The Rapido River Controversy: A Review

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Lee Carraway Smith is the latest entrant in the 36th Division (Texas) Rapido River controversy. Her book, A River Swift and Deadly: The 36th "Texas" Infantry Division at the Rapido River, was published by the Eakin Press of Austin in 1989. Mrs. Smith tells the story from the viewpoint of the GIs and junior officers, and does a creditable job of capturing the courage and frustration of the "T" Patchers who crossed the Rapido for the purpose of seizing the Liri Valley during January 20-22, 1944.

The ill-advised Rapido operation is perhaps the most written about happening of the Italian Campaign. The British, who were heavily involved in the overall effort, have written extensively on most of its phases, including the American tactical Rapido operation about which they knew little. Fred Majdalany's The Battle of Cassino (1957) is the chief culprit. Like many English journalists, he writes well, which tends to obscure his lack of detailed knowledge. On the American side, the man who has written the most about the Italian Campaign is Martin Blumenson, former historian for the Office of Chief of Military History. Since leaving OCMH, he has published at least two works, Bloody River (1970), and a biography of General Mark Clark in 1984 which deal directly with the Rapido Crossing.

It is Blumenson's thesis that the Rapido fiasco should be viewed in a larger context. He writes that the river crossing into the Liri Valley was needed to draw German troops south to ensure the success of the Anzio Landing on Italy's west coast. In theory the enemy would be caught in a great pincer movement. The German commander at the Rapido, General Fridolin Von Senger, has written a rejoinder that nothing more than local reserves were ever moved into the sector opposite the 36th.

Blumenson states that General Fred L. Walker, Commander of the 36th, was isolated within his own command and therefore ignorant of the larger picture. Walker may not have been privy to the details of the Anzio Landing, but he most certainly knew that some such action was in the wind.

Clark apparently did not require the counsel of his brother officers. I once asked General Walker if Clark had ever said to him, "Fred, what do you think?" Walker replied, "Never." This seems strange in light of Walker's distinguished service in World War I and the fact that Walker and Clark knew each other more than casually. It suggests that Clark relied on Fifth Army staff and did not seek advice from the commanders most involved in the actual fighting. It also suggests why Clark never developed what General Lucian Truscott called "a feel for battle."

Blumenson claims that Walker had a defeatist attitude about the

Robert L. Wagner lives in Austin, Texas.
Rapido crossing. He further maintains that Walker's alleged anxiety trickled down to the troops. Having talked with hundreds of "T" Patch veterans over the years, I can attest that none of them needed a bulletin board to inform them that they were embarking upon a cockamamie project. Lieutenant Colonel Oran C. Stovall, commander of the division's engineers, worked closely on the Rapido operation and knew him well. He told me that Walker never gave any hint that he felt the crossing would fail.

Blumenson also paints Walker as a director who was too concerned about the safety of his men and too tenderhearted to commit them to battle. Anyone who knew Walker will find this ludicrous. He was a tough, talented, experienced commander of combat troops who made the success of a mission — any mission — his top priority. What Walker saw being done was a major tactical error that not only would cause much bloodshed but, more importantly, probably would fail.

Blumenson concludes that the "real tragedy of the Rapido was that a broader and more detached view indicates that if Walker had demonstrated more determination, the crossing would have succeeded." If this is credible, why did it take six properly equipped divisions, in good weather, to do the job five months later?

Blumenson has described Walker as "quiet in manner, softspoken ... balanced in his judgments ...." All of which I can agree with, but then he goes on to describe Walker as "tall and rugged." Walker was no more than five feet, nine inches tall and weighed between 155-160 pounds. A trifling matter, perhaps, but I find it curious in light of the fact that Blumenson had interviewed Walker several times for his research and knew him socially. It suggests that if Blumenson's perception of Walker's physique could be so awry, but about his perception of far more intangible matters? To sum up, Martin Blumenson's writings about the Rapido tried to paint Fred Walker as vacillating and uncertain; that Clark was correct in launching the river crossing for reasons of higher military purpose; and that Walker was chiefly responsible for the defeat.

Blumenson ignores the overwhelming evidence that proper river crossing equipment was not available in all of Italy, and even if the "T" Patchers had crossed successfully, there was no place to go. The Germans were entrenched in heavily fortified artillery positions in the mountains on either side of the Liri Valley where infantry and armor could not have advanced until the mountain positions were neutralized. Where should the attack have been made? Walker held, as did the French, that it should have been made to the north in their sector behind Monte Cassino. This was the attack that General Von Senger said he had feared most.

Clark's own book, Calculated Risk (1954), is, as are most autobiographical works, self-serving. His views of the Rapido are echoed and amplified by Blumenson. The book, Return to Cassino (1964), was
written by Harold Bond, who had served as a 36th Division junior officer. Bond’s account, published after a lapse of twenty years and relying entirely on memory, makes a mishmash of the Rapido and later operations. The excuse made for him is that he writes beautifully! Bond was a professor of English after the war and his work mirrors another great triumph of style over substance.

A sound historical work, though appearing early-on, is Chester G. Starr’s *From Salerno to the Alps* (1948). It is a condensation of the nine-volume Fifth Army history and he was fully aware that much remained to be researched.

My own book *The Texas Army: A History of the 36th Division in the Italian Campaign* (1972), reflects the views presented here in opposition. My only regret is that General Clark’s culpability was not sufficiently stressed in my misplaced attempt to be evenhanded.

On the German side there are at least three books that should be noted: Albert Kesselring’s *A Soldier’s Record* (1954) — Kesselring was commander in chief of German forces in Italy; Siegfried Westphal’s *The German Army in the West* (1951); and Fridolin von Senger’s *Neither Hope Nor Fear* (1964). All three agreed that the Rapido attack should not have been made. Kesselring added if Clark had been under his command he would not have treated him politely.

To all this controversy and more, Mrs. Smith had made her contribution and a good one it is. She has tried to get down to the nitty-gritty of the GI’s problems at the Rapido, and largely succeeds. She, too, sees the attempted crossing as shortsighted and foolish.

There are, however, two criticisms: the inclusion verbatim of the flawed post-Rapido casualty reports, which suggests book-length padding; and secondly, whether veteran’s memories after forty-odd years can retain an accurate picture. Allowing for these reservations, Lee Carraway Smith has achieved her purpose.