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OPERATION HUSKY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract of

OPERATION HUSKY – A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Allied invasion of Sicily was the largest amphibious operation conducted in World War II with over seven assault divisions landing across Italian beaches. The planning and conduct of HUSKY was fraught with indecision, fragmented planning, poor coordination, and a lack of unity of effort. Husky proves to be an interesting case study of the operational level of war and provides several relevant lessons for today's commanders and joint staff officers.

This paper analyzes the Allied planning effort from the operational level of war only. Specifically, this paper analyzes the planning and conduct of HUSKY in regard to following seven operational functions: operational intelligence, operational command and control, operational movement and maneuver, operational command and control warfare, operational fires, operational protection, and operational logistics.

The Allied invasion of Sicily was the largest amphibious operation conducted in World War II, with over seven assault divisions landing across Italian beaches. From 10 July to 17 August 1943, Allied forces fought a determined opponent that effectively traded space for time and successfully evacuated a large force to the mainland of Italy. Operation HUSKY culminated in an Allied victory and proved to be the catalyst for the decision to invade the Italian mainland. However, the planning and conduct of HUSKY was fraught with indecision, fragmented planning, poor coordination, and a lack of unity of effort. HUSKY proves to be an interesting case study of the operational level of war and provides several relevant lessons for today's commanders and joint staff officers.

This paper analyzes the Allied planning and conduct of HUSKY from the operational level of war only. The analysis of grand strategy in the Mediterranean theater and the Allied decision to invade Sicily is beyond the scope of this paper. Likewise, this paper does not address the tactical conduct of units involved in this major operation or the Axis operational functions. Specifically, the planning and conduct of HUSKY is evaluated regarding the following seven operational functions: operational command and control, operational movement and maneuver, operational intelligence, operational command and control warfare, operational fires, operational protection, and operational logistics.

The study of the command and control structure of HUSKY reveals many weaknesses and flaws that seriously jeopardized the outcome of the operation. Decisive leadership was lacking, unity of effort was difficult to achieve, and functional commanders were given too much freedom to act independently. Command and control is the first area to be discussed.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

The Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCOS) placed General Eisenhower in a difficult situation during the planning phase of Operation HUSKY. As Allied Commander in Chief (C-in-C) for HUSKY, he commanded a complex, combined organization in which his three subordinate commanders were British. General Sir Harold Alexander was designated as the Ground Force Commander and also served as the Deputy C-in-C for HUSKY. Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Tedder was named C-in-C of Allied Air Forces and Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham was awarded command of all naval forces for the operation.

General Eisenhower disliked the strong British influence within the command structure and its potentially negative impact upon HUSKY. The British practiced a system of cooperation or “leadership by committee” vice the American system of decisive leadership. General Eisenhower believed that this command structure would introduce the British system into the Allied Forces Headquarters (AFHQ) and possibly reduce his authority.¹ While the command structure was not optimal, it did not usurp Eisenhower’s authority. In some ways, the system actually ended up benefiting Eisenhower, as it gave him the freedom to concentrate on theater strategic issues, while leaving the detailed planning of HUSKY to his subordinate commanders. In this way, Eisenhower had the flexibility to pick and choose which issues he should become personally involved in.

The HUSKY command structure was formed around the functional area concept, with each commander coequal in status and reporting to the C-in-C, their common superior. They also reported informally to their own national command authority. Since Eisenhower had to create harmony and teamwork within the organization, he had to be very careful not to be too assertive in his dealings with the British commanders. A more effective command structure

would have been the appointment of an overall operational commander, who was subordinate to Eisenhower, but commanded the entire HUSKY force. A single operational commander would have been able to unite the three commands without the additional burden of theater strategic duties. As the Deputy C-in-C, Alexander attempted to fill this role, however, he was overburdened with his duties as the ground force commander and his personality did not lend itself to the decisive leadership needed to effectively command the force.

Unity of effort became a critical issue during the planning of HUSKY. The issue of air forces being responsive to naval and ground commanders was never adequately resolved. Air commanders retained complete control over all aspects of the air campaign. As one naval task group commander noted: "They took the point of view that all airplanes should be under air command regardless of their function."² Marshall Tedder's air staff concentrated on defeating the Axis Air Force by accomplishing three tasks: destroy or neutralize enemy air forces within range of the invasion area, protect naval operations, and defend northwest Africa and captured areas of Sicily from attack.³

Close air support was not a primary mission of the air forces, and they never intended to play a subordinate role to the ground and naval forces. The British strategy of an air force that is independent and coequal with other services was adopted for the invasion of Sicily. The British position was that airpower should be retained in mass under one commander and not parceled out.⁴ The Air Force believed that the attack of coast defenses by aircraft is unprofitable and that all bombing attacks in support of our ground forces had to be prearranged.⁵ During both the planning and execution of HUSKY, naval and ground commanders never knew when they would have close air support. The uncoordinated and independent manner in which the Air Forces were used, resulted in air force commanders

pursuing targets and opportunities that they believed important to the air battle vice supporting the fleet or ground campaign.

The use of aircraft carriers could have made a great difference in the air campaign as the naval and ground forces would have had fighter aircraft readily available. In addition, carriers could have compensated for the limited range of the land based fighters and brought more flexibility to possible schemes of maneuver for the invasion. Only two British escort carriers were available for HUSKY and neither British nor American leaders made serious demands for more aircraft carriers. General Patton begged Admiral Hewitt to procure escort carriers; however, there were none available. Those few carriers in the Atlantic were needed for the anti-submarine campaign.⁶

The CCOS directed that a special operational staff be created to plan the invasion of Sicily. The HUSKY planning staff was named Task Force 141 and was comprised primarily of officers from the continental United States, the United Kingdom, and from the Middle East.⁷ Task Force 141 was confronted with several difficult planning challenges such as the major force commanders that would execute the plan being unavailable for planning. The Tunisian Campaign was still in progress and the key commanders and their staff officers were busy coordinating combat operations in North Africa. Thus, early involvement of the commanders was lacking in the development of the overall HUSKY plan. In particular, General Alexander, the designated ground commander, was conducting the final phase for the battle of Tunis and he could not give his whole attention to the planning of the land campaign for Sicily.⁸

Face to face planning was very difficult to conduct throughout the HUSKY planning and execution phases. During the planning of HUSKY, Task Force 141 planners were distributed

between four centers: Cairo, Algiers, Malta, and the United Kingdom. The diverse and dispersed locations of the planners made unity of effort and detailed coordination difficult to achieve. Even during combat operations, the functional commanders and the C-in-C were in separate locations. For example, six days into the conduct of the operation, Eisenhower and Tedder were located in Tunisia, and Cunningham and Alexander were at Malta.⁹ In essence, the functional commanders acted independently during the conduct of the operation and failed to closely coordinate their actions. This lack of coordination exacerbated an already difficult command structure. General Omar Bradley recollected: “there was little guidance from the top – no one man exerting a firm hand.”¹⁰ Unfortunately, this weakness in the Allied command structure was not recognized by the CCOS when they designed the HUSKY command structure.

Operational movement and maneuver lacked a clear set of linked objectives and did not focus on the defeat of enemy forces. Analysis of this functional area also reveals a disproportionate emphasis on logistical concerns.

MOVEMENT AND MANEUVER

It is certainly surprising that the Allies did not conduct a more imaginative study of the Sicilian battle space. Since the Axis forces were being reinforced and supplied across the Straits of Messina, there is little doubt that the control of the straits was key to the Allied operational effort and also vital to the Axis defense. The straits are located in northeastern Sicily and are only 2-5 miles from the Italian mainland. Sicily is shaped with the interior area

being the widest portion of the island and it then narrows towards Messina and the straits – almost appearing funnel shaped with Messina at the small end.

An analysis of the topography reveals that the most likely Axis strategy was to conduct a delaying action by trading space for time with the end state being the evacuation of the island. Due in large part to the “funnel” shape of northeastern Sicily and the rugged mountainous terrain, the Axis were able to masterfully shorten their lateral defensive lines while at the same time withdrawing eastward towards the narrow end of the “funnel.” The German flanks and rear were protected by the ocean, which served as a natural defensive barrier. As the Axis forces moved eastward, the size of the area that they had to defend decreased. The Allies were also forced into a smaller area where they did not have sufficient room to maneuver. In view of the rugged terrain, the Allies had little chance to block the withdrawal of the Axis and cut off their escape route.

Task Force 141 did not focus their plan on the destruction of the Axis forces in Sicily. Enemy operational centers of gravity were not determined and strategies to attack enemy critical vulnerabilities were not deduced. Instead, the Allies should have selected a course of action that oriented on the enemy, cut him off, and defeated his operational reserve. Instead, the planners chose the Port of Messina as the operational objective, even though it could not be directly attacked. The Allies believed that the capture of Messina would unhinge the Axis defense and thus it was selected as the Allied main objective. Due in large part to its close proximity to the Italian mainland, the Port of Messina was a critical strength of the Axis forces. If the Allies had captured the port, they could have sealed off the defenders and denied them reinforcement or resupply through the adjacent Straits of Messina.¹¹

Messina was heavily defended and out of range of Allied fighter support. It was not feasible to have attacked Messina directly, early in the invasion.

The scheme of maneuver ashore called for the seizure of initial objectives in the form of small ports and airfields, but no other sequential steps planned to capture Messina. This planning failure can also be attributed to the British practice of letting the combat situation develop and then reacting to any opportunities that were presented. The British operational theory was a “wait and see” approach and they did not place great emphasis on executing a series of preconceived operational or tactical maneuvers. This was at odds with the American approach to link air, land, and naval efforts to a common set of objectives and set the conditions for operational success. General Alexander’s Operation Instructions of 19 May 1943 left everything after the amphibious landing and the capture of the Catania plain for future decision.¹²

General Hube was given two tasks by the German High Command (OKW): buy time for the Germans to prepare for the defense of Italy and evacuate as many soldiers as possible safely from Sicily to the mainland.¹³ Both Eisenhower and Alexander failed to plan for the interdiction of the Straits of Messina during pursuit operations. The result of this operational error allowed the Axis to evacuate over 102,000 troops, 10,000 vehicles and over 17,000 tons of stores.¹⁴ This egregious omission by the Allied High Command can be attributed to their fixation on set piece battle, near term objectives, and lack of a detailed campaign plan to closely link all elements of the Allied effort.

Allied airborne units were considered to be crucial to the success of the overall HUSKY plan. Airborne assault was considered to be a new form of maneuver on the battlefield and there was much argument over the proper role of these forces. The Air Force argued that the

airborne troops should be used to capture enemy airfields for immediate use by Allied fighters. The Army realized that the high ground and beach egress routes were significant to the success of the amphibious landing and tasked the airborne units to accomplish that mission. Naval commanders proposed that airborne units be used to soften the beach defenses against which the seaborne assaults would be made. They believed that naval gunfire was not designed for land bombardment. The attack of beach defenses seemed to be a logical mission for the paratroopers.¹⁵ The Navy was unsuccessful in promoting its idea.

Airborne forces were used primarily in the role that the Army had envisioned for them. The detailed planning of the airborne operations was not integrated and coordinated with the naval commanders. Tragically, the ships had a difficult time differentiating between friend and foe and 25 of the 45 airborne aircraft lost were most likely shot down by friendly naval fire.¹⁶

Overall, operational intelligence proved to be very reliable in the planning and conduct of HUSKY. However, intelligence analysts made two significant errors: failure to predict the most likely enemy course of action, and a failure to disseminate intelligence concerning the withdrawal of German forces to the Italian mainland.

OPERATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

A major problem during the planning phase of HUSKY was the absence of a G-2 section within Task Force 141. Planners had to rely upon the G-2 section of AFHQ to obtain processed intelligence. In the early stages of the planning, AFHQ G-2 was primarily concerned with the ongoing operations in North Africa and was not focused on supporting

the Task Force 141 planners. In addition, the dispersed location of the 141 planners also made staff coordination difficult to exercise.

Despite this significant obstacle, the ULTRA program and an effective signal intelligence effort ensured that the Allies were privy of German capabilities and intentions during the planning phase of HUSKY. Intercepts from these sources proved to be highly reliable for the duration of the operation. Intelligence officers provided an accurate assessment of the enemy order of battle to include naval and air force strengths. Key intelligence estimates revealed that a possible course of action for the Germans was the reinforcement of Sicily with additional divisions. G-2 AFHQ estimated that one German division or 1.5 Italian divisions could be moved across the straits every week.¹⁷

The Axis also exploited their intelligence capabilities and had advance knowledge of Allied intent to land in Sicily. As far back as 6 April, German Intelligence reported that “Sicily is most frequently mentioned and is the focal point of reconnaissance by enemy intelligence,” On 7 July it was reported that; “several of the airfields near harbors which are suitable as landing places have not been attacked for several days. Landings from the air can therefore be expected at these fields.” And on 9 July: “Enemy movements at sea and preliminary air attacks indicate that the enemy will land on the south and southeast coast of Sicily.”¹⁸ While deception efforts may have succeeded at the strategic level, it is clear that the Axis operational commanders believed that Sicily would be assaulted with a sizeable Allied force.

The major Allied intelligence failure in planning HUSKY was the inability to predict the most likely enemy course of action, which was to fight a delaying action and then evacuate the island. The blame can be cast upon the intelligence community for failing to accurately

analyze available information, as well as General Alexander for failing to grasp the significance of intelligence provided later in the operation.

As early as 1 August, decrypts disclosed that ferrying in the straits of Messina had commenced and on 6 August the 8th Army reported that ferries to the mainland were full with troops and empty on their return trip.¹⁹ On 11 August, General Alexander stated that “ The general impression, and it is only an impression, is that the Germans may withdraw across the straits shortly.” Despite the fact that the main German evacuation commenced on 11 August, General Alexander waited until 14 August to notify Air Chief Marshall Tedder that “it appears that the evacuation has really started”²⁰ The failure to predict the pending evacuation of Sicily, disseminate known intelligence, and interdict the Axis withdrawal, allowed a sizeable German force to escape only to fight the Allies again.

Deception operations in support of HUSKY were highly sophisticated and proved to be effective against the German High Command. But, the effects of deception upon the Axis operational commanders was unsuccessful and did not adversely affect their ability to defend the island.

COMMAND AND CONTROL WARFARE

The Allied plan for command and control warfare concentrated on deception operations and signal intelligence collection. The Allies coherently integrated these sources and were able to plan deception operations that reinforced OKW beliefs concerning Allied intentions.

Operation BARCLAY was the “umbrella” strategic deception plan created for the Mediterranean theater and included several other plans to include Operation MINCEMEAT, Operation CASCADE, Operation ANIMALS, and a naval cover plan for HUSKY.

BARCLAY targeted the OKW by attempting to make them believe the Allied main effort would be against the Balkans, Crete, and the Peloponnese. It was predicted that Hitler and the OKW would redeploy divisions to the threatened areas and not heavily defend Sicily. While BARCLAY may have been successful at the strategic level, it only marginally impacted the operational planning of the Axis regarding Sicily. Field Marshall Kesselring had deduced that the Allies would attack Sicily. Kesselring knew that the key to Allied offensive campaigns was the support of land-based air power. He estimated the approximate range of allied aircraft from their Mediterranean bases and determined that Sicily would be the next objective.²¹ Kesselring reinforced Sicily with two German divisions and also had two additional divisions and a panzer corps headquarters on standby in southern Italy for additional reinforcement if needed.

Allied naval cover plans were also used to reinforce the overall BARCLAY plan that the Balkans was the target of the Allies. Naval cover plans attempted to retard the reinforcement of Sicily, reduce air and naval attacks and keep the Italian Fleet east of Messina.²² Prior to the landings on Sicily, Allied naval convoys used multiple routes to make them appear that they were attacking Crete and Sardinia vice Sicily.

The feints and cover force movements did not appreciably alter the operational scheme of the Axis. A C 38m decrypt showed that the German commanders knew that the Allies would attack on 10 July and Italian reconnaissance of Allied convoys placed the attack to be against eastern Sicily.²³ Thus, the Allied deception plan had little effect at the operational level.

The plan for operational fires was very effective in shaping the HUSKY operation by limiting the Axis ability to reinforce Sicily. However, a major mistake was made by not planning operational fires to seal off the island and prevent the withdrawal of Axis forces.

OPERATIONAL FIRES

The Allied plan for operational fires hoped to achieve two objectives: to deceive the Axis as to the next Allied objective, and to isolate enemy forces on Sicily and prevent their reinforcement. The Air Force was the primary tool used to deliver operational fires.

The air commanders developed a superb air campaign plan that reinforced the BARCLAY deception plan. Allied pre-invasion bombing was directed against Sardinia, Naples, Corsica, and Calabria as well as Crete and the Balkans. The Allies believed that the bombing campaign would reinforce what Hitler already believed: that the Allies were using Sicily as a diversion and that the Balkans was the next objective.

Allied strategic bombers continually pounded airfields at Grottaglie, San Pancrazio, and Lecce in Apulia, as well as airfields on Sardinia and Calabria.²⁴ The Allies bombed railroad marshalling yards as far away as the outskirts of Rome with the intent of preventing the reinforcement of Sicily.²⁵ The effectiveness of the air campaign against Axis aircraft and airfields was considered to be highly successful.

In order to facilitate the operational maneuver of Allied forces, it was necessary to capture the island of Pantelleria, located only 63 miles southwest of Sicily. Pantelleria and Malta were to become the primary fighter bases for the HUSKY operation. Pantelleria was an important enemy air force and E-boat base, which could interdict Allied convoys. The capture of Pantelleria was vital to the Allied effort, not only to remove the enemy threat from

the island, but because it was within fighter range of Sicily. Eisenhower directed an intensive air bombardment of the island to determine how effective concentrated, heavy bombing on a defended coastline could be.²⁶ In view of the amount of attention the Air Force paid to the bombing of Pantelleria, it was captured with very few casualties.

The Allied effort to plan and coordinate operational fires in the attempt to interdict the Axis withdrawal across the Straits of Messina was one of the most significant failures of the operation. The Allies should have added a third objective to their plan for operational fires: fires to prevent the withdrawal of Axis forces across the Straits of Messina. Planning for this most likely course of action by the Germans was not addressed in the HUSKY operations orders. It is shocking that branch plans were not prepared to address a German withdrawal. The Allies were very late in developing a plan once the Axis withdrawal was confirmed. Allied strategic bombers were to be chopped to the tactical air forces once the German evacuation commenced. On 11 August General Coningham the Tactical Air Force commander, decided that he could handle the mission himself and recommended that the strategic bombers be released from this commitment.²⁷ This proved to be a poor decision.

The Allied North West Africa Air Forces did in fact run thousands of sorties trying to prevent the Axis withdrawal to Calabria. Unfortunately, the robust German anti-air defenses did not allow fighter and fighter-bomber aircraft to operate at elevations low enough to hit their targets. In addition, the great majority of the sorties were directed against the city of Messina vice the embarkation points and the area within the straits. Lastly, a significant portion of the strategic bombers concentrated their efforts on the Italian mainland vice the withdrawal. Strategic bombing would have been the most effective method to interdict the straits as bombers could fly at higher altitudes and would be less vulnerable than other

aircraft. The Allied failure to cut off and destroy the Axis forces during their withdrawal to the mainland continues to be viewed as a serious operational blunder by Eisenhower and Alexander. As Admiral Kirk recollected: “but an awful lot of Germans got across the Straits of Messina. They never should have, if we’d pushed a little harder, as everyone knows.”²⁸

The major force protection issue in the conduct of HUSKY was the independent and uncoordinated manner in which the Air Force supported the campaign. The lack of carrier aviation reduced the flexibility of the Allies and limited where the Allies could land.

OPERATIONAL PROTECTION

The predominant force protection issue for the Allied forces was the defense of the naval surface force supporting the landings on Sicily, and the counter air effort against the German Air Force. The key to Allied success was to deny the enemy fighters the opportunity to attack the fleet, while concurrently inflicting damage upon the GAF airfields and aircraft.

As addressed earlier in this paper, General Tedder and his subordinate commanders agreed to the necessity of providing fighter coverage to the fleet, but they did not provide specific plans as to how to accomplish this vital task. Tedder was adamant that his aircraft not be placed within the operational control of army or navy commands. Literally, the Army and Navy sailed to Sicily without ever knowing what kind of air support they could expect.

The Air Force continued to be more interested in pursuing the attack of enemy airfields and sweeping enemy aircraft from the skies than protecting the fleet. Admiral Kirk, the commander of the Central Attack Force, best expressed the frustration of the Navy: “No control over fighter patrol was delegated to the Central Attack Force. No bombers were on

call. No fighter protection to spotting planes was provided. At no time was the force informed concerning the degree of air control exercised by our forces. The air battle was separate and foreign, apparently unconcerned about the situation in the Central area.”²⁹ The lack of coordination between Naval and Air Forces resulted in 12 Allied ships being lost to enemy air off of the invasion beaches.³⁰

Operational logistics was over emphasized during the planning phase of HUSKY. While the logistical buildup is a crucial element of an amphibious operation, it still must be considered in a supporting role vice the overriding concern.

OPERATIONAL LOGISTICS

The logistics planning for HUSKY quickly overshadowed all other operational functions and became the proverbial “tail that wagged the dog.” Logistical concerns dominated the planning to include the scheme of maneuver ashore, the operational objective of Messina and the selection of landing areas. Sicily’s small size of approximately 10,000 square miles is roughly the same size as the state of Vermont.³¹ The emphasis placed on logistics during the planning phase of HUSKY is difficult to comprehend considering the small size of the island.

The over emphasis on the logistical buildup prevented the Allies from incorporating speed and maneuver in order to create a fast operational tempo. The landings quickly became an effort to protect the beachhead vice attack the enemy, resulting in attrition warfare.

The Allies did display some brilliant planning and vision concerning logistical support in theater. In anticipation of the capture of the airfields on Pantelleria, AFHQ created the 2690th Air Base Command, which was given the mission of administering the island and preparing

the airfields for immediate use.³² This proactive approach to support ensured that Allied fighter aircraft were able to support operations in Sicily prior to D-day.

CONCLUSION

Operation HUSKY offers today's operational commander several lessons to consider when planning and conducting a combined operation. The following lessons have been selected to aid commanders in their pursuit of operational excellence:

Appointment of a single overall operational commander

The absence of a single commander at the operational level allowed a fragmented and disjointed planning effort to take place and made unity of purpose and effort difficult to achieve. Eisenhower was designated by the CCOS to fill this role, yet he was much too involved with theater strategic issues to effectively command the force. Alexander as the Ground Force Commander exercised command over the 15th Army Group and needed to concentrate solely on the ground campaign. A single operational commander would have been able to bring together air, naval, and ground forces in a coordinated manner.

Orient plans on the destruction of the enemy's army

The destruction of the enemy's army is the quickest path to victory. Enemy and friendly centers of gravity must be determined and critical strengths and weaknesses must be assessed. Operations and maneuver must be directed toward attacking the enemy's center of gravity either directly or indirectly through vulnerabilities. Defeat of the enemy forces in battle is the surest path towards military success.

Commanders need to be involved early in the planning process

The HUSKY planning effort validated the need for early involvement of the commanders during the planning process. Despite a clear intelligence picture of Axis capabilities, the plan was never developed fully and lacked a clear set of linked operational objectives. Early involvement of commanders will help to resolve contentious issues and foster unity of effort.

Logistics should support the operation, vice the operation supporting logistics

Operation HUSKY placed too much emphasis upon logistical support ashore. While the sustainment of a military force is vital, it should not be the overriding consideration in planning. The military defeat of enemy forces must be the overriding concern. Functional areas such as logistics must play a supporting role to the pursuit of combat operations.

HUSKY proved to be an interesting example of combined operations against a determined enemy. The lessons that have been derived from this major operation have stood the test of time and are as relevant now as they were during the Second World War.

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