

SICILY



The U.S. Army Campaigns
of World War II

Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. During the next several years, the U.S. Army will participate in the nation's 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II. The commemoration will include the publication of various materials to help educate Americans about that war. The works produced will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

World War II was waged on land, on sea, and in the air over several diverse theaters of operation for approximately six years. The following essay is one of a series of campaign studies highlighting those struggles that, with their accompanying suggestions for further reading, are designed to introduce you to one of the Army's significant military feats from that war.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Andrew J. Birtle. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

Sicily

9 July–17 August 1943

On the night of 9–10 July 1943, an Allied armada of 2,590 vessels launched one of the largest combined operations of World War II—the invasion of Sicily. Over the next thirty-eight days, half a million Allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen grappled with their German and Italian counterparts for control of this rocky outwork of Hitler’s “Fortress Europe.” When the struggle was over, Sicily became the first piece of the Axis homeland to fall to Allied forces during World War II. More important, it served as both a base for the invasion of Italy and as a training ground for many of the officers and enlisted men who eleven months later landed on the beaches of Normandy.

Strategic Setting

In January 1943, American President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill met with their senior military advisers at Casablanca, Morocco, to devise a military strategy for the coming year. The United States Army had begun ground operations against the European Axis Powers only two months before as part of a joint Anglo-American invasion of North Africa. With the North African campaign moving toward a successful conclusion, the leaders of the two nations debated where to launch their next blow. After several days of negotiations, they agreed to make Sicily their next target.

Situated ninety miles off the north coast of Africa and a mere two and one-half miles from the “toe” of the Italian peninsula, Sicily was both a natural bridge between Africa and Europe and a barrier dividing the Mediterranean Sea. Its rugged topography made it a tough, unsinkable bastion from which Axis air and naval forces could interdict Allied sea lanes through the Mediterranean. Yet despite its strategic location, the Allies were deeply divided over the merits of invading the island, and in the end the decision to invade Sicily represented an uneasy compromise between British and American strategists.

The British strongly supported the invasion because Britain had long-standing political and strategic interests in the Mediterranean. They argued that Sicily’s conquest would not only reopen

Allied sea lanes to the eastern Mediterranean, but also give the Allies a base from which to launch further offensives in the region. Moreover, the occupation of Italian national territory might shock the war-weary Italians into dropping out of the war altogether.

American strategists, led by Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, argued that the Allies should focus their energies upon a direct thrust at Nazi Germany and not waste their time nibbling at peripheral Axis outposts like Sicily. Marshall wanted to launch a cross-Channel attack into northern France as soon as possible, and every man, tank, and ship sent to the Mediterranean reduced the forces available for an invasion of northern Europe.

At Casablanca, Winston Churchill, rather than George Marshall, had his way. Roosevelt and Churchill wanted to do something further to divert Germany's attention from the war against Russia. The two Allied leaders also were anxious to exploit the momentum of their impending victory in North Africa, and the mass of men and materiel that would be available in the Mediterranean at the conclusion of the North African campaign made additional operations in that theater attractive. After studying a variety of options, including operations in Greece, the Balkans, Crete, and Sardinia, the Casablanca conferees chose Sicily as the most appropriate sequel to the Tunisia Campaign. In return for undertaking the operation, the British reaffirmed the ultimate goal of a cross-Channel attack, and several months later the two powers fixed May 1944 for that event. Beyond this, there was no agreed upon plan.

The Americans wanted Sicily to be the last of the Allies' Mediterranean adventures, while the British continued to regard it as only the first step in what they hoped would be an all-out attack on the "soft underbelly" of Hitler's Europe. Thus the decision to invade Sicily represented an uneasy compromise between coalition partners, a compromise that left the commanders in the field with an imperfect understanding of the ultimate purpose of the operation. This lack of clarity would ultimately have an adverse impact upon the resolution of the campaign.

While London and Washington haggled over the ultimate course of Allied strategy, preparations began for the immediate task at hand. The Combined Chiefs of Staff chose General Dwight D. Eisenhower as supreme Allied commander for the Sicilian operation, with three Britons as his land, air, and sea component commanders. General Sir Harold Alexander was Eisenhower's principal deputy and the actual commander of Allied land forces.



A Sherman tank moves past Sicily's rugged terrain. (National Archives)

Alexander's 15th Army Group directed the U.S. Seventh Army, under the command of Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., and General Sir Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army.

Preparations for Operation HUSKY, the code name for the invasion of Sicily, began immediately after the Casablanca Conference. With the invasion scheduled for 10 July, there was little time to lose. In drawing up the invasion plans, three factors dominated Allied thinking—the island's topography, the location of Axis air bases, and the amount of resistance that could be expected.

Slightly larger than the state of Vermont, Sicily's 10,000 square miles of rough, highly defensible terrain is cut in a roughly triangular shape. Beginning with low hills in the south and west, the land becomes more mountainous to the north and east, ultimately culminating in the island's most prominent feature, the 10,000 foot-high volcano Mount Etna. The port of Messina in the island's northeastern corner is the primary transit point between Sicily and the Italian mainland. It was the key strategic objective for the campaign, for without Messina, Axis forces would be cut off from supply and reinforcement. Unfortunately, the country around Messina was extremely rugged and the beaches narrow. Moreover, the city was heavily fortified and beyond the range at which the Allies'

Africa-based fighters could provide effective air cover. Consequently, Allied planners ruled it out as an initial objective.

The widest and most accessible beaches for amphibious operations lie along the island's southeastern and western shores. By happy coincidence, Sicily's other major ports—Palermo, Catania, Augusta, and Syracuse—are also clustered in the northwestern and southeastern corners of the island, as were the majority of the island's thirty major airfields. Both the ports and the airfields were major considerations in the minds of the invasion planners. The Army needed the ports for logistical reasons, while the air and naval commanders wanted the airfields captured as early as possible to help protect the invasion fleet from aerial attack.

The confluence of favorable beaches, ports, and airfields in the northwestern and southeastern corners of the island initially led Allied planners to propose landings in both areas. They ultimately rejected this idea, however, because the two landing forces would be unable to provide mutual support. General Montgomery was particularly adamant about the need to concentrate Allied forces to meet what he anticipated would be fierce Axis resistance. German troops had fought tenaciously in Tunisia, and Montgomery feared that Italian soldiers would resist with equal stubbornness now that they would be fighting on home soil. Eisenhower accepted Montgomery's argument and chose the more cautious approach of concentrating Allied forces at only one location, Sicily's southeastern shore.

The final plan called for over seven divisions to wade ashore along a 100-mile front in southeastern Sicily, while elements of two airborne divisions landed behind Axis lines. The British Eighth Army would land four divisions, an independent brigade, and a commando force along a forty-mile front stretching from the Pachino Peninsula north along the Gulf of Noto to a point just south of the port of Syracuse. A glider landing would assist the amphibious troops in capturing Syracuse. To the west, Patton's Seventh Army would land three divisions over an even wider front in the Gulf of Gela. The assault would be supported by parachutists from the 505th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team and the 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry.

Once ashore, the Eighth Army would thrust northward, capturing in succession Augusta, Catania, and the airfield complex at Gerbini before making the final push on Messina. The Seventh Army's initial objectives were several airfields between Licata and

Comiso, after which it would advance to a position approximately twenty miles inland designated the Yellow Line. From the Yellow Line the Seventh Army would control the high ground that ringed the American beaches and protect the western flank of the Eighth Army's beachhead. Once this had been secured, the Seventh Army was to push slightly forward to a second position, termed the Blue Line, from which it would control the road network that emanated from Piazza Armerina.

Of the two armies, it was the veteran Eighth to whom Alexander assigned the primary burden of the campaign. The less experienced Seventh was relegated to a secondary role of supporting the British and protecting their flank as they moved up the east coast toward Messina. The unequal allocation of responsibility clearly reflected British skepticism about American capabilities, a skepticism born of the debacle at Kasserine Pass a few months before. Moreover, it made more sense to have only one army advance on Messina than to attempt to coordinate the movements of two such entities upon the same goal, especially given the rather narrow and constrictive terrain of northeastern Sicily. The problem was that Alexander never drew up any detailed plans for the land campaign beyond the initial landings, preferring instead to make those decisions once the troops were firmly ashore and the operation was under way. By failing to assign the Seventh Army any clear objectives beyond the Blue Line, Alexander opened the door for disagreement and contention between his two army commanders once the campaign had begun.

General Patton organized his invasion force as follows. On the right, Maj. Gen. Troy Middleton's 45th Infantry Division, newly arrived from the United States, would land near Scoglitti and move inland to Comiso and Ragusa where it would link up with the Eighth Army's left flank. In the center, Maj. Gen. Terry de la Mesa Allen's veteran 1st Infantry Division, reinforced by two battalions of Rangers under the command of Lt. Col. William O. Darby, was to secure Gela and its neighboring airfields before pushing north to Niscemi. Paratroopers from the 82d Airborne Division's 505th and 504th Parachute Regiments under the command of Col. James M. Gavin would assist Allen by seizing the high ground north of the 1st Division's beachheads and blocking the road south from Niscemi and the vital road junction at Piano Lupo. On the left, Maj. Gen. Lucian K. Truscott's 3d Division, reinforced by a Ranger battalion and Combat Command A of the 2d Armored Division, was to land at Licata and

protect the left flank of the American beachhead. Once these objectives had been achieved, the 1st and 45th Divisions would drive north to Highway 124, the main east-west corridor in the southeastern portion of the island and the boundary of the Yellow Line.

Patton grouped the 45th and 1st Divisions (minus one regiment) together under Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley's II Corps while keeping Truscott's 3d Division under his personal supervision. In reserve were the balance of the 2d Armored and 82d Airborne Divisions, the 9th Infantry Division, a regiment from the 1st Infantry Division, and a battalion of French Moroccans. With the exception of Gavin's paratroopers, who were to precede the waterborne assault force by a few hours, all of the amphibious landings were to occur simultaneously at 0245, 10 July 1943.

Although Allied planners opted to concentrate their ground forces in the anticipation of tough Axis resistance, the actual combat capability of Axis troops deployed in Sicily was questionable. Axis forces consisted of between 200,000 and 300,000 Italian and about 30,000 German troops under the overall command of General Alfredo Guzzoni's *Italian VI Army*. The Italians were organized into six coastal divisions, four infantry divisions, and a variety of local defense forces. Many of these units were woefully deficient in equipment, training, and morale and would prove incapable of putting up serious resistance. In fact, many Italian soldiers were tired of Mussolini's disastrous war and would surrender at the first opportunity. The German troops were divided into two divisions, the *15th Panzer Grenadier* and the *Hermann Goering Panzer*. They formed the hard core of Sicily's defenses. The *15th Panzer Grenadier Division* was essentially combat ready, but the *Hermann Goering Division* was significantly understrength and contained some inexperienced personnel.

Axis strategists recognized that they did not have sufficient strength to hold Sicily should the Allies gain a firm foothold on the island. Their only hope of success lay in crushing the Allies on the shore before they had time to consolidate their beachhead. This was easier said than done, however, for most Axis units on the island lacked the mobility to launch a quick counterstrike. The Axis command was therefore forced to station its reserves as close as possible to the most likely landing places.

General Guzzoni attempted to do just that. After spreading his coastal units in a thin line around the island's perimeter, he placed two Italian infantry divisions in each of the two most likely invasion

sites, the island's western and southeastern corners. He considered the southeast to be the more probable landing site, however, and for this reason he wanted to concentrate both German divisions there. Fortunately for the Allies, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Hitler's representative in Italy, thwarted Guzzoni's plan by transferring the bulk of the *15th Panzer Grenadier Division* to western Sicily shortly before the invasion. Kesselring believed that the only way the Axis could repel the Allies was by having German forces ready to launch a quick counteroffensive at each of the potential landing sites. Since the Axis could not rule out the possibility of a western landing, Kesselring insisted on moving a significant portion of the *15th* to cover that potentiality. Consequently, of the two German units, only the *Hermann Goering Division* was positioned to launch a counterattack against the Seventh Army's beachheads during the initial hours of the invasion.

Operations

The invasion got off to a rough start during the night of 9–10 July 1943. As the Allied armada steamed toward the island a fierce, forty-mile-per-hour gale, dubbed the “Mussolini wind” by seasick G.I.s, whipped up the seas, seriously endangering some of the smaller craft. The situation in the air was even worse. Buffeted by the winds and confused by an overly complex flight plan, the inexperienced pilots ferrying Allied airborne forces became disoriented in the darkness and strayed from their courses. Of the 144 gliders bearing British paratroops to landing zones outside of Syracuse, only 12 landed on target, while 69 crashed into the sea and the rest dispersed over a wide area. In the American sector, Colonel Gavin's 3,400 paratroopers were even more widely scattered. Gavin himself landed twenty-five miles southeast of his intended drop zone. The wide dispersion of paratroopers seriously jeopardized Seventh Army's invasion plan by weakening the buffer these men were supposed to form in front of the 1st Division's beachhead. Nevertheless, the men of the 82d Airborne went right to work wherever chance landed them. Operating in small, isolated groups, the paratroopers created considerable confusion in Axis rear areas, attacking patrols and cutting communication lines.

The airborne forces had begun landing about 2330 on 9 July, and by midnight General Guzzoni was fully apprised of their presence. He was not surprised. Axis air reconnaissance had spotted Allied



Troops and supplies unloading near Gela on D-day. (National Archives)

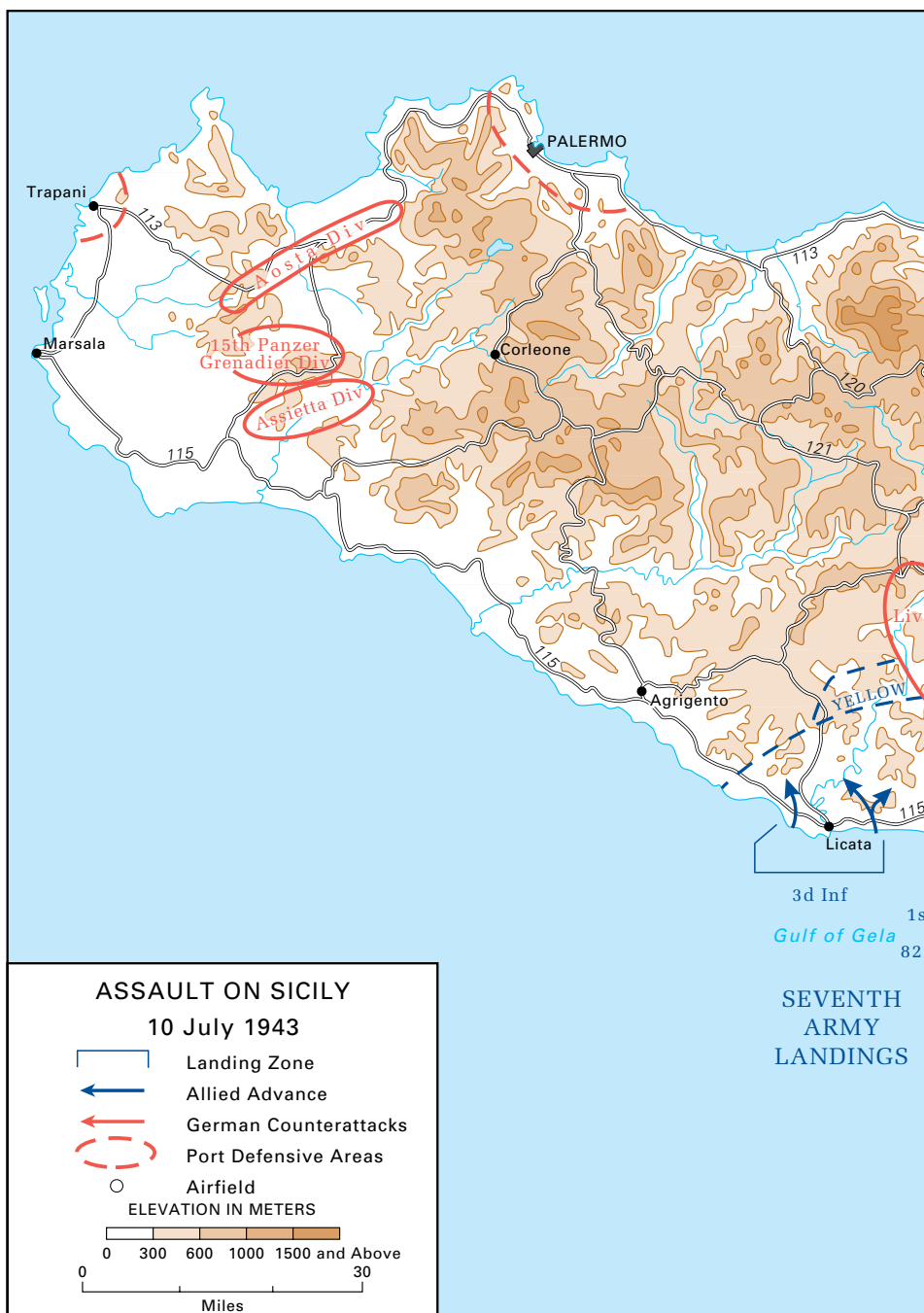
convoys moving toward Sicily earlier that day, and Guzzoni had ordered a full alert at 2200 on the 9th. Based upon the reported airborne drops, Guzzoni correctly surmised that the Allies intended to come ashore in the southeast, and he issued orders to that effect at 0145 on 10 July, nearly an hour before the first assault wave hit the beach. Nevertheless, the dispirited and ill-equipped Italian coastal units hardly put up a fight. Opposition in the Eighth Army's sector was negligible. By the end of the first day the British were firmly ashore and well on their way toward Augusta, having walked into Syracuse virtually unopposed. Resistance was not much stronger in the American zone, and the Seventh Army had little trouble moving ashore despite sporadic air and artillery attacks.

The only serious fighting occurred in the American center, where Axis mobile forces tried to throw the Americans back into the sea before they had a chance to become firmly established. Fortunately for the Americans, the attacks were poorly coordinated. At Gela, the 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions, assisted by the 1st Battalion of the 39th Engineer Combat Regiment, the 1st Bat-

talion of the 531st Engineer Shore Regiment, mortar fire from the 83d Chemical Battalion, and naval gunfire, repulsed two Italian attacks, one by a battalion of infantry and the other by a column of thirteen tanks. Nine or ten of the latter managed to penetrate the town before the Rangers drove them off in a confused melee. Meanwhile, at the vital Piano Lupo crossroads, those few paratroopers who had been fortunate enough to land near their objective repulsed a column of about twenty Italian tanks with the help of naval gunfire and the advancing infantrymen of the 16th Regimental Combat Team. Shortly thereafter they rebuffed a more serious attack made by ninety German Mark III and IV medium tanks, two armored artillery battalions, an armored reconnaissance battalion, and an engineer battalion from the *Hermann Goering Division*. Naval gunfire played a crucial role in stopping this German thrust. The worst event of the day occurred when seventeen German Tiger I heavy tanks, an armored artillery battalion, and two battalions of motorized infantry from the *Hermann Goering Division* overran the 1st Battalion, 180th Infantry (45th Division), after a stiff fight, capturing its commander and many of its men.

While Rangers, paratroopers, and infantrymen repelled Axis counterattacks, an even more serious struggle was being waged against mother nature. Although 10 July dawned bright and sunny, the rough seas of the previous night had disorganized several units. The worst case was that of the 45th Division's 180th Regiment, which had been scattered over a ten-mile front. Nor did the beaches prove to be as favorable as anticipated. Soft sand, shifting sandbars, and difficult exits created congestion on the beaches that was further aggravated by enemy air and artillery barrages. By midmorning, between 150 and 200 landing craft were stranded on the shoreline. Nevertheless, American service troops performed herculean feats to keep the men in the front lines supplied and supported. During the first three days the U.S. Army and Navy moved 66,285 personnel, 17,766 deadweight tons of cargo, and 7,396 vehicles over Sicily's southern shores. An entirely new generation of landing craft and ships—LSTs, LCTs, LCIs, and LCVPs—greatly facilitated the logistical effort. Even more remarkable was the innovative DUKW amphibious truck that could move directly from offshore supply ships to inland depots.

By the end of the first day, the Seventh Army had established a beachhead two to four miles deep and fifty miles wide. In the process it had captured over 4,000 prisoners at the cost of 58 killed, 199





wounded, and 700 missing. But the situation was still perilous. Axis counterattacks had created a dangerous bulge in the center of the American line, the very point where the bulk of the 505th Parachute Regiment should have been if its drop had been accurate.

July 11, the second day of the invasion, was the Seventh Army's most perilous day in Sicily. Early that morning, General Guzzoni renewed his attack against the shallow center of the American line—Piano Lupo, Gela, and the beaches beyond. Guzzoni committed the better part of two divisions in the attack, the *Hermann Goering Division* and the *Italian Livorno Division*. He backed them up with heavy air attacks by Italian and German planes based in Italy. Congestion on the beaches hampered Bradley's efforts to send tanks forward, so that the defending infantrymen had nothing but artillery and naval gunfire to support them. Cooks, clerks, and Navy shore personnel were pressed into service to help the 1st and 45th Division infantrymen, Rangers, and paratroopers repel the Axis attacks. The fighting was fierce. A few German tanks broke into Gela, while two panzer battalions closed to within two thousand yards of the vulnerable beaches before being repulsed by ground and naval gunfire. Several miles southeast of Gela, Colonel Gavin and an impromptu assembly of paratroopers and 45th Division soldiers effectively thwarted another German column consisting of 700 infantry, a battalion of self-propelled artillery, and a company of Tiger tanks at Biazzo Ridge. By day's end, the Seventh Army had suffered over 2,300 casualties, the Army's greatest one-day loss during the campaign. But as darkness descended, the Americans still held, and in some areas had actually expanded, their narrow foothold on the island.

After a day of heavy fighting, Patton decided to reinforce his battle-weary center with over 2,000 additional paratroopers from his reserves in North Africa. He ordered that the 1st and 2d Battalions, 504th Paratroop Regiment, the 376th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, and a company from the 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion be dropped near Gela on the night of 11 July. German aircraft had been active over the American sector all day, and consequently senior Army and Navy officers went to great lengths to inform everyone of the impending nighttime paratroop drop lest overanxious gunners fire on the friendly aircraft. Nevertheless, when the transport planes arrived over the beaches in the wake of a German air raid, nervous antiaircraft gunners ashore and afloat opened fire with devastating effect. Allied antiaircraft guns shot down 23 and dama-

ged 37 of the 144 American transport planes. The paratroop force suffered approximately 10 percent casualties and was badly disorganized. Later investigation would reveal that not everyone had been informed of the drop despite the Seventh Army's best efforts.

Over the next two days the Seventh Army gradually pushed its way out of the coastal plain and into the hills ringing the American beachhead. Fighting between the 1st Division and the *Hermann Goering Division* was occasionally stiff, but General Allen moved his men relentlessly forward through Niscemi and on toward the Yellow Line. On the right, Middleton's 45th Division likewise made good progress toward Highway 124, while to the left Truscott's 3d Division infantrymen, supported by 2d Armored Division tanks, moved beyond their initial Yellow Line objectives. The British matched American progress, and by the 13th they had advanced as far as Vizzini in the west and Augusta in the east. Resistance in the British zone was stiffening, however, due to difficult terrain and the arrival from France of elements of Germany's elite *1st Parachute Division*. As the Eighth Army's drive toward Catania and Gerbini bogged down in heavy fighting, Montgomery persuaded Alexander to shift the boundary line between the American Seventh and British Eighth Armies west, thereby permitting him to advance on a broader front into central Sicily and sidestep the main centers of Axis resistance. The boundary change, which Alexander communicated to Patton just before midnight on 13 July, stripped Highway 124 away from Seventh Army and assigned it instead to the Eighth Army. Under the new instructions, a portion of the Eighth Army would advance up Highway 124 to Enna, the key road junction in central Sicily, before turning northeast toward Messina. In essence, Alexander was interposing British forces between the Americans and the Germans, allowing the Eighth Army to monopolize the primary approaches to Messina and giving it complete responsibility for the Allied main effort. With its original line of advance blocked, Seventh Army was thus relegated to protecting the Eighth Army's flank and rear from possible attack by Axis forces in western Sicily—a distinctly secondary mission.

The change in front was one of the most important and controversial operational decisions of the campaign. It clearly reflected the British belief that the veteran Eighth Army was better qualified to carry the main burden of the campaign than its junior partner from across the Atlantic. Indeed, the decision did little more than make explicit the priorities and assumptions that had



81-mm. mortars support Patton's drive on Palermo. (National Archives)

been implicit in the campaign plan all along. On the other hand, by ordering the Seventh Army to stop short of Highway 124 and redirecting its advance, Alexander lost momentum and provided the Axis valuable time to withdraw to a new defensive line between Catania and Enna. The loss of momentum was best illustrated by the repositioning of the 45th Division, which had to return almost to the shoreline before it could sidestep around the 1st Division and take up its new position for a northwestward advance. Given the circumstances, Alexander might have been better served by reinforcing success and shifting the main emphasis of the campaign to the Seventh Army. This was not his choice, however, and his decision stirred up a storm of controversy in the American camp.

Patton and his generals were furious. They had always assumed that the Seventh Army would be permitted to push beyond its initial Yellow and Blue objectives and into central and northern Sicily in order to accompany the Eighth Army on its drive toward Messina. After all, Alexander's vague preinvasion plans had never expressly ruled this out. Now that option had been eliminated and they felt slighted. Not content to accept a secondary role, Patton immediately cast about for an opportunity to have his army play a more decisive part in the campaign. The object which caught his eye was Palermo, Sicily's capital. Capture of this well-known city would not

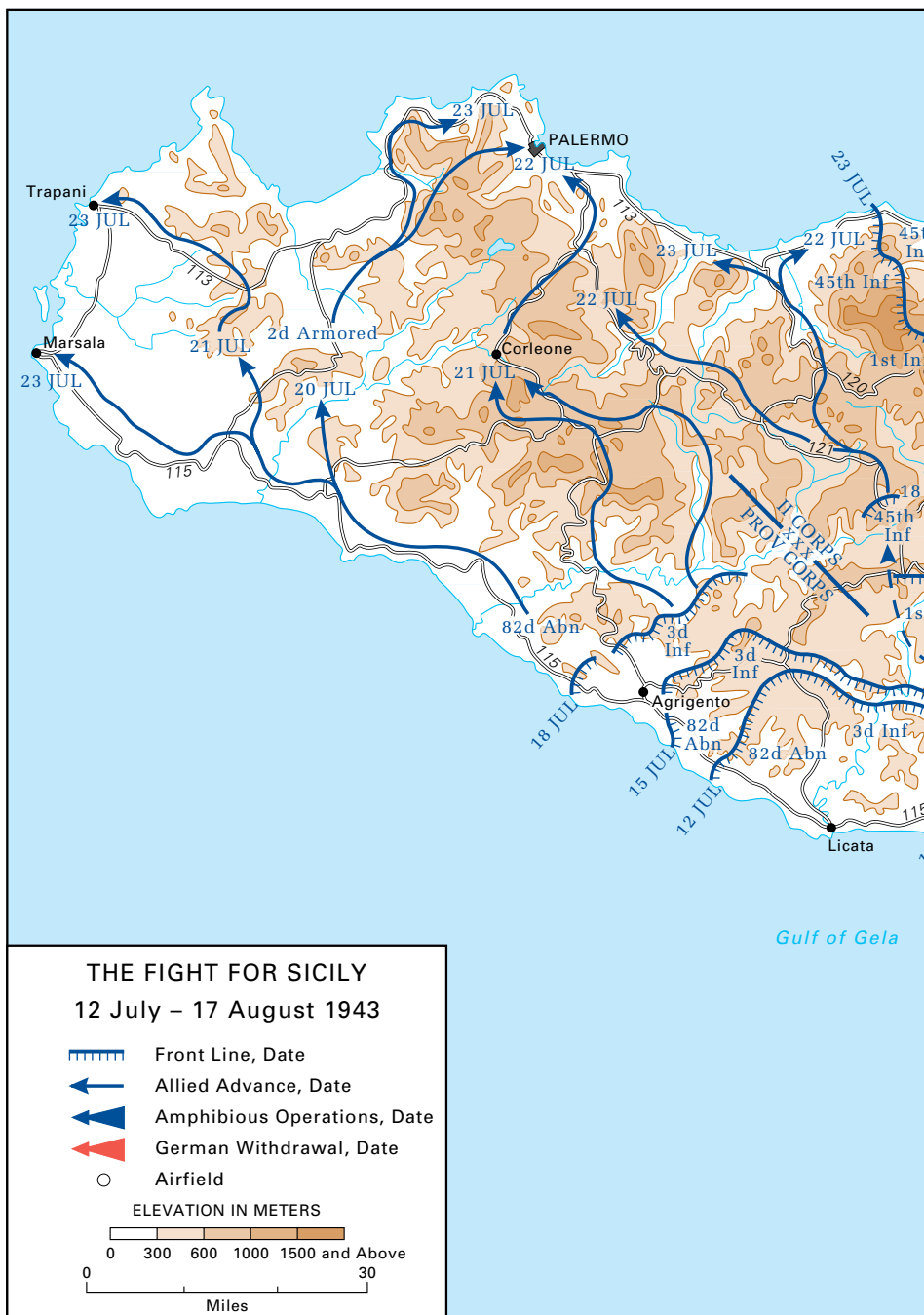
only be a publicity coup, but it would also give his army a major port from which to base further operations along the northern coast.

Patton's first move was to coax Alexander into sanctioning a "re-connaissance" toward the town of Agrigento, several miles west of the 3d Division's current front line. That authorization was all General Truscott needed to seize the city on 15 July. With Agrigento in hand, Patton was in a position to drive into northwestern Sicily, and on the 17th he traveled to Alexander's headquarters to argue for just such a course. Patton wanted to cut loose from the Eighth Army and launch his own, independent drive on Palermo while simultaneously sending Bradley's II Corps north to cut the island in two. Alexander reluctantly agreed, but later had second thoughts and sent Patton a revised set of orders instructing him to strike due north to protect Montgomery's flank rather than west. Seventh Army headquarters ignored Alexander's message claiming that it had been "garbled" in transmission, and by the time Alexander's instructions could be "clarified," Patton was already at Palermo's gates.

The Seventh Army met little opposition during its sweep through western Sicily. Guzzoni had recalled the *15th Panzer Grenadier Division* to central Sicily soon after the invasion, and the only troops left in the western portion of the island were Italians who, for the most part, showed little inclination to fight. While General Bradley's II Corps pushed north to cut the island in two east of Palermo, Patton organized the 2d Armored, 82d Airborne, and 3d Infantry Divisions into a provisional corps under Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Keyes and sent it on a 100-mile dash to the Sicilian capital. Palermo fell in only seventy-two hours, and by 24 July the Seventh Army had taken control of the entire western half of the island, capturing 53,000 dispirited Italian soldiers and 400 vehicles at the loss of 272 men.

The fall of Palermo was quickly followed by even more startling news. Disenchanted by the long and costly war, Mussolini's opponents ousted the dictator from power on 25 July. Although the Allies had hoped that Operation Huskey would destabilize the Fascist regime, the coup took them by surprise. Mussolini's downfall did not immediately terminate Italy's participation in the war. Nevertheless, the invasion of Sicily had acted as a catalyst in bringing about an important crack in the Rome-Berlin Axis.

Palermo's capitulation also coincided with the beginning of a new phase of the campaign. On 23 July Alexander ordered Patton to turn eastward toward Messina. Montgomery's drive had bogged down at Catania, and it was now apparent that the Eighth Army





was not going to be able to capture Messina on its own. Alexander, therefore, redrew the army boundaries once again, authorizing Patton to approach Messina from the west while Montgomery continued to push from the south.

The drive on Messina would not resemble Patton's quick, cavalry-like raid on Palermo. The city was protected by the most rugged terrain in Sicily, the Caronie Mountains and Mount Etna's towering eminence. In addition, the Germans had constructed a series of strongpoints, called the Etna Line, that ran from the vicinity of Catania on the east coast, around the southern base of Mount Etna, north to San Fratello on the island's northern shore. Here, in Sicily's rugged northeast corner, the Axis had decided to make its stand. But it was to be only a temporary stand, for while General Guzzoni still talked of defending Sicily to the end, Berlin had decided to withdraw gradually from the island. Guzzoni, his authority weakened by the disintegration of most of his Italian units, was not in a position to disagree. From this point forward General Hans Hube, commander of the newly formed *German XIV Panzer Corps*, and not Guzzoni, exercised real control over Axis forces in Sicily.

General Hube planned to withdraw slowly to the Etna Line where he would make a determined stand while simultaneously undertaking preliminary evacuation measures. Final evacuation would occur in phases, with each withdrawal matched by a progressive retreat to increasingly shorter defensive lines until all Axis troops had been ferried across the Strait of Messina to Italy. To accomplish this task, Hube had the remnants of several Italian formations plus four German divisions—the *1st Parachute*, the *Hermann Goering Panzer*, the *15th Panzer Grenadier*, and the newly arrived *29th Panzer Grenadier Division*.

There were just four narrow roads through the Etna Line, and only two of these actually went all the way to Messina. Possessing these vital arteries became the focal point of the campaign. General Alexander gave each of the Allied armies two roads for the advance on Messina. A portion of the Eighth Army was to advance along the Adrano-Randazzo road that skirted the western slopes of Mount Etna, while the remainder endeavored to drive north along the eastern coastal road, Route 114, to Messina. Alexander assigned the two northern roads to the American Seventh Army. The first, Route 120, ran through the interior of Sicily from Nicosia, through Troina, to Randazzo. The second, Highway 113, hugged the northern shoreline all the way to Messina.

It was Highway 113 that held Patton's interest, for it was his most direct route to Messina. Stung by the belief that Generals Alexander and Montgomery belittled the American Army, Patton was obsessed with the idea of reaching Messina before the British. "This is a horse race in which the prestige of the US Army is at stake," he wrote General Middleton. "We must take Messina before the British. Please use your best efforts to facilitate the success of our race."

The race got off to a slow start as the Germans skillfully exploited the mountainous terrain to cut the Allied advance to a crawl. Illness and the weather aided the Germans. Malaria and other fevers incapacitated over 10,000 soldiers. Heat exhaustion brought on by Sicily's 100-degree temperatures knocked additional G.I.s out of the ranks. The Seventh Army advanced two divisions abreast, with the 1st Infantry Division moving along Route 120 and General Middleton's 45th Infantry Division operating on the coast road. After Middleton's G.I.s captured Santo Stefano's "Bloody Ridge" on 30 July, Patton replaced them with General Truscott's 3d Division, allowing the men of the 45th time to rest and recuperate for their next assignment, the invasion of Italy.

Meanwhile, the 1st Infantry Division pushed its way eastward against stiffening German opposition, capturing Nicosia on the 28th before moving on to Troina. Patton planned to take the exhausted 1st Division out of the line once Troina fell. The mountain village, however, would prove to be the unit's toughest battle, as well as one of the most difficult fights of the entire Sicily Campaign. Troina constituted one of the main anchors of the Etna Line and was defended by the *15th Panzer Grenadier Division* and elements of the *Italian Aosta Division*. The Axis forces were deeply entrenched in hills that both dominated the approaches to the town and were difficult to outflank. The barren landscape, almost devoid of cover, made advancing American soldiers easy targets for Axis gunners.

The battle for Troina began on 31 July, when the Germans repulsed an advance by the 39th Infantry Regiment, a 9th Infantry Division outfit temporarily attached to the 1st Division. The setback forced Bradley and Allen to orchestrate a massive assault. Over the next six days the men of the 1st Infantry Division, together with elements of the 9th Division, a French Moroccan infantry battalion, 165 artillery pieces (divided among 9 battalions of 105-mm. howitzers, 6 battalions of 155-mm. howitzers, and 1 battalion of 155-mm. "Long Tom" guns), and numerous Allied aircraft, were locked in combat with Troina's tenacious defenders. Control of key hilltop positions see-



Troina. (National Archives)

sawed back and forth in vicious combat, with the Germans launching no fewer than two dozen counterattacks during the week-long battle.

The experience of Col. John Bowen's 26th Infantry Regiment was fairly typical of the action around Troina. The 26th's assignment was to outflank Troina by seizing Monte Basilio two miles north of town. From here, the regiment would be positioned to cut the Axis line of retreat. Bowen moved his soldiers forward on 2 August supported by the fire of 1 battalion of 155-mm. howitzers, 4 battalions of 105-mm. howitzers, and 4 "Long Tom" batteries. Despite this weighty arsenal, German artillery fire and difficult terrain limited the regiment's advance to half a mile. The next morning one of the regiment's battalions lost its bearings in the hilly terrain and wandered around ineffectually for the remainder of the day. A second battalion reached Monte Basilio with relatively little difficulty, only to be pounded by Axis artillery fire directed from neighboring hills. The 129th Panzer Grenadier Regiment launched a major effort to retake the mountain that afternoon, but Bowen's riflemen and machine gunners, supported by the artillerymen in the rear, repulsed the attackers.

For the next two days Axis artillery and small arms fire kept the men on Monte Basilio pinned down. Determined to hold Troina for as long as possible, the Germans reacted strongly to the threat the 26th Regiment posed to their line of communications. Axis pressure practically cut off the men on Monte Basilio from the rest of the 1st Division, and attempts to resupply them by plane were only partially successful. By 5 August food and ammunition stores were low, and casualties had greatly depleted the regiment, with one company mustering only seventeen men effective for duty.

It was at this point that the German infantry attacked again, touching off another round of furious fighting. During the battle, Pvt. James W. Reese moved his mortar squad to a position from which he could effectively take the advancing German infantry under fire. The squad maintained a steady fire on the attackers until it began to run out of ammunition. With only three mortar rounds left, Reese ordered his crew to the rear while he advanced to a new position and knocked out a German machine gun with the last rounds. He then shouldered a rifle and continued to engage the enemy until killed by a barrage of hostile fire.

Through the efforts of men like Private Reese, the 26th Infantry successfully held its position. The United States recognized Reese's heroism posthumously by awarding him the Medal of Honor. The Germans acknowledged the 26th Regiment's gallant stand by evacuating Troina later that night. Hard pressed by American forces all along the Troina sector and unable to dislodge the 26th Regiment from its position threatening his line of retreat, General Hube withdrew the badly damaged *15th Panzer Grenadier Division* toward Randazzo. As the 9th Infantry Division took up the pursuit, the 1st Division retired for a well-deserved rest.

While the 1st Infantry Division battled for possession of Troina, General Truscott's 3d Division faced equally stiff opposition at San Fratello, the northern terminus of the Etna Line. Here the *29th Panzer Grenadier Division* had entrenched itself on a ridge overlooking the coastal highway. Truscott made repeated attempts to crack the San Fratello position beginning on 3 August, but failed to gain much ground. The strength of the German position prompted him to try and outflank it by an amphibious end run. On the night of 7–8 August, while the 3d Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, and 3d Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, seized a key hill along the San Fratello Line, Lt. Col. Lyle Bernard led the 2d Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, reinforced by two batteries from the 58th Armored Field Artillery Bat-

talion, a platoon of medium tanks, and a platoon of combat engineers, in an amphibious landing at Sant'Agata, a few miles behind San Fratello. The amphibious assault force achieved complete surprise and quickly blocked the coastal highway. Unfortunately, the Germans had selected that night to withdraw from San Fratello, and most of their troops had already retired past Bernard's position by the time the Americans arrived. Nevertheless, the 3d Infantry Division's combined land and sea offensive bagged over 1,000 prisoners.

Allied pressure at Troina, San Fratello, and in the British sector had broken the Etna Line, but there would be no lightning exploitation of the victory. Taking maximum advantage of the constricting terrain and armed with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of mines, General Hube withdrew his *XIV Panzer Corps* in orderly phases toward Messina.

Patton made a second bid to trap the *29th Panzer Grenadier Division* on 11 August, when he sent Colonel Bernard on another amphibious end run, this time at Brolo. Once again Bernard's men achieved complete surprise, but they soon came under heavy pressure as the German units trapped by the landing tried to batter their way out. Bernard's group proved too small to keep the Germans bottled up, and by the time Truscott linked up with the landing force, the bulk of the *29th Panzer Grenadier Division* had escaped.

Time was now running out for the Allies. On 11 August, the day Patton launched the Brolo operation, General Hube began the full-scale evacuation of Sicily. Despite heroic feats by U.S. Army engineers in clearing minefields and repairing blown bridges, the Seventh Army was never quite able to catch the withdrawing Axis forces. A last amphibious end run by a regiment of the 45th Division on 16 August failed when the troops landed behind American, and not German, lines. By then the game was over. On the morning of 17 August, elements of the 3d Infantry Division's 7th Infantry Regiment entered Messina, just hours after the last Axis troops had boarded ship for Italy. The enemy had escaped, but the Seventh Army quickly brought reinforcements into the port, in the words of 3d Division assistant commander Brig. Gen. William Eagles, "to see that the British did not capture the city from us after we had taken it." Shortly after Patton accepted the city's surrender, a column of British vehicles slowly wound its way through Messina's crooked streets. Spotting General Patton, the commander of the British column walked over and offered his hand in congratulations. Patton had won his race.



A bunker covers the beach near Sant'Agata. (National Archives)

Analysis

The American soldier had much to be proud of in the Sicily Campaign. With the exception of those units which had taken part in the Tunisia Campaign, especially the 1st and 9th Infantry Divisions, few American formations employed in Sicily began the campaign with any combat experience, and their abilities were still unknown. But the American troops had done well. After landing on a hostile shore, they had repelled several counterattacks, forced the enemy to withdraw, and relentlessly pursued him over sun-baked hills until the island was theirs. In thirty-eight days they and their British colleagues had killed or wounded approximately 29,000 enemy soldiers and captured over 140,000 more. In contrast, American losses totaled 2,237 killed and 6,544 wounded and captured. The British suffered 12,843 casualties, including 2,721 dead.

Sicily was also a victory for the logistician and the staff planner. Although overshadowed by the Normandy invasion a year later, Operation Huskey was actually the largest amphibious operation of World War II in terms of the size of the landing zone and the number of divisions put ashore on the first day of the invasion. The am-

phibious operation, as well as the subsequent logistical effort, marked a clear triumph of American staff work and interservice cooperation. Army-Navy cooperation was particularly good, and the fire support provided by Allied naval vessels played a critical role in overcoming Axis resistance, especially around Gela.

The Sicily Campaign also marked the first time in World War II that a complete U.S. field army had fought as a unit. With over 200,000 men in its ranks by the time it reached Messina, the American Seventh Army employed the services of more than 150 different types of units, from infantry regiments to graves registration companies. The final victory was achieved only through the cooperation and collaboration of thousands of individuals from every branch of service.

Strategically, the Sicilian operation achieved the goals set out for it by Allied planners at Casablanca. Axis air and naval forces were driven from their island bastion and the Mediterranean sea lanes were opened to Allied commerce. Hitler had been forced to transfer troops to Sicily and Italy from other theaters, and Mussolini had been toppled from power, thereby opening the way for the eventual dissolution of the Rome-Berlin Axis and Italy's ultimate surrender. Although U.S. military leaders had not initially planned to use Sicily as a springboard for an invasion of Italy, the impact of the operation on the tottering Fascist regime begged exploitation, and the Allies quickly followed up their victory by invading Italy in September 1943.

Yet for all its achievements, the Sicily Campaign also demonstrated some weaknesses in Allied capabilities, particularly in the realm of joint operations. None of the Allied commanders had much experience in joint air-land-sea operations, and consequently the three services did not always work together as well as they might have. Ground commanders complained about the lack of close air support and the inaccuracy of airborne drops, air commanders complained of their aircraft's being fired upon by Allied ground and naval forces, and naval officers chided the land commanders for not fully exploiting the fleet's amphibious capabilities to outflank the enemy once the campaign had begun. Similarly, General Alexander's unfortunate decision to broaden the Eighth Army's front at the expense of the Seventh Army can be attributed to the newness of combined operations, for the decision reflected the British Army's proclivity to underestimate American military capabilities—an attitude that American G.I.s proved unjustified during the Sicily Campaign.

One consequence of this lack of integration within the Allied camp was that the Axis was able to evacuate over 100,000 men and 10,000 vehicles from Sicily during the first seventeen days in August. The failure of Allied air and naval forces to interdict the Strait of Messina was due in large part to the fact that neither Eisenhower nor his principal air, land, and sea commanders had formulated a coordinated plan to prevent the withdrawal of Axis forces from the island.

The escape of Axis forces from Sicily is also attributable to the conservative attitude of Allied commanders. They had opted for the most cautious invasion plan, massing their forces at the most predictable landing site. They never seriously considered the bolder option of launching simultaneous attacks on Messina and Calabria, the “toe” of Italy, to trap all Axis forces in Sicily in one blow. Their conservativeness was somewhat justified, for multinational amphibious operations of this magnitude had never been attempted before, and the initial landings would have been outside of the range of Allied fighter cover. Nevertheless, the advantages to be gained by taking the enemy by surprise and destroying an entire Axis army would seem to have merited greater attention by Allied strategists than it received.

The fundamental reason why the Messina-Calabria option was not seriously considered had to do with grand strategy, not operational considerations. At Casablanca the Allies had agreed only to invade Sicily, not Italy, and U.S. leaders had clearly stated their opposition to anything that might further delay a cross-Channel attack. A landing in Italy, even a local one intended purely to assist the Sicily Campaign, threatened to open the very Pandora’s box Marshall wanted to avoid. Of course in the end, the Allies invaded Italy anyway, only to be confronted by the same German troops who had made good their escape from Sicily. But in the spring of 1943, coalition politics ruled out a Calabrian envelopment, and Allied planners confined themselves to a narrow, frontal assault in southeastern Sicily.

Sicily was thus an important victory for the Allies, but not a decisive one. Coalition politics and the innate conservativeness of men who were still learning how to work the intricate machinery of joint, multinational operations tied Allied armies to a strategy which achieved the physical objective while letting the quarry escape. Nevertheless, Axis forces did not escape unscathed, and the experience Allied commanders gained in orchestrating airborne, amphibious, and ground combat operations during the campaign would serve them well in the months ahead, first in Italy and then at Normandy.



SICILY 1943

Further Readings

The most comprehensive treatments of the campaign can be found in two books, Albert N. Garland and Howard McGaw Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy* (1965) and Carlo D'Este, *Bitter Victory, The Battle for Sicily, 1943* (1988). Allied airborne operations are the subject of William Breuer, *Drop Zone Sicily* (1983). Also useful are S. W. C. Pack, *Operation "Husky, " The Allied Invasion of Sicily* (1977), Samuel Eliot Morison, *Sicily-Salerno-Anzio* (1954), Hugh Pond, *Sicily* (1962), Omar Bradley, *A Soldier's Story* (1951), Lucian Truscott, *Command Missions* (1954), W. G. F. Jackson, *The Battle for Italy* (1967), George Patton, *War As I Knew It* (1947), Trumbull Higgins, *Soft Underbelly* (1968), John Eisenhower, *Allies* (1982), Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, volume 2 (1974), and William Darby, *Darby's Rangers: We Led the Way* (1980). For the official British and Canadian views of the campaign, see C. J. C. Molony, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, volume 5 (1973), and G. W. L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy, 1943–45* (1967).

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Cover: 3d Infantry Division troops move along a cliffside road destroyed by the Germans at Cape Calava. (National Archives)

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