

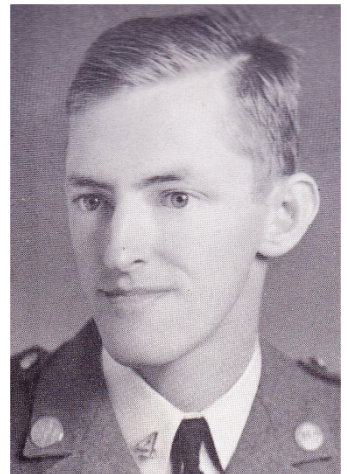
## Opportunity Lost

In late 1943, the battle between German occupiers and Allied liberators had transitioned from Sicily to the Italian mainland. In rugged terrain that favored the defending, battle-hardened Germans, Allied ground troops struggled and died for every foot of liberated ground. Against this backdrop of vicious fighting and heavy losses, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill goaded his commanders to consider a risky amphibious operation, one which, if successful, would create great opportunity for breaching the Germans' defensive lines and capturing Rome.

Operation Shingle would land Allied divisions on the beaches of Anzio and Nettuno on the west coast of Italy, some 60 kilometers south of Rome. These divisions would threaten the Germans' rear, causing them to draw forces from the Cassino area and facilitate an Allied breakthrough there. Such a scenario might be just the trick to breaking the Germans' stiff defense of Italy.

The landings began on January 22, 1944 and by the end of the first day appeared to be a tremendous success. 36,000 troops were ashore, as were 3,200 vehicles, at the cost of just thirteen Allied soldiers killed. But, Major General John Lucas, commanding VI Corps, concentrated on building up men and materiel and expanding his beachhead rather than striking quickly toward Rome and threatening the rear of German forces to the south. Churchill famously stated: "I had hoped we were hurling a wildcat into the shore, but all we got was a stranded whale." Lucas' strategy allowed time for the German defenders to shift forces to the west in an attempt to hurl VI Corps back into the sea. Lucas' cautious approach and the Germans' rapid response resulted in a lost opportunity for the Allies.

Exactly one month after the initial landings, General Lucas was relieved of command and replaced by Major General Lucian Truscott. Truscott's mission was to find a way to break out of the beachhead and put the Germans back on the defensive. In March, as the beleaguered men of VI Corps endured daily artillery bombardment from German forces which had occupied the high hills surrounding the beachhead, the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division landed at Anzio. Among this contingent was 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant James Daniel Kneece.



Kneece, from the Lexington County town of Gilbert, was in Clemson College's Class of 1942, the first to graduate after Pearl Harbor. Immediately, Kneece, or "Jeep" as he was known to his classmates, was commissioned in the Army. An agricultural economics major as a student, Jeep had also distinguished himself as a marksman at ROTC Camp the previous summer. Kneece trained at Camp Wolters, Texas; Fort Benning, Georgia; Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri; Camp Forrest, Tennessee; and Fort Meade, Maryland; before being sent to overseas.

Kneece was assigned as the leader of the heavy mortar platoon of H Company, 134<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. As he and his men adjusted to life under frequent harassing bombardment, Truscott and his staff were planning the breakout from the Anzio perimeter.

At 5:45 am on May 23, an intense Allied artillery barrage commenced. After 40 minutes of firing, the guns paused to allow friendly aircraft to attack targets in support of frontline infantry and armor troops. As the infantry and tank units advanced, the artillery bombardment resumed.

With the Allies on the move, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Kneece and his platoon trapped several Germans in a cave. As Kneece fired at the cornered Germans, he was cut down by a “burp gun,” a small submachine gun, suffering fatal wounds. Enraged, Kneece’s men fired round-after-round of white phosphorous mortar shells into the cave. None of the Germans survived.

James Daniel Kneece was survived by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. D. Kneece of Gilbert; two sisters, Miss Mildred Kneece of Swansea and Miss Betty Kneece of Gilbert; and a brother, David Kneece of Gilbert. He is buried in the Sicily-Rome American Military Cemetery. There is a memorial marker dedicated to him in Saint Paul's Lutheran Church Cemetery, Gilbert, SC.

The landings at Anzio were a missed opportunity; so too was the brief life of James Daniel Kneece, a young hero cut down in the prime of life.

