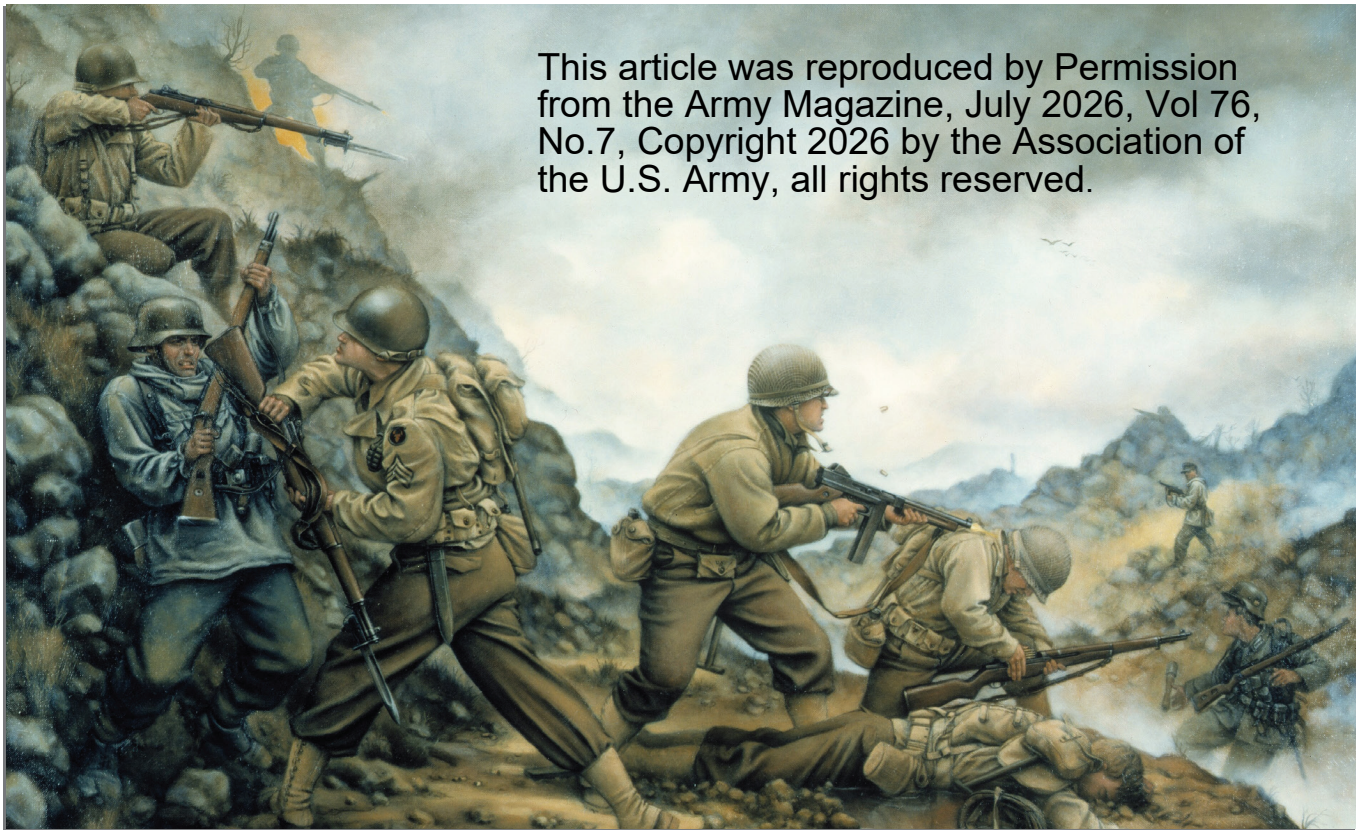
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Soldiers Made Sacrifices For 250 Years of Freedom

By Lt. Gen. Daniel Bolger
U.S. Army retired

America's 250th birthday promises to be a big one. A lot of older folks fondly recall the bicentennial on July 4, 1976. This year's celebration officially marks our country's semiquincentennial. Although precise, this particular term is a real mouthful. No wonder the logo-makers and meme crafters went with the much catchier America250.

July Fourth traditionally signifies the midpoint of summer. Independence Day may have started as a political remembrance, but it has become a family and community holiday awash in red, white and blue. We all know the traditions observed from sea to shining sea: patriotic parades, hot dogs and hamburgers on the grill, baseball and auto racing, an evening concert and fireworks.

While we may see soldiers marching in a color guard during a parade, July Fourth typically isn't an occasion devoted to saluting the U.S. armed forces. Other days are designated for that. Americans honor the nation's military dead on Memorial Day in late May. Then we pay tribute to current and former service members on Veterans Day, Nov. 11.

But with America celebrating its 250th, it's time to widen the aperture of the holiday and embrace those who swore an oath to support and defend the country.

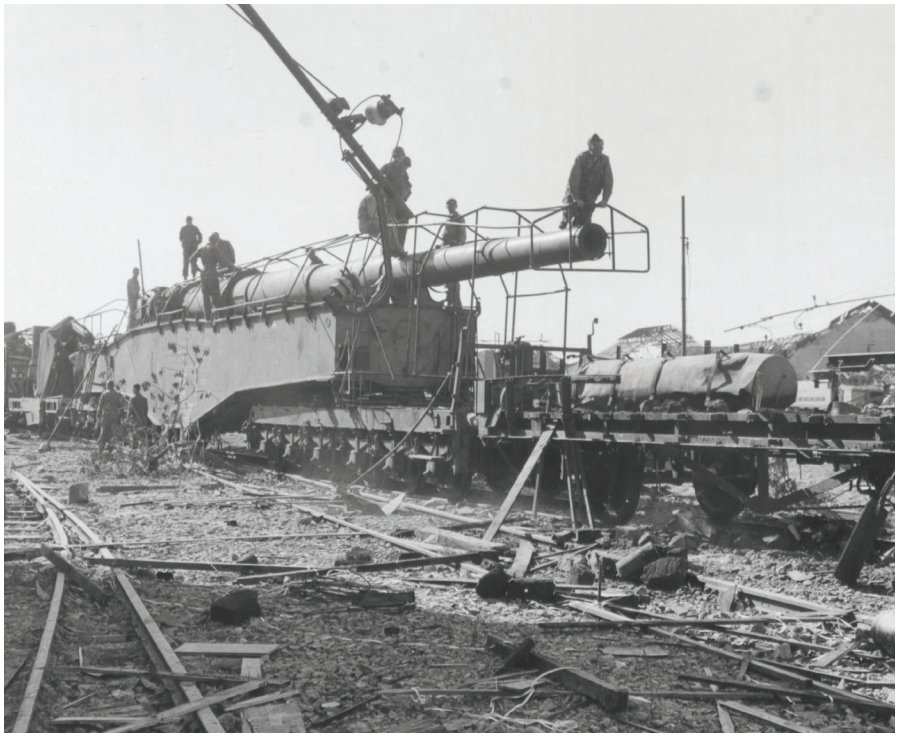
TOUGH FIGHTING

Someone like Tech. Sgt. Charles Blubaugh. May 30, 1945, was a pleasant, sunny morning on the lovely shore of the brilliant blue Tyrrhenian Sea, the kind of place tourists pay serious money to visit. Blubaugh appreciated the scene. "Lots quieter than the old days," he told the U.S. military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*.

Blubaugh and the rest of the 34th Infantry Division had been there over a year earlier. They came in to reinforce the first wave of Americans who splashed onto the beach at Anzio, Italy, on Jan. 22, 1944. The battle plan envisioned getting ashore and then pushing some 35 miles north to take Rome, the Eternal City, one-time capital of Benito Mussolini's Fascist Italy. The higher ups thought American and British soldiers might spend a day or so passing through Anzio. The

U.S. soldiers with the 34th Infantry Division battle German soldiers circa 1943 in Pantano, Italy, in a painting by Donna Neary.
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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In Civitavecchia, Italy, U.S. soldiers inspect a 280 mm railroad gun used by German troops against Allied forces during the battle at Anzio in 1944.
NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Germans thought otherwise.

Instead of a quick jaunt through a beachfront resort, tens of thousands of Allied troops, including Blubaugh and his buddies, instead found themselves surrounded and pummeled by tenacious Germans. For over four agonizing months, the Germans held the ring. Hidden enemy observers on neighboring hills watched U.S. and British movements. Unloading ships were hammered at the waterline. Buildings were knocked to ruins, forcing medical, signal and supply teams to burrow into dank basements. Tanks and trucks trying to drive attracted flurries of German shellfire.

Any visible groups of Allied troops, mobile or stationary, merited clutches of hostile mortar rounds. Individual soldiers fell to well-aimed sniper bullets. Pinned down all day and harassed all night, the American GI and British Tommy routine became troglodytic, with soldiers scuttling among foxholes, dugouts and trenches. It was like Blubaugh and his pals signed up for World War II and instead found themselves stuck in World War I.

OVERSHADOWED

At great cost, the Americans and British broke out in the fourth week of May 1944. The Allies did indeed take Rome on June 5, later than hoped, but a win is a win. The next day, however, saw the D-Day landings in Normandy, France. Italy dropped off the front pages of U.S. newspapers and never really returned.

Pressed hard from the west by Americans, British and Free French, steamrolled from the east by the Soviets and pushed against the Alps from the south by the Allies in Italy, German führer Adolf Hitler committed suicide in a Berlin bunker on April 30, 1945. His wrecked Third Reich surrendered on May 8, 1945, Victory in Europe (VE) Day. Japan still held out in Asia and the Pacific. But that was a problem for another day.

Busy disarming capitulating German regiments and trying to succor bombed-out Italian civilians, U.S. soldiers like Blubaugh wanted to know one thing and one thing only. When could they go home? Well, you know the Army. Hurry up and wait. The officers and NCOs kept the guys busy with occupation duties, some rudimentary training and organized sports. As May 1945 ended, a ceremony at the Anzio temporary cemetery seemed worthy.

Thus, Blubaugh joined a contingent from his own 34th Infantry Division, falling into ranks with other Fifth Army outfits like the 1st Armored Division, 10th Mountain Division, the African American 92nd Infantry Division and the Japanese American 100th Infantry Battalion. From southern Germany came Anzio veteran honor guards from the 3rd Infantry Division, 36th Infantry Division and 45th Infantry Division. Some of the soldiers in formation wanted to be there. Some didn't. The 6,614 American men and women buried at Anzio no longer had a choice.

Neither did the officer chosen to deliver remarks. In fact, Lt. Gen. Lucian Truscott had made a rare personal request to take leave from his duties as Fifth Army commander to attend his son's graduation and commissioning at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, on June 5, 1945. Word came back—denied. Senior U.S. Sen. Burton Wheeler and other dignitaries would be at Anzio. Respects must be paid. Like Blubaugh, Truscott would stay in Italy for now.

UNSUNG LEADER

Today, most Americans do not know of Truscott. He's a minor character in the 1958 movie *Darby's Rangers* and the 1970 film *Patton*. In the 1968 motion picture *Anzio*—based on a battle in which Truscott commanded the invading 3rd Infantry Division and then stepped up under fire to take over VI Corps to save the beachhead from fierce German counterattacks—he was fictionalized as Maj. Gen. "Luke Howard" and mouthed but a few pedestrian lines.

Among a World War II Army upper echelon of famous West Pointers, Truscott benefited from but a single year of high school. Enlisting

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during World War I, he saw no action, though he earned a commission in the horse cavalry.

He remained there until the eve of World War II, well-prepared to refight the American Civil War, as he knew a lot about horses and mules and not much about tanks and airplanes.

NORTH AFRICA, ITALY

Yet this graduate of the Army School of Hard Knocks proved an able combat commander. He took charge of a landing force in North Africa (November 1942), commanded the 3rd Infantry Division for the Sicily (July 1943) and Salerno, Italy, (September 1943) beach assaults, then led the division into battle at Anzio (January 1944).

Once things got truly desperate, the top Allied generals tagged Truscott to hold the perimeter by assuming command of VI Corps. He did so, seeing and being seen, dodging German bullets and shell bursts day and night in forward positions. When the thrust to Rome began in May 1944, Truscott's VI Corps did its part. Then the general and VI Corps waded onto the coast of Southern France (August 1944) and stormed up the Rhone River valley.

That task completed, Truscott returned to Italy to command Fifth Army through its final campaign in 1945. In the words of Purple Heart recipient and *Stars and Stripes* cartoonist (*Willie and Joe*) Sgt. Bill Mauldin, late of the 45th Infantry Division, Truscott was "one of the really tough generals."

In Harvey Ferguson's *The Last Cavalryman: The Life of General Lucian K. Truscott, Jr.*, Mauldin remembered Truscott "spent half his time at the front—the real front—with nobody in attendance but a nervous Jeep driver and a worried aide." Although fearless, Truscott wasn't much of a public speaker. Mauldin and all the troops knew it, too.

So, when the Fifth Army GI detachments aligned their ranks, and Wheeler and the other distinguished guests took their seats that May morning in front of the Anzio graveyard, pretty much all present expected the same old, same old. Two chaplains gave invocations. The 223rd and 246th Army bands both played stirring American tunes, the *Stars and Stripes* reported. A one-star officer from the Rome headquarters recited President Abraham Lincoln's classic Gettysburg Address.



A memorial honors the soldiers who took part in the January 1944 Allied landings at Anzio, Italy.
U.S. ARMY/SPC. JUDE VOGEL

APOLOGY TO THE FALLEN

Truscott then walked to the microphone, where he abruptly faced about to confront the endless rows of cemetery markers. You could have heard a pin drop.

His rasping voice echoed: "Everybody tells leaders that it is not their fault that men get killed in war, but every leader knows in his heart this is not altogether true," according to Mauldin, who was present for the speech. Truscott apologized for his own failings as a commander, and asked for those interred to forgive him, although "that was asking a hell of a lot under the circumstances," Mauldin wrote in *The Brass Ring: A Sort of Memoir*.

Truscott pointedly did not embrace the term "the glorious dead" because he did not "see much glory in getting killed in your late teens or early 20s," Mauldin wrote. If Truscott ever ran into anyone who mentioned glory in battle deaths, he promised to "straighten them out." With that, he turned around. There was nothing left to say.

Today, you can visit the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery and Memorial near Anzio. There are many more like it in Cuba, Europe, Gibraltar, Mexico, New Guinea, North Africa, Panama, the Philippines, Saipan, South Korea and across the United States.

On America's 250th birthday, consider Truscott's example. Take time to honor the men and women who paid for our freedom. ★

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