

Invading Sicily

A Tale of Branches and Sequels

By KEVIN J. DOUGHERTY



Coming ashore
near Gela.

Naval Historical Center

In July 1943, the Americans and British executed Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. It was the first major opposed amphibious landing since Gallipoli in World War I, a seven-division amphibious assault echelon that made it the largest such assault in modern history. The Allies met weak resistance which soon caused the Axis forces to evacuate the island.

Operation Husky is frequently cited as a prelude to the Normandy invasion. As one writer notes, "Sicily was essential for Normandy: a real-life live-fire training exercise [in which lessons were learned] in planning and executing amphibious operations, and in joint and combined organization, planning, and command and control."¹ Among the lessons was the role of planning branches and sequels. Sadly, failure in this step turned the operation into a hollow triumph.

As Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, states, "Many [operational plans] require

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that the Allies were strong enough to invade Italy, so the options narrowed to Sardinia and Sicily.

In actuality, the logic for attacking Sicily is best described as a rationale. Operation Husky was not planned within the context of leading to an overarching strategic objective. At Casablanca the Allies chose Sicily not because of anything inherent to Sicily but because, as Samuel Morrison concludes, "Something had to be done in the European theater in 1943," and "it was entered upon as an end unto itself; not as a springboard

The United States and Britain discussed two basic courses of action at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943. They included avoiding land combat with Axis forces or invading Sardinia, Sicily, Italy, Greece, or the Dodecanese Islands. Even General George Marshall, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, supported the idea of avoiding contact with the enemy to prepare for Operation Roundup, but the heads of state rejected the proposal. The British favored actions in the Balkans, but the Americans feared that such a step would delay a cross channel invasion. No one believed

B-17 over Messina.



Allied landing,
July 1943.

for Italy or anywhere else.”⁴ The choice “was a strategic compromise conceived in dissension and born of uneasy alliance—a child of conflicting concepts and unclear in purpose.”⁵ There was no operational sequel planned after Sicily.

Part of the reason for this omission was that it had been a difficult process just to agree on Sicily. The participants in the Casablanca Conference did not want to tackle what to do next. As Liddell Hart puts it, “An attempt to decide on the

next objective would have revived divergencies of view—but in such matters tactful deferment is apt to result in strategic unreadiness.”⁶ The Allies would pay a price for failing to come to terms with a common strategy at the outset. General Omar Bradley, who commanded II Corps during the invasion, wrote, “There were no decisions reached about how to exploit a victory in Sicily. . . . It was an egregious error to leave the future unresolved. It led to misguided planning for and a cloudy conclusion to the Sicily operation and to costly mistakes beyond Sicily.”⁷

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Distracted Commanders

The Combined Chiefs of Staff selected the operational commanders at Casablanca. General Dwight Eisenhower would be supreme commander. Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham would be in command of naval forces and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder would command air forces. General Sir Harold Alexander would command 15th Army Group, consisting of Seventh Army under General George Patton and Eighth Army under General Sir Bernard Montgomery. Eisenhower had his staff immediately begin planning. Unfortunately, the commanders were currently engaged in fighting in Tunisia and could not participate in the process. Montgomery described this time as one

of “absentee landlordism.”⁸ General Mark Clark, Fifth Army commander, was more pointed. His diary for April 28 contains the following entry: “It is inexcusable that high planning on an overall scale is not taking definite form. Planners should project themselves forward and set up a grand-scale strategic plan for the Allied forces. We can’t win a war by capturing islands.”⁹

The Allies held the Trident Conference on May 12, 1943. The Americans quickly secured British commitment to a cross-channel invasion, but the issue of what to do with troops already in the Mediterranean area was unresolved. Britain proposed eliminating Italy from the war, and the United States agreed that forcing Italy to surrender would result in German divisions replacing Italian troops and thus weaken the forces opposing the cross-channel invasion.

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Final agreement came on May 19, with Eisenhower being told “to plan such operations in exploitation of Husky as are best calculated to eliminate Italy from the war and to contain the maximum number of German forces.” Various possible plans beyond Sicily had been discussed, but no decisions were made. Such matters were reserved for the future, an unfortunate habit of pushing decisions down the road. Trident turned out to be another stage in a protracted debate rather than a determination. The invasion was less than two months away, and “The Americans were still asking ‘Where do we go from here?’ and the British were still irritated by the query.”¹⁰

The Invasion

An armada of 2,590 vessels rendezvoused in the central Mediterranean on July 9. Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay commanded the landings. At 0245 hours on July 10, the ships reached their debarkation points without incident. The landing

suffered from problems that could be expected of a nighttime operation conducted in a high wind and swell. Ships lowered the landing craft too far out at sea. Boat waves formed late and many landing craft missed assigned beaches, became stuck on sandbars, or capsized in the surf. Nonetheless the landings were largely successful since there was almost no resistance from Italian coastal forces. Montgomery, for example, occupied harbors at Syracuse and Augusta without firing a shot. Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, the German Commander in Chief South, who observed that “one disappointment followed another,” wondered if the Italian defenders were guilty of “cowardice or treachery.”¹¹

Both Montgomery and Patton elected to precede their landings with airborne assaults. The 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the Airlanding Brigade of the British 1st Airborne Division assaulted fifteen minutes before the landings, but problems with the air force caused neither unit to be effective. Only one in eight of 226 planeloads of the American paratroopers landed on assigned drop zones and only 12 of 137 British gliders landed near their objectives.

At 0600 hours on July 11, General Alfredo Guzzoni, who commanded Sixth Italian Army, mounted a counterattack with the Livorno and Herman Goering Divisions. By noon German tanks were within 2,000 meters of the beach and firing at unloading parties. But determined resistance and massive naval gunfire forced the Axis units to retreat after losing a third of their tanks.

The following day, Guzzoni began to systematically withdraw to the San Stefano line. His intention was to evacuate Sicily after delaying the Allied forces as much as possible. Still reeling from losses in Stalingrad and Tunisia, Hitler opted not to issue his usual hold-at-all-costs order.

Moving Inland

The attack by Montgomery up the east coast of Sicily was slower than Alexander desired. On July 17, Patton proposed that his troops overrun western Sicily and take Palermo. Alexander approved and Patton entered the port on July 22. The following day he captured the western tip of Sicily. The next day Alexander ordered Patton to turn eastward toward Messina, the primary transit port between Sicily and the Italian mainland. Montgomery was bogged down at Catania, and it was apparent that Eighth Army could not capture Messina alone. Alexander redrew the army boundaries, authorizing Patton to approach Messina from the west while Montgomery continued to push from the south. But even as both Patton and Montgomery raced for Messina, time

the United States agreed that forcing Italy to surrender would result in German divisions replacing Italian troops



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Montgomery and Patton.

was running out. On the morning of August 17, elements of 7th Infantry Regiment, 3^d Infantry Division, entered Messina but it was too late.

Sicily was a victory, but according to Bradley, it had “a cloud on the title.” As he claimed,

one obvious branch that could have disrupted the German evacuation would have been an amphibious landing in Calabria

“... there was no master plan for the conquest of Sicily. Nothing had been worked out beyond the limited beachhead objectives.”¹² This planning lapse was critical. Just hours before the Allies

reached Messina, the last Axis troops boarded ships for Italy.

Escape

On July 26, the Italian King, responding to the weariness of his people, placed Mussolini under arrest. With this unstable political situation in his rear, Kesselring ordered the evacuation of Sicily. The withdrawal was a masterpiece that ended on August 17 with the Germans salvaging much of their men, equipment, and supplies.

The Allies were seemingly aware of the Axis intention to evacuate Sicily but lacked a plan once again. Admiral Cunningham, after careful thought, concluded that there was “no effective method . . . of stopping the evacuation by sea or air.” But he was surprised that “no use was made

by the Eighth Army of amphibious opportunities. The small [landing ships] were kept standing by for the purpose . . . and landing craft were available on call.”¹³ Nonetheless, Montgomery elected not to employ airborne troops or make an amphibious move to speed his advance and cut off the evacuation, instead using “much the same plan he had developed four days after the invasion,” before the recent developments.¹⁴

Patton and Seventh Army did conduct two small amphibious end runs to outflank obstacles on the Palermo-Messina road which, although beneficial, were too small and too late to have much impact on the campaign. Indeed, as the official historical account concluded, by the time of these efforts, “the game was over.”¹⁵ One reason the maneuvers were too late was that they were not planned ahead of time as branches. The Allies were ultimately unable to interfere significantly with the evacuation.

One obvious branch that could have disrupted the German evacuation would have been an amphibious landing in Calabria, on the toe of Italy, behind Axis forces fleeing Sicily. Kesselring had no means of meeting such a threat and confessed, “A secondary attack on Calabria would have enabled the Sicily landing to be developed into an overwhelming Allied victory.”¹⁶ But instead, “The absence of any large-scale encirclement of the island or of a thrust up the coastline of Calabria gave us long weeks to organize the defense with really very weak resources.”¹⁷

On the political-military level, the lack of Allied planning of branches and sequels is also painfully obvious. The overthrow of Mussolini took the Allies by surprise, and it was not until July 31 that President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill agreed to a set of armistice terms to present to the Italians. Exactly what Italy would accept was still unclear. Thus the fall of Il Duce was not a turning point in Allied strategy. It hastened the decision to invade the Italian mainland, but it did not in itself produce a decision.

Amidst this continued indecision, the Allies not only failed to halt the evacuation; they did not pursue the retreating forces until September 3, giving Kesselring an advantage in preparing for the defense of the Italian mainland. In fact, until the end of the Sicilian campaign and the escape of the four German divisions, Kesselring had only two German divisions to defend southern Italy.

Kesselring criticized this Allied hesitancy:

The enemy failure to exploit the last chance of hindering the German forces crossing the Straits of Messina, by continuous and strongly coordinated attacks from

Enemies meeting in Palermo.



(U.S. Army/Naval Historical Center)

*the sea and the air, was almost a greater boon to the German Command than their failure immediately to push their pursuit across the straits on 17 August. Unquestionably the troops on both sides had to face extraordinary exertions in the heat of a blistering midsummer sun in the rocky and almost treeless mountain regions, but the halt called by the Allies until 3 September, which was not absolutely dictated by the situation, was again a gift to the Axis.*¹⁸

Indeed, it was by no means the situation that dictated that the Allies halt. It was the failure to plan for the situation through branches and sequels.

The Gift of Hindsight

In late May, a month before the invasion, Churchill with General Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Marshall met Eisenhower at his headquarters "to discuss further the objectives of the Sicilian campaign, other than the mere capture of the island to assure free use of the Mediterranean sea route."¹⁹ Eisenhower reports that these discussions "left exploitation of the Sicilian operation to my judgment but expected me to take advantage of any favorable opportunity to rush into Italy. . . ."²⁰ Obviously the rush did not happen and Bradley would blame Eisenhower for the failure. After lamenting the woefully poor "extent of the strategic considerations about Sicily and its follow-up operations," Bradley commented that "Seldom in war has a major operation been undertaken in such a fog of indecision, confusion, and conflicting plans."²¹ For this error, he concluded, "Ike must . . . share a large part of the blame. . . . Inasmuch as his three

deputies were absorbed in the Tunisia fighting, it seems to me it was all the more important that Ike give the Sicily operation his utmost care and attention. He was the logical man to conceive the operation as a whole, impose his imprint, see it through, and accept responsibility for the consequences. But Ike did not rise to the challenge."²²

Many lessons were learned in Sicily, but planning branches and sequels was not one of them. As Montgomery lamented, "If the planning and conduct of the campaign in Sicily were bad, the preparations for the invasion of Italy, and the subsequent conduct of the campaign in that country, were worse still."²³ Curiously, the Army would conclude after the war, "Sicily was also a victory for . . . the staff planner."²⁴ This may be the case in terms of some details of amphibious operations, but certainly not for the larger elements of campaign planning. Planners today should learn from Sicily the criticality of planning branches and sequels. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Uldric Fiore, "Sicily: An Essential Exercise in Futility," *Military Review*, vol. 73, no. 7 (July 1993), p. 64.

² Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), p. 438.

³ Thomas Buell et al., *The Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean*, Vol. 1 (West Point: U.S. Military Academy, 1979), pp. 423–24.

⁴ Hanson Baldwin, *Battles Lost and Won: Great Campaigns of World War II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 193.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁶ Liddell Hart, *History*, p. 438.

⁷ Omar Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 160.

⁸ Albert Garland and Howard Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1986), p. 60.

⁹ Bradley, *A General's Life*, p. 166.

¹⁰ Baldwin, *Battles Lost and Won*, p. 195.

¹¹ Albert Kesselring, *Kesselring: A Soldier's Record* (New York: William Morrow, 1954), p. 196.

¹² Bradley, *A General's Life*, p. 186.

¹³ Liddell Hart, *History*, p. 446.

¹⁴ Garland, *Surrender*, pp. 378–80.

¹⁵ Andrew Birtle, *Sicily* (Washington: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1993), p. 24.

¹⁶ Liddell Hart, *History*, p. 446.

¹⁷ Kesselring, *A Soldier's Record*, p. 199.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1949), p. 166.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

²¹ Bradley, *A General's Life*, p. 167.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 198 fn.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

²⁴ Birtle, *Sicily*, p. 25.