



Operation Husky, the Invasion of Sicily - July 1943

The decision to invade Sicily was agreed by the Western Allies at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943. 'Operation Husky' was to be a combined amphibious and airborne attack scheduled for that summer under the supreme command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

The Allies began air attacks on targets in Sicily and Italy in the early summer of 1943. They also attacked the Italian island of Pantellaria, which surrendered to the British 1st Division who arrived there on 11 June.

The Allied convoys concentrated near Malta on the 9 July and headed for Sicily's southern beaches. The careful planning of the landings was slightly hindered by a storm, which slowed down the landing craft. The Italian defenders believed such weather conditions would deter any attempt of an invasion and were on a low state of alert.

The British 1st Airlanding Brigade mounted in 137 gliders, were the first to land. They were to seize the Ponte Grande Bridge south of Syracuse. These landings were, on the whole, unsuccessful. Of the 137 gliders, 69 came down in the sea, drowning some 200 men. A further 56 landed in the wrong area of Sicily and just 12 reached the target area and managed to take the bridge. The US paratroopers had difficulties too, the pilots were inexperienced and dust and anti-aircraft fire resulted in the 2,781 paratroopers being scattered over an area 80km radius.

The main amphibious landings involved three British divisions in the east and two US divisions in the west, all supported by heavy fire from off shore warships.

The British did not meet strong resistance from the Italian coastal troops and were able to bring tanks and artillery ashore ahead of schedule. By the end of the day 13th Corps had taken Syracuse and 30th Corps had secured Panchino.

The US divisions had a far more difficult landing, with stiff resistance from the Italians and German air attacks. Later in the day the Hermann Goering Panzer Division, with its 56 ton Tiger tanks, joined the defence, but the US 2nd Armored Division and US 18 Regimental Combat Team landed in the evening and the Americans managed to stand firm against the fierce fighting. Eventually, naval supporting gunfire forced the tanks to disperse.

The sudden appearance of so many paratroopers gave the appearance of a much greater invasion and the Axis defenders called for reinforcements.

By 12 July, the British had captured Augusta and Montgomery decided to head northwards, to the east of Mount Etna, to take Messina. The Commander of the US 7th Army, Lieutenant-General George S Patton, unhappy with this change of plan, was to fight westwards, towards Palermo. The Americans advanced well. They captured 53,000 prisoners and also the port of



Pontoon bridge being constructed from a landing craft to the shore. From the papers of Jim Williams.



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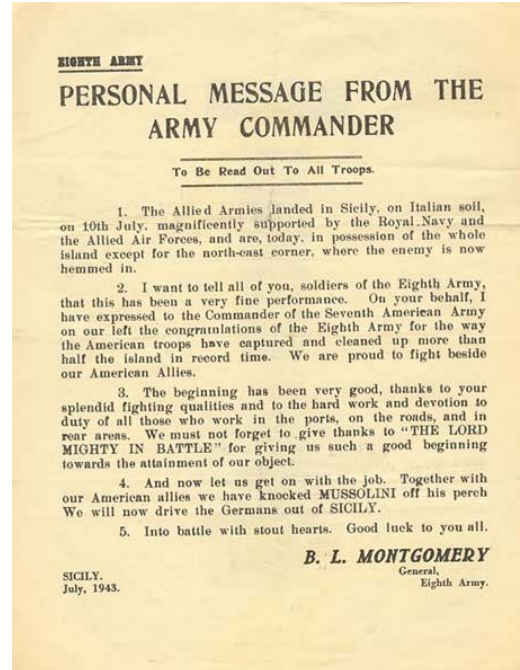
Palermo on July 22. This enabled the US 9th Division to land there, instead of on the southern beaches, and was valuable for receiving Allied supplies. Alexander ordered Patton to advance to Messina.

Meanwhile the British Eighth Army was making slow progress. The German paratroopers, with 88mm anti-tank guns, were a formidable enemy and the mountainous Sicilian countryside was hard to negotiate. The Highlanders fought hard for Biancavilla and the XIII Corps eventually took Catania and then Paterno.

The Canadians of Lord Tweedsmuir's Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment managed to take the hill town of Assoro by scaling a cliff and taking their enemy completely by surprise and advanced to Leonforte, which fell to them on 22 July.

By August, the invasion of Sicily was almost complete. The race for Messina continued; the British were helped greatly by airborne forces landing ahead and saving bridges from destruction by the Axis troops. On 17 August, the US 3rd Division entered Messina at 10am, just 50 minutes before the arrival of the British Army. The Germans had been evacuated, but had left huge amounts of weapons, ammunition and fuel. The historic city of Messina had been ravaged by Allied bombs and after the invasion, by shells from the Italian mainland.

Operation Husky was a success. The Allies achieved their goal - the 'soft underbelly' of Europe had been exposed and the Mediterranean could be fully used as a sea route. The cost of casualties was high, though less than anticipated. The Allies lost more than 16,000 men and estimated that 164,000 Axis troops were either killed or taken prisoner.



A message to the Eighth Army from General Montgomery. From the papers of H.L. Barter.



Reloading with Italian POWs bound for North Africa from the papers of Jim Williams.



Sicily in a mess. August 27, at the end of the campaign. From the papers of H.L. Barter.



Bert Holt DFC served with the Glider Pilot Regiment. He was based in Sousse immediately before the campaign began and flew as second pilot. He was interviewed for the Centre in January 2000 by [Dr Peter Liddle](#).

We flew to Sicily from Sousse. I flew a Waco with a friend of mine, carrying 16 soldiers of the Border Regiment. We were towed by a British plane called Albemarle which was a very nice aeroplane to be towed behind, and we set off for Sicily at night ... via Malta. We had to fly over the centre of Malta, then take a compass course from there to land just on the south coast of Sicily.



Pages from Bert's log book pertinent to the Sicily Campaign.

We landed exactly where we were supposed to because the moon was not too bad. The only thing that worried us when we got near the ground was that our maps were coloured as if looking at the place in moonlight. Now Sicily didn't look like these maps, so when we got down there it wasn't a flat field - there were woods and stone walls, whereas the stone walls on the map looked like footpaths. So, what we had to do was land between trees, knock the wings off and hope to Christ that we stayed on one level.

On approaching the island we were met by fires from what appeared to be Bofors guns. They were the same type of shell, explosion etc, that our Bofors made. We got a few holes in the wings, but nothing else.

On round figures it was said that 50 gliders landed on Sicily. The other 100 landed in the sea and that 100 were all towed by Americans, whereas of those that landed on the island, 35 were towed by British aircraft. I do sympathise a bit with the Americans. All these lads had only flown Dakotas in America, delivering letters and parcels. They had never seen a gun in their lives, so one can possibly excuse them with the barrage that they received when they hit Sicily.

On landing, we were to ensure that the Border Regiment knew exactly where they had to go and meet the rest of their chaps, so we made our way to the bridges which were just up the road from Syracuse, where we had landed ... I got there by crawling through a tomato field, joined the soldiers of the Borders and the glider pilots that were already there, and took up positions on the bridge.

In the Syracuse area was a river and a canal and our, the job of the Army, was to hold the bridges covering these two streams so that the lads landing from the sea further south than Syracuse were able to get over and proceed through the island. We were there with some Paratroops but mostly with our successful landings by Horsas which landed round the bridge. There were about 65 to 70 soldiers defending these areas and we looked out for them and kept them away until the next day, or it might have been



two days. On the third day we ran out of ammunition. We had to give ourselves up and the Italians came in, being very happy about the whole situation.

The Italians lined us up and asked us questions in Italian, which we didn't understand. So they went through all our pockets and our gear, putting anything which they thought might be useful to themselves away. One of the Italians who was searching my equipment found a tin, an unopened tin, in my equipment and he asked me what was in it. I told him, in Italian, that it was food. "Oh", he said, "good". This tin had a tin opener with it and the Italian must have been hungry because he immediately opened the tin and when he looked inside he looked at what he thought was some sort of jelly. He put his finger in and put it in his mouth. It was actually solid methylated spirits. I still wear the bruise on my backside from what he did after that!

They put us all together and marched us up the road. We had marched for about two hours when we saw the seaborne troops, I think it was a Scottish Regiment, we saw the first lads coming towards us. We saw them pick up their rifles and drop down as if they were going to shoot us, so we shouted out, in great basic English, who we were - that we were English and not Italian. The Italian lads ran away. Some of them got killed by these Scots lads chasing them, and we finished off in Syracuse.

The diary of **A.H.Lee**, a Wireless Telegraphist on a Harbour Motor Defence Launch (HMDL) gives a strong insight into naval activity during the campaign. He arrived, from Sousse, at the south east corner of Sicily on 7 July 1943.

On the 11th (of July), we had the job of acting as ferry boat to none other than Lord Louis Mountbatten and one of the Brigadiers in charge of the operation. L.M.M. is a very nice chap and I had a close up view of him for about an hour at very close range. I was standing right alongside him on our bridge.

That evening, on the 11th, I had the chance of listening in to the news from London. It was very good to hear how we were progressing. Incidentally, that is the only method we have of keeping in touch with the Sicilian news. After this bulletin, in particular, there was a short talk on the invasion and particular stress was laid on the craft used to navigate the correct beaches for our lads to land on. It was stated how difficult it was to manoeuvre these craft in heavy seas, the expert seamanship required, etc. etc. I felt quite pleased to think that, at long last, some person recognised the fact that we were doing some valuable work to help the war effort. The speaker was talking about us.

That night, we had air raids the whole period of darkness, just as we have had every other night since. None of us on board had any sleep for several nights after that, due to Jerry. The barrage was particularly heavy and shrapnel came down like rain.

One amusing incident I have forgotten to mention. When we pulled in to one of the bays to anchor for a few hours, there was a crowd of Italian soldiers standing on the shore waving white flags to us. Apparently they thought we were after their blood.

On the 13th July, we left the south east corner of Sicily, we called it Bank East, en route for Syracuse, a short trip of about one hour. Upon arrival there we had some more ferrying to do. This time our passengers were none other than the famous



General Montgomery and Admiral Ramsay. They, I believe, were in complete charge of the whole job.

That night, we had a particularly heavy air attack. The flak that went up was so thick you could not put a finger in between the shell bursts. We saw nine planes brought down. (Who is afraid of fireworks and bangs now?).

On the 14th, we went aboard our English merchant ship which had been set on fire by jerry bombs and took off several guns. The ship was still on fire and the decks still hot.

Obtaining small guns such as Tommys, Lanchesters, Brownings, the Italian Breda, etc., was a job which we were continually executing. We raided several Italian packets and took off their Bredas. At present we have more guns on board than crew. We are rather fed up with the sight of armaments.

We are having air raids every night and I usually wear a steel helmet when I turn in.

On the 19th, we had a funeral party and took two chaps out to sea for burial. They were part of the crew of an M.T.B. which had set out for Messina the night before. Apparently they were led into an ambush. They entered the Straits of Messina quite easily but, no sooner had they reached the narrowest part of the Straits, when the searchlights were put right on to them and every shore battery opened up. Four boats left here but only two returned.

On the morning of the 20th, I saw a particularly violent explosion, made by an ammo ship exploding after being hit by a bomb. She also had a quantity of petrol on board. Smoke went up to about five hundred feet. On the night of the 20th, we had rather a heavy air attack and a couple of large British merchant ships were hit and set on fire. We happened to be passing one of them as the bombs came down so we were naturally on the spot to pick up casualties and swimmers. We managed to get a few chaps on board, although one of them died a little later in hospital on the cruiser Newfoundland. The whole harbour was a one mass of fire. Apparently one of the merchant ships had petrol on board in tins and all the empty cans, etc., were floating around.

Every night without fail, we could see fires and gun duels in the front lines, a few miles away at Catania. It was pretty hot at times, believe me.

We stayed at Augusta for a few weeks and, on the night before we left, which incidentally was the last night of fighting in Catania, (it fell to our troops the next morning) there was a huge fire which absolutely lit us up like daylight. It was going all night and was supposed to be the jerries burning their equipment. That was round about the beginning of August. We then departed for good old Malta.



Joe Kelley, a Durham Light Infantryman was very much involved in the Invasion of Sicily. His memoir describes the fight to take the Primosole Bridge.

We sailed up the Suez Canal to Port Said to join the armada of ships already assembled there. We were on our way, the 5th July. What a sight, I had never seen so many ships in one place. Escorts consisted of Battleships, Aircraft Carriers, Destroyers and Gun Ships for anti-aircraft etc., and then the troop ships to convey our 50th Division and also the 5th Army Division. We were then told of our destination, Sicily, at the foot of Italy. During the voyage we had to attend lectures and look at pictures of the part we would be attacking. The



Joe Kelley

day before the invasion, on the 9th of July a gale-force wind churned up the sea. Lots of men were sea sick. It seemed to calm down before the dawn of 10th July. We were told to get as much rest as possible and I must admit I dozed off. I had a rude awakening about 03.00am, we were about to embark and there was a great swell caused by the gales. We had the experience of having to jump into space when the L.C.I. craft came up to the side of the ships. 2 naval ratings caught us as we landed on the deck, they then guided us to the manhole that took us to our deck.

With 200 men in these boats it took a long time to fill them. The Navy wasted no time; when we were full we had 9 or 10 miles to cover before the beach landing. It was a relief when we finally landed. 7 ft of water, all our equipment wet through, but we had a Mae West to support us. There was a beach master shouting, "Come on the Durhams, get clear of the beach." We were about 2000 yards from our landing stage. We cleared the beach and went into some orchards. The first thing that I and many others did was to empty the sea water from our packs. That made things a bit lighter, our clothes just dried in the sun, which was very warm even at 08.00am. Our Platoon Officer Lt Holloway got us organised and we set off following the remainder of the battalion. Our objective was the hills beyond "Avola". We were given instruction to climb the hill, what a job we had.

We did not get much rest. Some Italian Commandos were on the move so we had to stand by. The 6th Battalion had laid an ambush for them, from where we were we could see what was happening, we were told to wait just in case they needed a hand. The ambush had been well prepared, anti tank guns were used against the transport vehicles. The fight lasted about 2 hours, eventually the Italians gave themselves up. The 6th Battalion captured an Italian General and all of his staff, including lots of papers that revealed valuable information. The next morning the 51st Highland Division took over our position.

The 151 Brigade, 6th, 8th and 9th Durhams were ordered to advance towards Primosole Bridge. The order was for the 9th Battalion to lead the way to the Simeto River on which the Primosole Bridge stood. The order came through in the afternoon (of the 12



July) the temperature in the shade was 35 degrees C, we had full kit on, along with ammunition and grenades.

The bridge was about 400 feet in length, it's depth I would guess about 10 -12 ft and width of 3 - 4 yards, all made of steel girders. The Airborne troops were supposed to hold the bridge till we arrived. During our 25 mile forced march, with all equipment, we were strafed by 2 German fighter planes. We wondered where our transport was, it was said that the ship carrying all of the 50th Division transport had been sunk. That explained why we had so much marching to do. Then came the biggest surprise of them all. When we left Lentine we were bombed by American bombers, not a very pleasant experience - we suffered a few casualties. I won't repeat what we said about them.

We advanced towards the bridge. I think the time was around 12.00 on the 15th July, we were grateful for the rest. We all stretched out exhausted and slept as best we could. We were told that the 9th Battalion would be attacking the bridge at around 07.30am and we were to advance and take over their position. From the high ground where we watched the 9th Battalion make their frontal assault, the sight was shocking. The River Simeto did, literally, run red with the blood of the 9th Battalion. It was all over by 09.30am, no bridgehead but they had succeeded in preventing the Germans from blowing up the bridge.

It was decided that our attack would go in at 02.00am on the 16 July. (We were shown) a shallow crossing about 300 yards from the bridge. This took the Germans by surprise and they retreated about 100 yards. The end of the bridge, which we had to approach from a frontal assault, had lots of bodies of Germans and British Paratroopers, mostly dead but some wounded who were being treated by the stretcher bearers.

Our Company advance was held up due to lack of communications. Just as first light appeared, up came Col. Lidwall and ordered us over the bridge to assist A Company. The bridge had been cleared of mines by the Royal Engineers (who had) piled them on the side of the bridge. One of our Bren gun carriers had been hit by a shell, it was not a pretty sight. We advanced onto the bridge and when we got to the far end it started. We suffered a few casualties because of the German Spandau machine guns which were firing on fixed lines 6 or 7 inches above ground. Capt. Lewis, our Company Commander, ordered us to lay low and went to find out the number of casualties, we never saw him again.

The Sgt told us to watch out for the German Paratroopers, they were well camouflaged and wore green netting over their faces, making it difficult to see them. Also, that snipers were in abundance. Then came the first counter attack. They were that well camouflaged that we could not see them crawling among the vines until they were 30 yards away. I cannot remember a lot of the action but being a Bren gunner I had used up 3 magazines before the cease fire order came. The moaning and screaming by the wounded was very unpleasant. We could not tend to the wounded because of the snipers. They had already shot some stretcher bearers even though they wore Red Cross armbands.



Ammunition was running low, so the Company runner was told to go back and tell the carriers that we needed some ammo. Before it arrived, the German Paratroopers attacked again. I knew that between us we only had 3 ½ magazines left. At one point the Major shouted "Every man for himself!" At this stage my mind went blank, I don't remember much of the action but when it was all over, another pile of bodies were piled one on top of the other. The distance between us and the Germans was 25 to 30 yards. The bridgehead we made was reduced to 300 yards, so there we were, facing each other. We ran short of ammunition for the third time and the Bren gun carriers did a fine job keeping us well supplied and helped us repel counter attacks. Some carrier lads said they had named our area 'stink alley' because of the dead. We had forced the enemy back once again.

I now found myself with only 1 magazine left. The enemy did not retreat very far so we used hand grenades and 2 inch mortars, this held them back and they began to tire and retreat back to their own lines, leaving the wounded and the dead. With all the bodies the stench was terrible, Lewis and I found a small embankment and buried a German Officer, 2 German soldiers and 2 British Paratroopers. The mound gave us something to sit on, we didn't bother about the smell.

We hoped the oncoming evening would bring some respite, but no such luck, they came again. I let loose with my last remaining magazine, then I got hold of a rifle and continued to fire. Finally the enemy gave up and we rested, able to eat some of our rations. An officer came round and said "Well Done" and that the 6th and 9th Battalions were coming through us to widen the bridgehead. The next morning was clear and sunny. Lewis and myself had a good breakfast, biscuits and ham washed down with warm but soothing water from our bottles.

Joe was injured later in the campaign and was taken to Syracuse and evacuated to Tripoli on a hospital ship.

Jim Williams was a physiotherapist and masseur with RAMC and arrived in Augusta for the planned invasion. His memoir and photographs give a fascinating insight into caring for the casualties of the campaign and life in Sicily directly after the invasion.

For a major D-Day landing casualties were light and the expected rush of patients didn't materialise.

Within a few days we were called on parade and told that we were to join the invasion forces... As we were crossing to Sicily by LCT (Landing Craft tank) it was decided to split the hospital up into units of 100 beds. Each unit would be able to function independently as a 100 bedded hospital in case it was separated from the others. Before striking the tents each bed was made up with clean linen. Everything including the mattress was rolled up and stitched into sacking. Once we set up hospital again, the beds would be unfolded, a bundle placed on each, opened up, and within minutes a whole ward would be equipped with ready made up beds.

Our destination was an Italian psychiatric hospital, just outside Syracuse. All the Italian patients had been moved out and we were able to start putting our hospital together as soon as we arrived... Initially everybody took part in the hard, manual



labour required to build and equip the hospital. Gradually as patients began to be admitted, men were withdrawn to work on the wards, the theatres and wherever they were required. As we were acting as a Casualty Clearing Station no physiotherapy was needed and I went to work in the reception tent, admitting patients as they arrived.



Our barrack room on the hospital site.



Me, Jimmy and Paddy outside the department in Syracuse.

There were air-raids at night, fortunately not too intense, and we had casualties from these as well as from the front. Many (patients) were Italian POW's who were housed in makeshift camps not far from the hospital, with no cover or protection at all. Most of them had been wounded by ack-ack shrapnel as it fell to earth. There was no question of our men being given priority over other nationalities be they German or Italian. The most urgent cases were treated first.

There were not many German prisoners but thousands of Italians. I was allocated two every day to act as stretcher bearers, carrying patients around the hospital compound. They were always quiet, well-behaved men who apparently had never been Fascists, never wanted to fight and just wanted to go home.

Patients continued to pour in. More tented wards had to be erected and in a very short time we had 3,000 beds, more than half of which were stretchers, permanently full. Not all the patients were wounded. We had the usual cases of dysentery but what surprised us most was the number of cases of malaria we had to cope with. Special units of the Royal Engineers were brought in to combat the mosquitoes. All areas of stagnant water were sprayed with oil. Within a few months the number of malaria cases fell rapidly and we were able to discard our nets.



Surgical block staff with Italian POW in the foreground.



All the time we had been abroad we had only seen an occasional case of venereal disease. Sicily was to open our eyes. We had so many patients admitted with VD that we had to send for a special unit to cope with them. One night I admitted 156 men with these conditions. They had been collected from all over Sicily - Canadians, Americans, British, Indians, almost every nationality and were sent to us for treatment. When a soldier from a locally based unit was admitted with VD we tried to find the source of his infection. If we were successful, a military policeman and a carabinieri would visit the lady and bring her to the hospital (for treatment)



Glider Beach

As hostilities ceased for a while the flow of patients slowed down and we were able to relax a little and have some time off. Trips by lorry were organised now and then for us to go bathing on the sandy beaches at Avola, south of Syracuse. This was the area where the first British landings had been made and the sea and shore were still littered with the remains of the unfortunate gliders that had fallen short of their target.

Walking down to Syracuse one day we found a small draper's shop in a side street. Looking for presents or souvenirs to send home we went inside and found it staffed by three sisters and their mother. They had very little to sell, but offered to make us embroidered handkerchiefs. We accepted their offer and they made them with motifs of the 8th Army and Sicily in each corner. They were very friendly and we would always call in and see them as we passed that way, taking them items of food for it was still in short supply.

There was little to do but to see the sites. A few cafes and bars began to open but they had little to offer. The local people were very friendly and we would occasionally spend hours in these bars, fraternising with our ex-enemies and found the majority of them ordinary people like ourselves. I didn't like the wines very much but I did like the people.'



Embroidered handkerchief.



Embroidered handkerchief.