders on the island because we quite easily and successfully completed all landing operations and men onto the shores. From what I have heard, 2,590 Allied ships brought 180,000 troops on the shores with 230,000 Italian defenders and 170,000 German defenders. For nearly two weeks, the Krauts put up a fierce resistance initially, but as we pushed them further and further in until they was going out did they start to crumble. Finally on July 22, us Americans captured the objective of Palermo before any of our Allies.

We finally had a breather for a few days while the Brass decided what next to do and give us a chance to rest. Rumors went around that we bombed the heck out of Rome on July 19. Also that Mussolini was arrested on July 25/26, causing the fall of the Italian Fascist government in all its glory. More rumors spread of a Marshal Pietro Badoglio taking over the power and negotiating with the Allies’ leaders. I think we should just forget about them.

Again, we are ordered to up and move and get rid of all these Germans on the island as soon as we can. I guess General Patton wanted the Americans to reach our next objective before the British got there since we is so much better or something. From August 12-17, all the Germans evacuated Sicily. All 117,000 of them went to the Italian mainland. On the 17th, we reached Messina, beating the British there. All this fighting over the island came at a price, though. The Axis had casualties of 29,000, Americans 9,530, British 12,843, and Canadians 2,410. I guess we are supposed to hold this island until we invade the Italian mainland in about a month.

This is just what we did not even a full month later. On September 8, the Italians announced their surrender to the Allies. The next day, we landed on Salerno and Taranto to beat back the Krauts still stationed on the mainland. The British and other Allies got the easy landing site on Taranto. They met with no resistance by the Germans because the Krauts already pulled back two days before. Us, on the other hand, had a force of 165,000 on the Salerno offensive. The Nazis put up a much greater resistance and fought back with a counter offensive on the 13th. Eventually, they pulled back with our greatest advance on the 19th.

September and October were pretty slow for any marching and moving out. A lot happened though with the Germans and now their former allies. On September 11, the Germans occupied and took control over Rome. On the 12th, the Krauts rescued Mussolini and brought him to northern Italy where they still liked him. On the 23rd, Mussolini reestablished a Fascist government like the first one he tried was going to work again. On October 1, us and the Allies entered Naples, Italy. The brass met with a bunch of top officials from the new government, and they decided to work together. On the 13th, Italy declared war on Germany. For the rest of the year, we didn’t do much but plot, plan, and prepare for the next offensive.

I celebrated Christmas and New Years over in the trenches this year, but I made a lot of friends to help get through this. It wasn’t long after New Years that the brass ordered another offensive to take place. On January 17, we launched the first attack toward Cassino, Italy where we had to cross a bunch of rivers to get to the German’s positions on the Gustav Line. For about a month, the fighting was constantly back and forth. Every time we gained so ground, the Krauts would launch another counter attack and push us back. The casualties for this were getting real heavy. The conditions were worst with the mud and muck making impossible for anything with wheels to cross through. Even then, our boots were getting stuck and falling to the ground for cover meant mud in all the worst places. I overheard that the Allies had radioed in for backup and to take some pressure off of our spots. On January 22, the troops landed at Anzio with 36,000 men to relieve some pressure on the line. Nothing was working, and on February 11, the brass called off the attacks.

We barely even settled when they bombing missions started on our next objective since this one was a bust. From February 15 to the 18th, the Allies bombed the monastery at Monte Cassino. 229 U.S. heavy bombers dropped 1,150 tons of explosives onto that poor building. Later on, we found out the Germans weren’t even using it as a base cause of its importance to the church and history. After we destroyed it and then didn’t try to take it over right away, the Krauts moved in.

The landing on Anzio didn’t help us when we needed it too, but now it was finally getting some heat when we pulled back. On the 16th, the Nazis counter attacked us against the Anzio beachhead. They failed of course and many were sent to POW camps for the rest of the war.

I got shipped off again to fight on that stupid Gustav Line, but a buddy of mine stayed back for another attempt at the Monte Cassino target. He wrote me telling me that on March 15, they tried attacking again. At first, they had a heavy bombardment and shelling that lasted for three hours. I was in the trenches again when I received his next letter that heavy rains had slowed them down, and they ended up halting on the 23rd from strain.

On May 11, us and the other Allies attacked the Gustav Line again that was just south of Rome. This time, we had a heavy bombardment to start off the attack. The fighting was still fierce, but we managed to gain ground swiftly. It took less than a week to secure all of the area and start setting up shop on the 17th. We beat back the Nazis to their Adolf Hitler Line on the 15th.

More rumors and such spread to all the divisions of what happened back at the Hitler Line. I guess a bunch of Polish and Canadian troops fought and breached the line on the 23rd. They drove those cowards all the way back to their Caesar C Line, the last defense before entering into the south of Rome. Rumors too of that the Germans retreated from Anzio on the 25th, but it cost us a lot of good men. As the campaign of a whole, the Allies had 55,000 casualties whereas the Germans only had 20,000.

Finally, after months and nearly a year worth of fighting tooth and nail for the land, the ending in Italy seemed in sight. On June 5, the Allied forces entered Rome. I was 19 years old. We were doing good over here, and I hear that the Russian Bears were taking out the Nazis, too.