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Soldiers of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division on the road during the advance on Ispica, 12 July 1943.

“The Eyes of All Fixed on Sicily”

Canada’s Unexpected Victory, 1943

Lee Windsor

This year’s seventieth anniversary commemoration of Canada’s contribution to the 1943 invasion of Sicily is a worthy time to reflect on why it matters. Operation Husky, as the Allied collective effort was code-named, constituted the largest international military air, sea and land operation in history and turned the tide of the Second World War irreversibly in the Allies’ favour. It marked the end of a three year struggle to contain Axis expansion while the Allies mobilized, built, and trained the massive forces necessary to return to Axis-occupied Europe. Canadians formed a large portion of the Allied invasion force and played a pivotal role in the victorious 38-day struggle for the island, but their voices were drowned out by those louder and more numerous in Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. What follows here is an effort to re-consider Canada’s part in Operation Husky.¹

In June 1943, when the Canadian contingent sailed from Great Britain bound for Sicily the Royal Canadian Navy had been fighting German U-boats for three long years. Royal Canadian Air Force personnel had helped thwart a German invasion of Great Britain in 1940-41 and by 1943 were carrying the bomber war to the heart of Germany. Only the Canadian Army still waited; coiled up and anxious to join the fight.

Abstract: Canada’s role in the Battle for Sicily is usually overshadowed by Anglo-American tensions and German assertions that they were the real victors. The green 1st Canadian Division was supposed to play a supporting role alongside veteran British and American formations, but found themselves at the centre of events. Canada’s contingent destroyed elements of every major Axis formation on the island and contributed significantly to the Allied capture of Sicily which broke Fascist power in Rome.

Of course blood had been spilled at Hong Kong in 1941 and Dieppe in 1942 demonstrating Canada’s commitment to the Allied cause, but it remained to be seen whether the nation’s Great War reputation for military effectiveness would carry through to the Second World War. First Canadian Army trained and waited in England, held together for the invasion of France postponed until 1944. Meanwhile, British and other Commonwealth forces had been fighting German and Italian armies in the Mediterranean region since 1940. By early 1943 the Canadian government, people, and senior Army leadership could wait no longer to get their soldiers into the fight. Senior British commanders granted Ottawa’s request to find a place for a Canadian Army contingent

in the next scheduled Mediterranean operation.²

The inexperienced and unproven 1st Canadian Infantry Division and 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade were assigned supporting roles in plans to invade Sicily, second to battle-tested British and American formations fresh from victory in North Africa. RCAF bomber and fighter squadrons along with RCN landing craft flotillas rounded out Canada’s contribution to the great armada bound for the central Mediterranean. Once the invasion began on 10 July 1943 a chain of events and decisions thrust the newcomer Canadians to centre-stage, ready or not. Five days into Operation Husky British Eighth Army’s renowned commander, General Sir Bernard Montgomery, ordered 1st Canadian Division to make haste for the mountainous central province of Enna in search of the weak point between Axis forces gathering in eastern Sicily and those believed to be remaining in the west.³ Montgomery’s controversial order resulted in 23 consecutive days of violent clashes amid rugged hills and rolling grain fields, culminating around the ancient mountaintop towns of Agira, Regalbuto, and Centuripe. During those days 1st Canadian Division alongside 231st British “Malta” Brigade and 1st US Division broke the centre of the Axis defence. By 7 August, combat

losses, Benito Mussolini's arrest, and mounting tension with their Italian allies forced the German garrison to commence an evacuation. The defeat foiled German hopes to delay an Allied conquest of Sicily long enough for fall weather to postpone Fascist Italy's collapse and Allied landings in southern Europe for another year. Instead, German forces pre-emptively turned on their Italian allies and took over the defence of southern Europe, transferring large numbers of men, tanks, guns, and planes from other theatres.⁴ In short, Allied plans to conquer Sicily as a base, remove Italy from the war, and draw German resources away from Russia and France to southern Europe succeeded. Canada's contingent played no small part in these outcomes.

Canada's unanticipated leading role in Sicily remains little known in part because the story is often carved into small regimental pieces. Not long after the battle, J.B. Conacher,

1st Division's official historian, wrote that Canada's "campaign consisted of a series of brigade 'shows' and usually the brigade in action only committed one battalion at a time." Conacher's message referred mostly to the dispersed nature of fighting in a vast mountainous battlefield,⁵ but his message rings true in Canadian histories of Sicily which generally feature the small shows at the expense of the wider program. Farley Mowat made the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment's cliff scaling at Assoro famous in Canadian literature. Other regimental histories likewise capture clan accounts, like that of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in Leonforte, the Royal Canadian Regiment at Nissoria, or the Royal 22e Régiment at Catenanuova.⁶ Indeed, the heroism, high drama, and tragedy experienced by famous units made it easy to lose sight of how they collectively contributed to the global war in 1943 and the first major land

offensive against Hitler's "Fortress Europe" of the Second World War.⁷

Canada's story in Sicily is also buried in an international history of Anglo-American friction, particularly between British Eighth Army's Sir Bernard Montgomery and the United States Seventh Army's George Patton.⁸ Many believe that this dysfunctional alliance frustrated total victory and let the Germans escape from Sicily in August 1943 in their equivalent to the British 1940 evacuation from France at Dunkirk. English language histories near unanimously contend that after the Allies landed with overwhelming force, fighting in Sicily amounted to a skilful German delaying withdrawal which repeatedly foiled a shoddy Allied pursuit.⁹ Rick Atkinson recently summed up the prevailing view that "barely fifty thousand Germans had overcome Allied air and sea supremacy, and the virtual collapse of their Italian confederates,

General view of "Roger" and "Sugar" Beaches, the landing site of 1st Canadian Division during the invasion of Sicily, 10 July 1943.





An Italian coastal gun captured by the Canadians near Pachino.

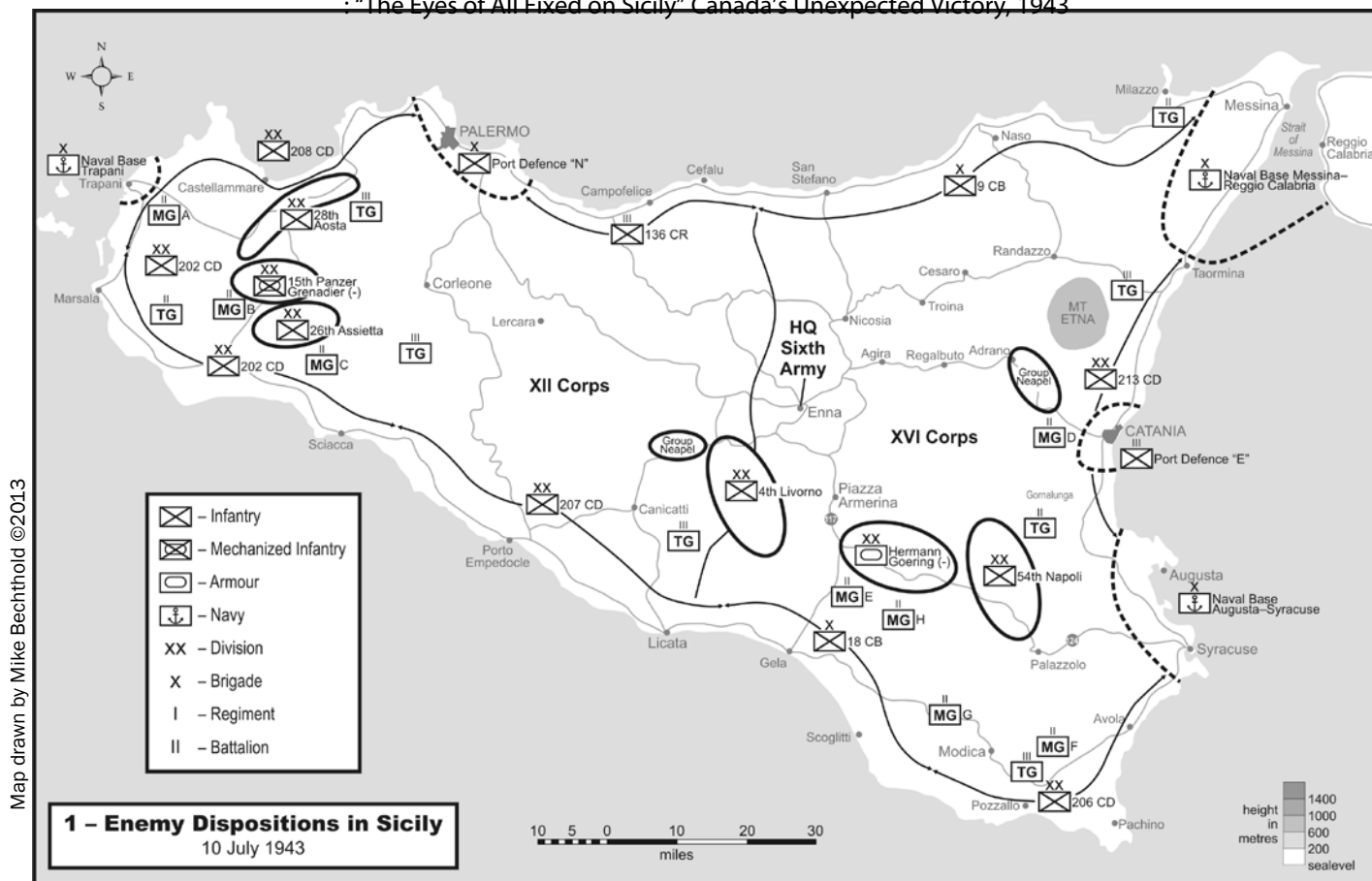
to hold off an onslaught by nearly half a million Anglo-Americans for five weeks.¹⁰ The result was a clean German getaway across the Straights of Messina to mainland Italy to fight another day which “doomed the Allies to a prolonged battle of attrition up the bloody Italian peninsula.”¹¹ Even Montgomery grumbled at Allied inability to prevent the German escape “when we had complete air and naval supremacy.”¹²

Not surprisingly, German commanders who served on Sicily were the loudest advocates of this view. German accounts devalued the Allied final victory by insisting that Sicily was impossible to defend in the face of overwhelming Allied superiority. General Hans-Valentin Hube, the German ground commander on Sicily, considered his mission hopeless before it even began.¹³ General Max Ulich, commander of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, claimed that Allied forces outnumbered German units by 8:1.¹⁴ His calculations did not

include the 200,000 Italian soldiers on Sicily. Ulich and most other German commanders dismissed the Italians’ value claiming that they “virtually never gave battle” and that “90% of the Italian army are cowards who do not want to fight.”¹⁵ On the surface, the surrender of 130,000 Italian soldiers in Sicily, many after offering only token resistance, affirmed German complaints.¹⁶ Germany’s military leadership realized that Italy would probably break in 1943, leaving German units trapped on Italy’s islands and mainland. General Walter Warlimont, the deputy chief of the operations staff of the German high command (OKW), thought it best to abandon Sicily sooner rather than later. Hitler insisted field commanders be prepared ultimately to evacuate Sicily and indeed, most of Italy.¹⁷ Somehow Germany’s successful evacuation turned defeat in Sicily into a defensive victory.

History’s preoccupation with Germany’s evacuation from Sicily does not explain the campaign’s

middle phase from 13 July to 6 August 1943. During those three weeks German forces on Sicily doubled in size and most of the Italian garrison remained in action and together they fought to hold Sicily. Desertions in some Sicilian coastal militia units and Italy’s final surrender should not overshadow the fact that Italian soldiers, sailors, and aircrew did much of the fighting and dying for the Axis in Sicily.¹⁸ Allied units battled mixed Italian and German formations until the last week of the fighting. Italian numbers and firepower made the Axis defence possible. Only in August, after the Allies unloaded and concentrated all available forces in northeast Sicily did the Allies significantly outnumber their opponents on the ground. During the critical three weeks from 15 July to 6 August, the Canadians fought their toughest actions against a staunch Axis defence between Enna and Catania. Their experience contradicts German explanations of what happened on Sicily.



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2013

In fact the Germans had little choice but to defend Sicily. The capture of the island and establishment of an Allied base in the central Mediterranean would threaten the entire south coast of Europe. Allied leaders agreed that attacking sovereign Italian territory in Sicily was the next logical blow in the effort to topple Mussolini's unpopular government and remove Italy from the war.¹⁹ An Italian exit would force the Germans to move forces from more important fronts to protect southern Europe's long coastline. In 1943, the Italian army, naval, and air forces defended the Mediterranean region with 1,700,000 men in uniform.²⁰ Even if German leaders mistrusted Italy's commitment to the Axis, they could not replace Italy's armed forces. German plans for a major offensive on the Russian front at Kursk in 1943 depended on the Italians carrying the main burden of defending the Mediterranean coast.²¹ Generals Albert Kesselring and Frido von Senger und Etterlin,

Hitler's commanders responsible for protecting Europe's south coast, understood that "the Germans could not fight two opponents - the Allies and the defecting Italians."²² For Germany, the Axis alliance had to continue as long as possible making it necessary to hold on to Sicily.

Although Axis leaders suspected Sicily was the next Allied target in 1943 they could not be sure, leaving them little choice but to disperse their forces to defend the entire Mediterranean coast. What they mustered for Sicily included the equivalent of seven Italian reserve coastal defence divisions totalling some 100,000 men. The garrison's mainstay were four regular Italian infantry divisions including 4th Livorno, 54th Napoli, 26th Assietta, and 28th Aosta Infantry Divisions reinforced with artillery and tank units borrowed from other regular Italian divisions, along with base troops and anti-aircraft gunners totalling another 100,000. The most mobile and best equipped defenders

were the German 15th Panzer Grenadier and Hermann Goering Panzer Divisions numbering over 30,000 troops. German and Italian units drew on the large Axis military base complex still on Sicily after three years of war in the Mediterranean region. That included 30,000 German Luftwaffe support troops, supply depots, signals stations, anti-aircraft batteries and ground crews added to Axis capability. All Axis forces on Sicily nominally fell under command of General Alfredo Guzzoni's Sixth Italian Army although German units also took orders from a parallel national command system under the senior German liaison officer Lieutenant-General von Senger.²³

The Axis force was sub-divided into 12th Italian Corps in western Sicily and 16th Italian Corps in the eastern half. In both areas coastal defence units, made up largely of Sicilian militiamen, spread a thin perimeter defence and early warning screen along all potential landing beaches. Behind that perimeter

Guzzoni stationed 16 mobile battlegroups of tanks, motorcyclists, machine gun companies, and anti-tank gun batteries to protect airfields and to deliver immediate counterattacks once Allied landings were detected. Neither the coastal militia nor the mobile groups were expected to stop an Allied invasion. Instead they were a kind of speed bump to disrupt Allied landings and delay their assembly ashore to buy time for regular Italian and German divisions to mount a counteroffensive after the Allies revealed their landing sites. General Guzzoni felt the Allies would land on the wide beaches in southeastern Sicily and that all six Axis main force divisions should concentrate a decisive counterstroke there. But Guzzoni submitted to German fears of simultaneous landings either near Catania on the east coast, Gela in the south, or Marsala near Palermo in the west and northwest respectively. He allowed 26th Assietta, 28th Aosta Infantry Divisions and 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to move west and cover Palermo and Trapani. An eastern counterattack force was formed by 4th Livorno, 54th Napoli, and Hermann Goering Division. Guzzoni and von Senger understood the Allies would be weak in the first 48 hours of battle as they unloaded men and material from ship to shore. They hoped that a concentrated Axis counterattack with tanks in those first critical days might isolate and defeat part of the Allied landing force and then move to the next.²⁴

In the Allied camp, the final Operation Husky plan was shaped by commanders who appreciated the dangers of landing on a hostile shore revealed by the 1942 Dieppe experience and who had experienced an aggressive Axis defence in Tunisia. None could be certain about how the enemy might react when Allied troops waded ashore on Sicily. Italian and German forces might resist ferociously together or the

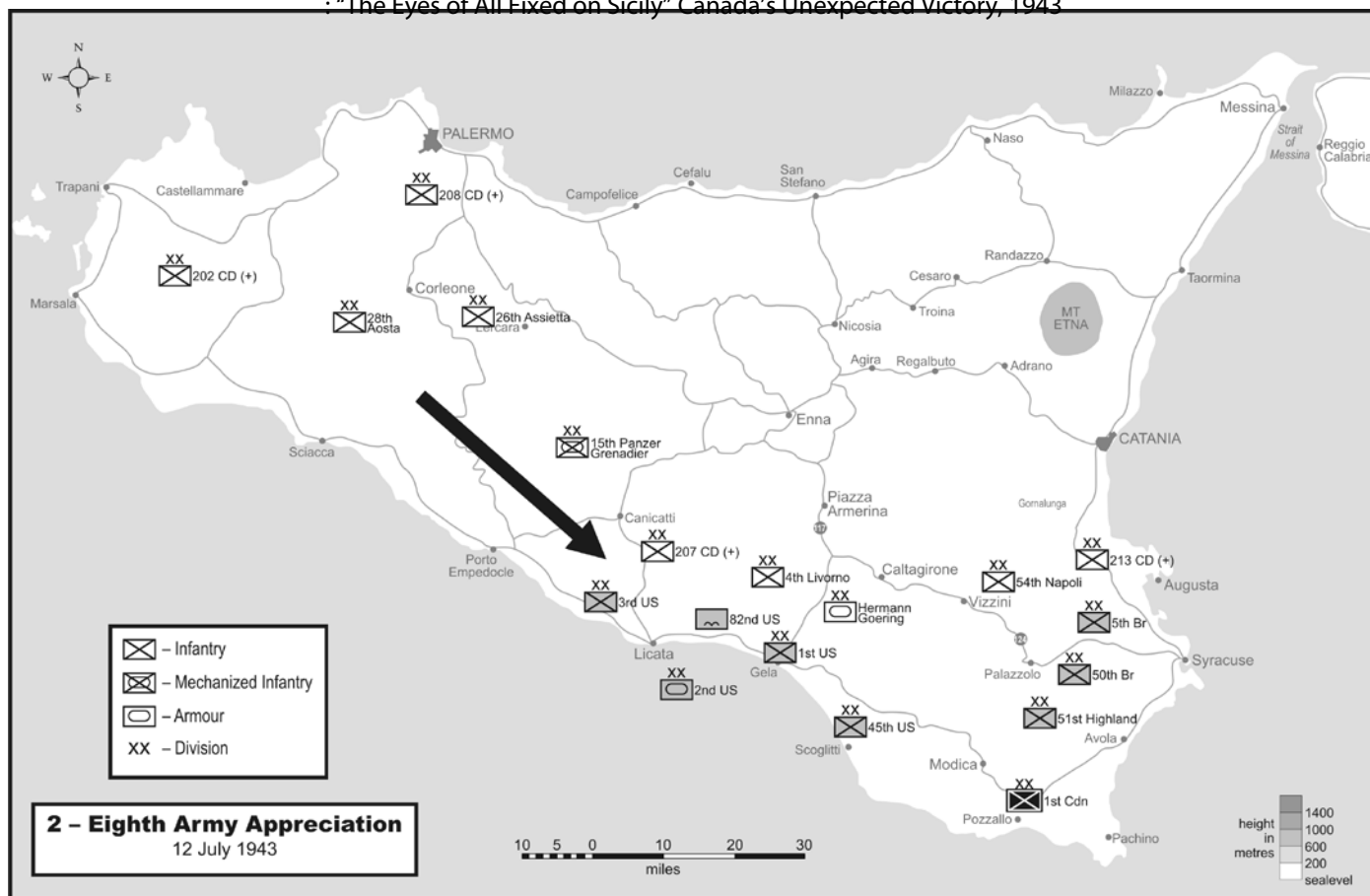
former might quit while the Germans abandoned the central Mediterranean and retreated to the Alps. Anything between these two extremes was possible. Italian units fought well in Tunisia in the spring of 1943, revealing improvements in equipment, supply, and combat effectiveness. While Operation Husky was calculated to collapse the Fascist regime, no one could guess how long Royal Italian Army units would fight on their own soil before politics intervened and a truce was reached. It was also impossible to predict how many enemy divisions could shift to Sicily if the Axis chose to make a stand there as they did in Tunisia.²⁵ General Montgomery was perhaps the most famous voice calling for caution, but in the face of so many unknowns Allied commanders agreed to a plan that guaranteed victory even if the Italians and Germans reacted determinedly with all their available forces in the central Mediterranean.²⁶ The Allies concentrated forces in southeastern Sicily for mutual protection and security. The central principle linking the air, sea, and land plans was delivering the assault force to the beaches alive, capturing Axis air bases in the southeast, and then turning the beachhead into an fortress in time to receive the expected counter-offensive. Beyond that, it was difficult to make plans until the enemy showed his hand.²⁷

The Allied amphibious task forces, including the Canadians, loaded into transports prepared to battle hard for the beach and then against an Axis counter-offensive. Fighting troops, weapons, and ammunition took priority in the assault convoys. Eighth Army's divisions sailed with an assault scale of vehicles (890 of their full establishment of 3,000), which was enough to fight and re-supply to about 16 kilometres from shore. Follow-on convoys would land more vehicles around D+2 enabling some deeper penetration inland, but the

full balance of vehicles and heavy engineer equipment would not arrive until two weeks after the beachhead was secure and the deep water port at Syracuse open for business. Infantry battalions organized to function with 75 vehicles brought 29 on D-Day.²⁸ In light of experience fighting Axis counteroffensive moves, the loading arrangements seemed sound.

Convoy routes to Sicily ran through enemy-infested sea and air space. Axis naval and air forces remained powerful in 1943. German U-boats infiltrated the Canadian convoy during the night of 4/5 July and struck two transports with torpedoes. A third went up in flames the next afternoon. Fifty-five Canadians died on the three vessels along with merchant navy crewmen. The divisional artillery lost 40 guns and tractors and most of its headquarters equipment. Over half of the division's vehicles, some 500 of all shapes and sizes combat loaded with stores, went to the bottom of the Mediterranean, slashing the already tight assault scale. Royal Canadian Army Service Corps truck fleets and the divisional headquarters were hardest hit. Equipment lost could not be replaced from stocks in the United Kingdom until at least D+42, the forecast termination of Operation Husky.²⁹ It was fortunate then that 1st Canadian Division had the easiest D-Day assignment.

The Husky plan assigned Eighth Army's three British divisions backed by air assault troops and commandos to land south of Syracuse and grab the ancient port intact. The 1st Canadian Division would guard their left wing by landing on the Pachino Peninsula and capturing the airfield. US Seventh Army's three assault divisions, along with Ranger and parachute units, would land across the Gulf of Gela on the south coast. Their main mission was to seize airfields in the broad Gela and Acate valleys and the commanding heights above them where General Patton



planned to meet the enemy counter-strike.³⁰ After winning the beachhead battle, General Montgomery expected his three British divisions to turn north and drive on Catania and the neighbouring Gerbini airbase complex before carrying on to Messina and cutting the Axis link to mainland Italy. General Patton would land a fourth American division and advance to central Sicily to engage Axis forces left intact after the opening battles, including those in western Sicily.³¹ After securing their beaches and Pachino airfield, the Canadian mission was to guard the British inland shoulder and link up with the Americans in the most remote part of the assault area, the least likely to see an Axis counterattack.

Despite losses at sea and tumultuous weather the day before the invasion, events unfolded much as both sides anticipated. Italian patrol aircraft and coastal defence units served their warning function, triggering the march of Axis mobile

forces to the south and east coasts. Neither Guzzoni nor von Senger calculated that the Allies could or would simultaneously land seven reinforced divisions massed in southeastern Sicily. With just three main force divisions in the east they only had strength to strike the Americans at Gela. Guzzoni launched 4th Livorno and Hermann Goering Divisions into the attack immediately. Guzzoni also ordered Major-General Eberhard Rodt's veteran 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to rush to central Sicily from the west and join in the battle. Guzzoni hoped the stronger coastal defences around Syracuse-Augusta fortress complex could hold on against the British.³²

In the vulnerable first days, 13th British and 2nd US Corps and attached airborne forces bore the brunt of fighting north and west of the Canadian area. For two days Italian and German armoured and motorized infantry forces counterattacked US Seventh Army's beachhead at Gela, only to be

smashed by US 1st Infantry Division and Allied naval gunfire. Smaller Italian units counterattacked or tried blocking British landing forces. While there were tense moments and heavy losses for some British and US units, the beach defences were overcome and Axis counterattacks defeated more quickly than anticipated. British 5th Infantry and 1st Airborne Divisions aided by commandos and the Royal Navy destroyed Italian counterattacks and captured the port installations at Syracuse intact by early evening on D-Day.³³ In the Canadian sector assault battalions engaged in a few sharp fights with Italian coastal defence units around the Pachino airfield complex, but their area stood isolated from Axis bases and road networks and thus met only a few small counterattacks, none backed by substantial armoured forces. The 1st Canadian Division then advanced to the northwest before dawn on D+1, following the plan to anchor the beachhead along the ridge overlooking the Pachino

Peninsula. Canadian vanguard columns won the towns of Pozzallo, Ispica, and Rosolini commanding that ridge face by midday.³⁴ The 206th Italian Coastal Division and the two Italian mobile groups that covered 70 kilometres of Eighth Army's landing beach were overwhelmed. Two thousand were captured in the first 36 hours and an unknown number killed by naval and aerial bombardment. The survivors withdrew towards their base at Modica or to the inland hills alongside 54th Napoli Division.³⁵

By 12 July commanders on both sides contemplated what to do next. Events hinged on what looked like a thinly defended road to Catania and Messina, manned by weak enemy forces. It appeared to General Montgomery that day that his troops destroyed, captured, or drove off Italian units in their area faster than anticipated. Most German troops were located further west. Hermann Goering Panzer Division was fighting the Americans within

sight of the Gela beaches and 15th Panzer Grenadier Division was reportedly moving there too.³⁶ In that light Montgomery made a bold decision. Despite vehicle shortages he ordered the infantry and tanks of 13th British Corps to dash up the coast on Highway 114 to Catania. These conventional forces had help from British No.3 Commando who landed ahead of them to grab the Lentini River bridge north of that town. The Parachute Brigade dropped to secure the heights and bridge at Primosole along the Simeto River.³⁷ The roads along their path were few in number. Only the coastal Highway 114 was paved and sturdy enough for heavy two-way military traffic. Montgomery and his staff calculated that was only enough to carry the two British divisions in 13th Corps, even with their vehicle shortages.³⁸

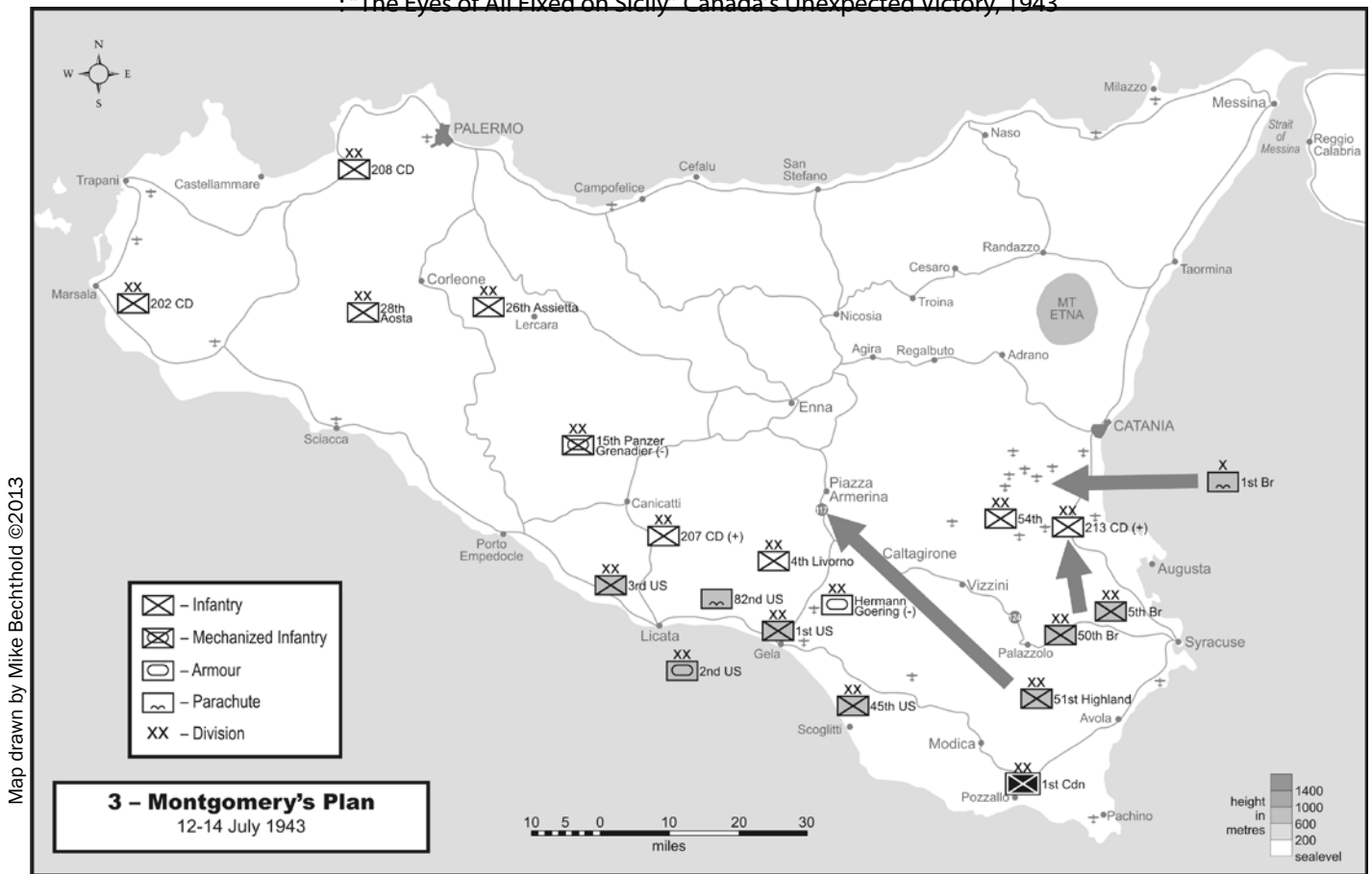
In light of the cramped road network Montgomery ordered Lieutenant-General Oliver Leese, commanding 30th Corps, to form

Harpoon Force. This partly motorized column based on 23rd British Armoured Brigade and 231st Malta Brigade was ordered to drive inland to cut the east-west Highway 124 at Vizzini. That much was expected, but Montgomery added a twist by ordering Harpoon Force to turn west at Vizzini and keep going along Highways 124 and 117 to Enna. Those two-way roads and the major transportation junctions around Enna were assigned to US Seventh Army as part of its mission to cut Sicily in half. Montgomery asked for and received permission from General Sir Harold Alexander, the overall Allied ground commander, to take those roads and that mission for his own 30th British Corps. That the decision strained Anglo-American relations in Sicily is an understatement, but is worth remembering that it made sense on 12 July. That day most the German garrison and three of four regular Italian divisions were locked in close combat with or moving

The Gela River plain, epicentre of Axis counter-attacks from D-Day to D+2.

US Air Force Photo A-67110 AC





towards the Americans in southern central Sicily. Reconnaissance aircraft reported no sign of the enemy moving east towards the British. It looked like a rapid British armoured thrust northwest to Enna might trap the enemy main force against the Americans and cut them off from the small Italo-German force in the east. The enemy lying in the path of the main British 13th Corps thrust to Catania seemed to amount only to pieces of 54th Napoli Division and a German regimental battlegroup under command of Colonel Wilhelm Schmalz.³⁹ That day Montgomery signalled to General Alexander that "once my left (30th) Corps reaches area LEONFORTE-ENNA the enemy opposing the Americans will never get away."⁴⁰

Montgomery directed 51st Highland Division to closely follow Harpoon Force while 1st Canadian Division, the junior formation in 30th Corps, was sidelined and ordered to hand over much of its Royal Canadian Army Service Corps

divisional transport company to Harpoon Force. Having become the least motorized Allied force in Sicily, the Canadians continued marching inland with orders to capture 206th Italian Division's headquarters at Modica before German units arrived in support. After that they were to link up with the Americans at Ragusa and keep walking north, screening Harpoon Force's inland flank.⁴¹ US Seventh Army would do its part by taking on the majority of Italian and German units in Sicily already on their front or moving towards them.⁴² In a sense, all was as it was supposed to be in the original Husky plan. Eighth Army was poised to strike north for Catania and Messina while the Americans engaged the main enemy force. Montgomery's plan to trap that force made sense on 12 July even if it was poorly communicated to the Americans and assumed that no more Italian or German troops reinforced Sicily from mainland Europe.⁴³ Of course Axis generals made their own decisions.

In the Axis camp, Generals Guzzoni, von Senger and Kesselring determined by 12 July that the Syracuse-Augusta naval fortress complex was in British hands, Axis counter-attacks at Gela failed, and eight Allied divisions were ashore. They therefore decided to fall back to a line running from the Catania Plain on the east coast to Leonforte in central Sicily and then to San Stefano on the north coast. This shorter line on defensible ground might hold with available troops and weapons, including the well-stocked supply base in the Catania-Gerbini complex and its fortress units.⁴⁴ Hitler and the German senior staff sanctioned the decision and despatched German reinforcements to Sicily. The Italians agreed to do the same. Most of 1st Parachute Division along with bomber and fighter squadrons moved immediately to Sicily or nearby mainland airfields. The 382nd Panzer Grenadier Regiment moved into Sicily that day and 29th Panzer Grenadier Division also made its way

down the Italian peninsula towards Sicily. The Germans deployed additional heavy coastal artillery, anti-aircraft and engineer units to the Straits of Messina to turn the short ferry link between Sicily and the mainland into an unbreakable lifeline. Hitler instructed his men to "delay the advance of the Allies and then bring it to a standstill."⁴⁵ If Axis forces could not throw the Allies off Sicily they now had to hold the Allies there. As long as the frontline remained in Sicily, Mussolini's Fascist regime might hold on, Italy's armed forces might stay on side, and the Allies might be kept away from vital natural resources in the Balkans.⁴⁶ The first wave of 1st Parachute Division reinforcements dropped onto the Catania Plain on the night of 12 July. Battlegroup Schmalz swelled with the attachment of three German parachute battalions, fortress battalions and a large contingent of Italian troops all of whom dug in to

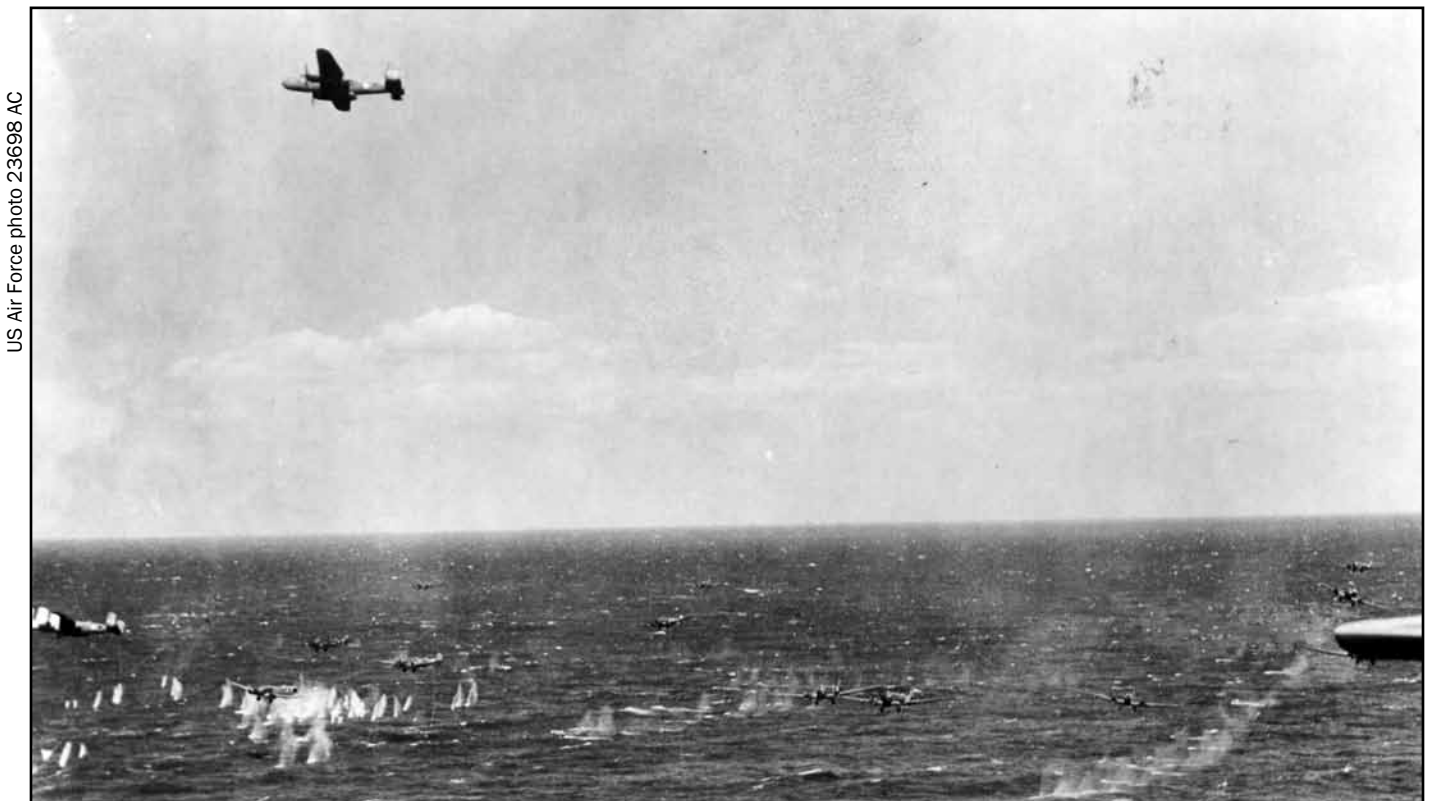
hold south of Primosole Bridge and buy time for more German units to arrive in Sicily and for those in the west to move east. Eighth Army headquarters could not know of these developments, although they did get reports of German paratroopers landing on Sicily.⁴⁷

On Eighth Army's inland wing Harpoon Force reached Vizzini early on 13 July where a stiff fight raged much of the day. British troops captured 54th Napoli Division's commander by afternoon and believed they had won. Montgomery thought his manoeuvre plan was working and sent word to Alexander that night that his "general battle situation was excellent."⁴⁸ In fact Napoli Division and surviving 206th Coastal Division troops had not yet given up Vizzini and two Hermann Goering Division battalions arrived to assist them.⁴⁹ Vizzini barred access to three key roads running down the Iblei Mountains to the Catania

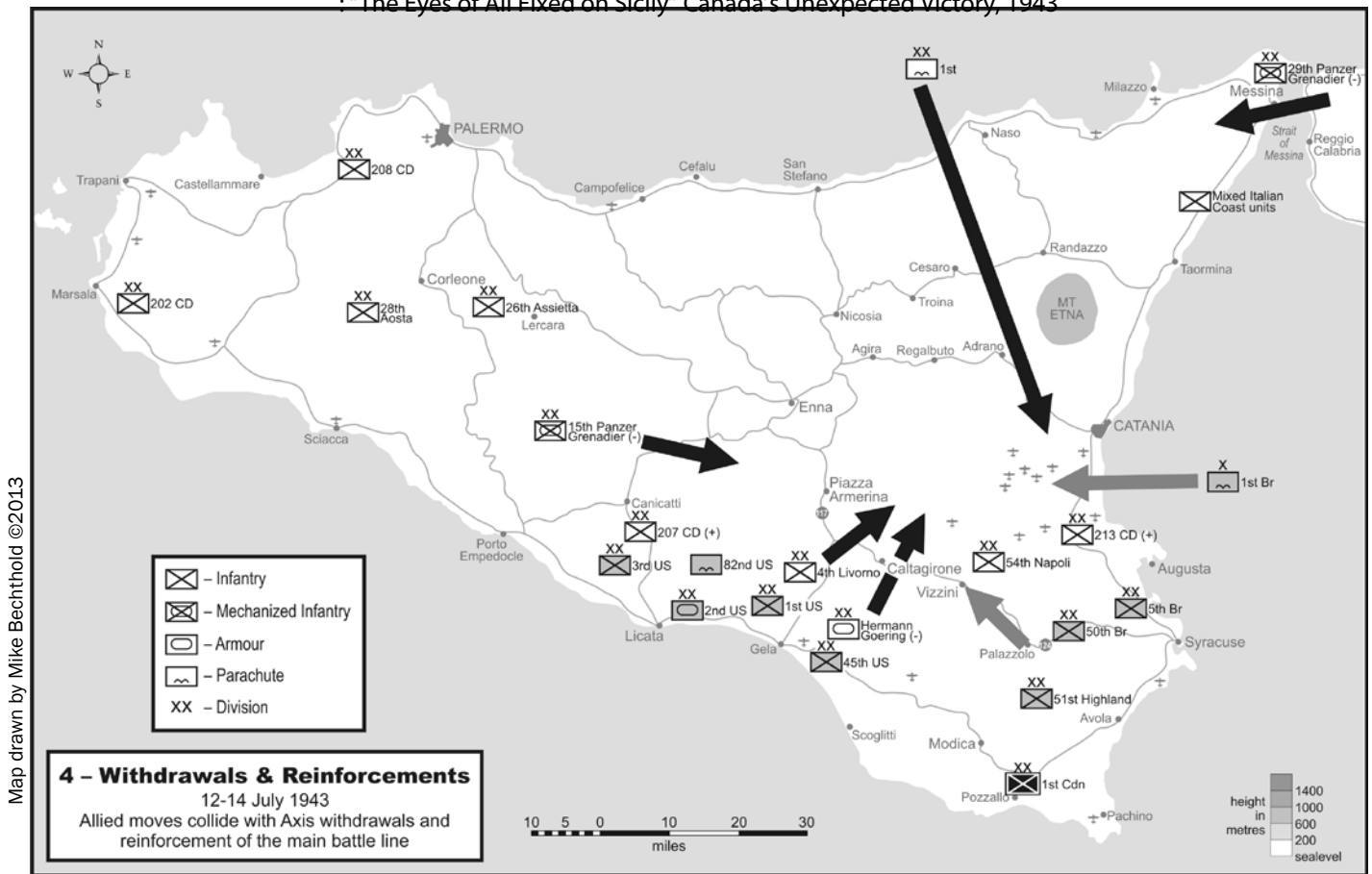
Plain. As long as they remained open Hermann Goering Division could escape from southern Sicily to the join the main Axis battle line forming at the edge of the plain.⁵⁰ The Italian-German force at Vizzini fought on through 14 July until 51st Highland Division arrived to envelope the naturally strong hilltop position. US 45th National Guard Division closed in from the southwest. British troops won the town early on 15 July but by then Hermann Goering Division had escaped to the Catania Plain.⁵¹ British reports oddly acknowledge only the presence of German troops at Vizzini, writing off the larger Italian force there as a "few miscellaneous detachments." In contrast the Americans always identified which Italian units they engaged, including 54th Napoli Division at Vizzini.⁵²

Fighting also flared at the southern edge of the Catania Plain where British commando and parachute troops landed in a hornet's nest. The

A formation of US Army Air Force B-25 Mitchells and P-38 Lightnings engage an axis air convoy during the struggle for air superiority prior to Operation Husky.



US Air Force photo 23698 AC



small band of elite British soldiers were caught between Group Schmalz that they had bypassed, German parachute reinforcements landing in front of them, and Hermann Goering Division arriving from the southeast.⁵³ The 13th British Corps advanced northward to even the odds. Confused fighting raged for three days as Group Schmalz fought to escape encirclement at Lentini and the rest of the Axis force repeatedly tried to recapture Primosole Bridge. Both of Montgomery's daring 12 July moves collided with Axis plans to make a stand south of Catania. He reacted by cancelling the Harpoon Force mission and steering 51st Highland Division north from Vizzini to pursue the Goering Division and add British weight to the fight expanding on the Catania plain. History may have judged Montgomery less harshly had he also cancelled his request to take over Highways 124, 117, and Enna from the Americans. Nigel Hamilton, Montgomery's well-known biographer, condemned his

subject for not giving back those routes because "the moment Harpoon Force failed to drive through Vizzini the whole logic of his strategy fell apart." Hamilton argued that the Americans had more four-wheel drive trucks and were in a better position quickly drive inland to reach Enna and cut off Axis forces in western Sicily from those in the east.⁵⁴ In Montgomery's view, coordinating manoeuvre along an international army boundary was too complicated. Better if Eighth Army maintained sole control over what seemed to be a quick battle to disrupt a German evacuation. Montgomery retained Highways 124 and 117 to keep his movement options open. There was still another German division to contend with in western Sicily.⁵⁵

Hamilton and other critics of Montgomery's decision might be right, but the damage was already done. By 15 July Patton's Seventh Army began shifting west towards Trapani and Palermo. For the next ten days the British fought in eastern

Sicily while the Americans waged a separate battle to clear the western half. But some Allied formation still had to drive to central Sicily, capture Enna, and prevent Axis forces in western Sicily from joining the battle on the Catania Plain. The 1st Canadian Division was the only Eighth Army force available for the job and so began Canada's greatest contribution to Operation Husky, made along the schism between Eighth British and Seventh US armies, literally and figuratively. Their mission to central Sicily was the bastard child of the "stolen road" inherited from the short-lived Harpoon Force.

Orders for 1st Canadian Division to move arrived at the end of a 24-hour rest on 13/14 July. Montgomery publicly praised Canadian potential but mused privately that they had "to be rested; the men were not fit and they suffered severely from the hot sun and many got badly burnt; generally, officers and men are too fat and they want to get some flesh

off and to harden themselves.”⁵⁶ Montgomery’s flippant and oft-quoted diary entry created a Canadian historical inferiority complex. Certainly the Canadians came pale-skinned directly from Scotland to a Sicilian summer after a long sea voyage. Arguably, they proved their fitness level by marching 45 kilometres inland to capture Modica and 206th Coastal Division headquarters by the morning of 12 July. This was no small feat given their lack of transport – many of the few trucks they had being commandeered for Harpoon Force. In fact, Montgomery wanted all his divisions rested after long marches in blazing sun and heat even if some rest periods were cut short when the chance to manoeuvre presented itself on 12 and 13 July on the east coast.⁵⁷ In the Canadian case, after capturing Modica and linking with the Americans in Ragusa there was little to do on 13 July but recover from

the long sea voyage and 48 hour march and to shuttle divisional supporting units up to their forward location around Giarratana. All that changed when heavy fighting at Vizzini, Lentini, and Primosole drew in all of Eighth Army except the Canadians.

Fortunately, the new Canadian assignment arrived on 14 July, the same day convoys unloaded Eighth Army’s second wave of vehicles. Until then Canadian service corps troops supplied the division with 43 of the 225 trucks they were supposed to have had even at assault scale.⁵⁸ But on that day Canadian truck platoons loaned to Harpoon Force were returned and Eighth Army found replacements for some of what was lost at sea. Canadian service corps troops scrounged other vehicles, borrowing or stealing them from British units. More still were captured from or donated by 206th Italian Coastal Division. Those came

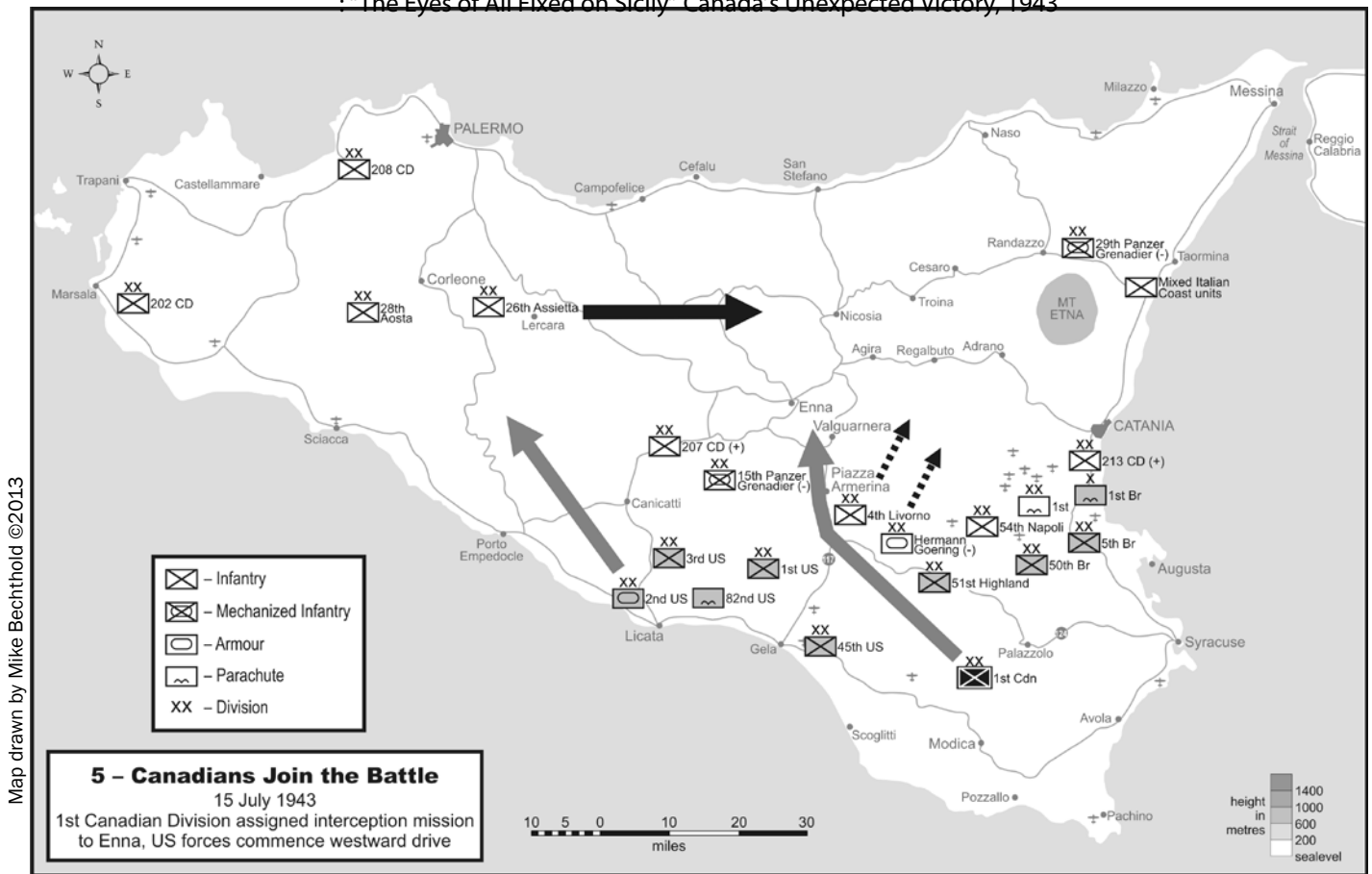
with willing Italian Army volunteers who revealed early clues about how many Italians were ready to join the Allied cause against Nazi-Fascism.⁵⁹ Second wave convoys also brought Royal Canadian Engineer trucks, bulldozers, and other heavy equipment vital for getting past the roadblocks, explosive traps, and demolitions that lay ahead on the road to Enna.⁶⁰ Three Rivers Regiment Sherman tanks from 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade and Bishop self-propelled 25-pounder guns from 142nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery were attached to 1st Canadian Division to add to their mobility.⁶¹ Before dawn on 15 July the Canadian column was as motorized as it could be and on its way to Enna.

Rich stories of Canadian actions in Sicily are well told elsewhere; the aim here is to review how they affect the wider campaign.⁶² In the early morning of 15 July

British troops advance in Sicily behind a Bishop self-propelled 25-pounder gun.



Canadian War Museum 19890223-220



the divisional vanguard set off including the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, a squadron of Three Rivers Regiment Shermans, a Saskatoon Light Infantry machine gun detachment along with towed anti-tank and self-propelled artillery. By 0900 hours they met a Hermann Goering-4th Livorno Division rearguard waiting in ambush in and south of Grammichele. At first all seemed to go badly. Enemy long range anti-tank guns, quad-mounted 20 mm anti-aircraft guns, tanks, and mortars picked off a number of Canadian vehicles. What remains remarkable about Grammichele was how quickly the green Canadians assessed the enemy threat, formulated a workable plan and deployed aggressively to see it through. If the purpose of any rearguard is to slow down their pursuers by forcing them to halt and deploy for battle and then escape before suffering undue loss, the Axis rearguard at Grammichele achieved only the first goal. In three hours Hasty P rifle companies and

Three Rivers Shermans enveloped the town and captured or destroyed two self-propelled quad-20mm guns, an 88 mm gun, and a troop of three tanks. Total German and Italian casualties are unknown but Private Huron Brant killed or captured at least thirty on his own. Canada lost three men killed and 22 wounded in the exchange.⁶³ It seems probable that the Canadian column surprised the Axis rearguard by approaching from the east. The day and night before, the same Italian-German force faced southwest and fought off 179th (Oklahoma) National Guard Regiment.⁶⁴

The actions at Vizzini and Grammichele along with intercepted wireless messages provided General Montgomery's staff with clues about enemy movement but no complete picture. Hermann Goering Division was obviously on its way to the Catania Plain and more of 1st German Parachute Division arrived to reinforce Group Schmalz.⁶⁵ Instead of one German regimental

group Eighth Army now faced the equivalent of two German divisions on the eastern Catania Plain. Both seemed hotly engaged by British 13th Corps' 5th and 50th Divisions around the Primosole Bridge sector. Things looked looser on the western or inland side of the Catania Plain. There 51st Highland Division seemed to be pressing on an open German inland wing. At that time Eighth Army staff wrote off all Italian units in eastern Sicily except for ineffective scattered remnants.⁶⁶ In this light Montgomery ordered 51st Division to drive north from Vizzini onto the western Catania Plain, capture the Gerbini airfield complex and press on to Paternò at the foot of Mount Etna. Montgomery wanted the Highland Division to turn or at least extend the main German force on the eastern Catania Plain and possibly open a second route to Messina.⁶⁷ On 15 July, it was still unclear whether the staunch German defence south of Catania covered an evacuation or if the enemy

planned to hold on in Sicily. The other unknown quantity was 12th Italian Corps with its 15th Panzer Grenadier Division still lurking to the west in the American sector. The Allies expected Italian troops in 12th Corps to keep fighting against or to surrender to the Americans. Montgomery's main concern was that 15th Panzer Grenadier Division would head east to join the Catania battle. His solution was to intercept them with 1st Canadian Division. Montgomery ordered General Leese, commanding 30th Corps, to "drive the Canadians on hard...to Caltagrione, and then to Valguarnera-Enna-Leonforte." General Leese passed the instructions to Major-General Guy Simonds, commanding 1st Canadian Division. "It is all the more vital for us to get on quickly...If opportunity occurs push a mobile mechanized force with tanks quickly through

towards Enna." If the Canadians met 15th Panzer Grenadier on route Leese warned Simonds that "all our experience in this island has been that if you are held up put in a well-supported attack in strength."⁶⁸ So far Axis troops proved hard to catch or out-manoeuve as they retreated through Sicily's rugged hills. Only when Axis troops stopped to fight did opportunities arise to destroy them.

As 1st Canadian Division drove on its intercept course with the enemy, they drew closer to the American force destined to be their most important partner in Sicily. Most of US Seventh Army grudgingly obliged Montgomery's plan and shifted units westward, except for Major-General Terry Allen's 1st US Infantry Division driving north from Gela. General Patton diverted their path only slightly towards the sulphur mining and transport hub

town of Caltanissetta, 20 kilometres west of Enna and on a parallel path with the Canadians.⁶⁹ The partnership began when Allen's 18th US Infantry Regiment attacked the Highway 124-117 crossroads prior to handing over there to the Canadians. US 1st Division patrols discovered enemy positions covering the crossroads manned by an Italian infantry battalion and a battalion of 100 mm medium guns. The Americans caught the Italians unaware and brought down observed artillery fire into their midst before sweeping down to attack. Italian survivors pulled back northward after abandoning 11 guns, 50 trucks, and 200 prisoners.⁷⁰ The road junction seemed open by late afternoon on 15 July.

The 1st Canadian Division could not link up with the Americans until the next morning. Highway 124 running from Grammichele

Palermo, pictured here during a March 1943 US Army Air Force bombing mission, was the largest port and city on Sicily.

US Air Force photo #834.955





Infantry of the 48th Highlanders advancing through Sicily.

was blocked at Caltagirone. The ancient Greek city lay on a narrow, steep-sided plateau connecting the southeastern Iblei Mountains to the Erei Mountains in Sicily's centre. Caltagirone's topography made it an important road junction town and the base for the Hermann Goering and Livorno Divisions. Both attributes made Caltagirone an Allied bomber target. Toronto's 48th Highlanders led the way into the half-demolished city of 40,000 inhabitants on the night of 15/16 July, encountering their first mass humanitarian disaster of the war. German engineers intensified the chaos by leaving behind mines, explosive-traps, and massive craters blown in all roads in and out of the city. Steep sided hills dropping away from the roads meant that traps could not be easily bypassed and had to be cleared. Booby-trapped demolitions killed the first two 48th Highlanders lost in the Second World War.⁷¹ Lieutenant-Colonel Geoff Walsh's divisional engineers had to open the bottleneck quickly.

All the division's bulldozers came forward to fill craters and move rubble. Bomb damage, raging fires, enemy traps, and the city's precarious location made Caltagirone the worst roadblock encountered by any Allied division in Sicily. Walsh asked 51st Highland Division's engineers to send their dozers to help. He also found 200 Italians prisoners willing to help clean up the broken city.⁷²

A rough bypass was ready for a Loyal Edmonton Regiment-based battlegroup to take the lead of the 1st Canadian Division column early on 16 July. By then Lieutenant-Colonel's Len Pease, commander Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, and Preston Gilbride, assistant adjutant and quartermaster general, had scrounged 53 trucks including 33 large three-ton Bedfords, enough to motorize all infantry battalions in the lead brigade. That morning over 3,000 men moved forward in a grand Canadian fighting convoy to join the Americans at Highway 117 and where they turned north to Enna.⁷³

The Loyal Edmonton vanguard column rolled through 16 July pausing on occasion because of German "demolition and mine laying activities." They met hundreds of Italian and German soldiers looking to surrender, including stragglers from the Gela battle and headquarters troops from the nearby base areas between Caltagirone and Piazza Armerina. The vanguard left these willing prisoners-to-be for others to round up and kept driving to the American-held Highway 117 crossroads where they turned north. As the column negotiated its way down into a hollow across Highway 117 five kilometres south of Piazza Armerina, the Loyal Eddies met what they called the "main German rearguard." An intense gun fight developed across the hollow as Three Rivers Regiment tanks, and Loyal Eddie anti-tank guns and 3-inch mortars on the south side responded to German machine guns on the north side, blowing open the stone farm houses they fired from. Germans

mortar and artillery shells struck back, scoring direct hits on Canadian gun and mortar crews. Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Jefferson deployed his rifle companies to attack the other side of the hollow on both sides of the road that bisects it.⁷⁴

It was too soon for the Canadians to realize who they were up against. They assumed that in front of them lay the same Goering Division rearguard evicted earlier from Grammichele.⁷⁵ In fact the Loyal Eddies had met the eastern end of General Eberhard Rodt's 15th Panzer Grenadier Division battle outpost line. The hills before them were manned by a battalion from Colonel Karl Ens' 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment reinforced with German self-propelled guns as well as Italian 90 mm dual-purpose guns and heavy howitzers. Colonel Ens' men had been waiting there for three days. The job of the 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment was to defend a deep triangle from Piazza Armerina west to Barrafranca and north to Valguarnera. Livorno Division tanks and artillery and 16th Corps' artillery reinforced Group Ens and held Aidone and Raddusa to the east, although not yet in a well-coordinated or cooperative fashion.⁷⁶ The rest of 15th Division was deployed in an arch southwest of Enna at every substantial road junction town.⁷⁷ If the Canadian mission was to advance to Enna to intercept 15th Panzer Grenadier Division then they had found their quarry.

Collectively Group Ens and Livorno Division were to hold south of Enna so that 12th Italian Corps and the well-stocked ammunition and fuel depots at Palermo could be moved east. The mostly intact

12th Italian Corps was to set up the northern wing of the *Hauptkampflinie* or main battle line from San Stefano on the north coast to Leonforte. Germany's 29th Panzer Grenadier Division was on its way to join them from the mainland. Once those moves were complete 15th Panzer Grenadier Division was to back up into its section of the line around the natural mountain fortress of Leonforte.⁷⁸ From San Stefano to Leonforte and east to Catania the German and Italian senior leadership agreed fight a protracted defensive battle. German goals remained the same: to keep Mussolini in power and Italy in the war by holding the Allies in Sicily.⁷⁹

On 16 July, before Italian and German forces were assembled and organized on the main battle line, von Senger saw the threat posed by 1st Canadian and US 1st Divisions driving towards Enna and Leonforte. He wrote: "The longer the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division could remain in its present position

the less likely was an encircling manoeuvre from the west in pursuit of the retreating Hermann Goering Division."⁸⁰ Von Senger disregarded the composite Italian forces covering the gaps between German divisions. The mistrust between Italian and German generals was far worse than any Anglo-American friction. Nevertheless von Senger's worries were justified as the Canadian-American threat mounted along the seam between Axis formations in Sicily. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division had to defend south of Enna. More specifically Colonel Ens' reinforced 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment must hold the Piazza Armerina-Barrafranca-Valguarnera triangle.

In that sense the Loyal Edmonton fight south of Piazza Armerina was only half the battle on 16 July. Ten kilometres west at Barrafranca US 1st Division's 26th Regimental Combat Team met the western wing of Battlegroup Ens.⁸¹ The fight



Library and Archives Canada PA 169997

Officers of the Carleton and York Regiment confer during an attack near Valguarnera, 18 July 1943.



Lieutenant-Colonel R.M. Crowe and Major J.H.W. Pope of the Royal Canadian Regiment consult a map at Piazza Armerina, Sicily, 17 July 1943.

Grenadier Regiment from demolition and delay work near Caltanissetta. As 15th Division fell back it integrated survivors of Livorno Division reconstituted into four battalion-sized battlegroups deployed from Valguarnera eastward, along with General Rossi's 16th Corps artillery. West of Enna, 15th Panzer Grenadier Division had help from battalions from 26th Assietta, 28th Aosta, and 207th Coastal Divisions along with a Bersaglieri Regiment to hold off 1st US Division.⁸⁴ By now General Hans-Valentin Hube had brought 14th Panzer Corps Headquarters to Sicily to take command of the battle from the Italians. Hube ordered General Rodt's division to hold a new line of combat outposts south of Enna until the western anchor of the main battle line at Leonforte and Nicosia was prepared.⁸⁵

Allied commanders remained in the dark regarding German and Italian decisions at the end of 16 July. Signs still indicated the Germans were moving east in order to evacuate and that Italian units looked to surrender at the first opportunity. In that light most of Patton's Seventh Army carried on towards Palermo and Trapani to capture those ports and finish off 12th Italian Corps believed to be standing passively in front of them.⁸⁶ Montgomery also remained optimistic: "All indications are that the enemy is stretched and we should press him strongly with thrusts in all sectors."⁸⁷ Thus on 17 July all Allied units in Sicily drove northwards, spreading out from the landing areas like a fan, pursuing an enemy who seemed intent on escape. The next 72 hours changed Allied assumptions and opened their eyes to the Battle of Sicily yet to be fought.

for Barrafranca raged all day and reached a peak when Colonel Ens counterattacked the lead American battalion with a company of Panzer IVs. By the late afternoon US 1st Division brought their artillery into action and drove the German reinforced battalion off the field towards Valguarnera, leaving eight Panzer IVs burning behind them.⁸² The Loyal Edmonton Regiment attacked into the hills south of Piazza Armerina that same afternoon, into terrain where their supporting Three Rivers tanks could not follow them. Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson mustered only three of his four rifle companies giving the German battalion odds in this fight. Both attacker and defender were well backed by artillery and mortars. Nevertheless the Loyal Edmonton infantrymen prevailed by carrying the action across the hilltops and away from the road the Germans tried to block. By late afternoon the Eddies owned the hills commanding Piazza Armerina and the long

crescent shaped valley in which it lays and the 2nd Battalion of 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment and its attached German and Italian artillery withdrew to the hills north of town. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division's report to Kesselring in the first week of Husky complained that "a special characteristic of the enemy manner of fighting is that he does not attack over open ground, but attacks through areas that provide cover while diminishing the efficacy of the tanks."⁸³ Crews from 70th US Tank Battalion and the Three Rivers Regiment might be forgiven for avoiding obvious prepared German anti-tank kill zones in open fields and along main roads, opting instead to support off road infantry attacks on German flanks.

The loss of Barrafranca and Piazza Armerina on 16 July forced General Rodt's 15th Panzer Grenadier Division into in a tighter circle protecting the approaches to Enna. Rodt pulled in his western-most unit, Colonel Fritz Fullriede's 129th Panzer

On 17 July British units in Eighth Army followed up Axis units falling back into the outpost zone of their main battle line positions.⁸⁸ In the Canadian sector, Group Ens abandoned the high ground north of Piazza Armerina leaving behind bobby-trapped craters and mines to cover their escape. Third Canadian Infantry Brigade took over the division's improvised truck fleet and continued the pursuit up Highway 117 to Enna. That afternoon they discovered that the enemy had only backed up a few kilometres to the cluster of hills covering the fork where Highway 117 bears northwest to Enna and a provincial road branches off northeast to Valguarnera. New Brunswick's Carleton and York Regiment was riding atop Three Rivers Regiment Sherman tanks when the fight started. The New Brunswickers jumped clear and both went into action against a well-armed enemy backed again by artillery and mortars. Three Rivers' "B" Squadron won a close range gun fight against a Livorno Division detachment west of the highway compelling crews to abandon three Italian light tanks, two towed 76 mm anti-tank guns and a self-propelled gun. The Italians fell back to the main German position sited on three hills commanding Highway 117-Valguarnera Road fork in the area known locally as Grottaalda. The Carleton and Yorks and the West Nova Scotia Regiment were about to attack the main position when General Simonds halted the proceedings in the afternoon. Simonds gathered his brigade and supporting arms commanders together for a conference.⁸⁹

Simonds and his staff still believed that ahead of them laid the same battalion-sized rearguard from Hermann Goering Division that they

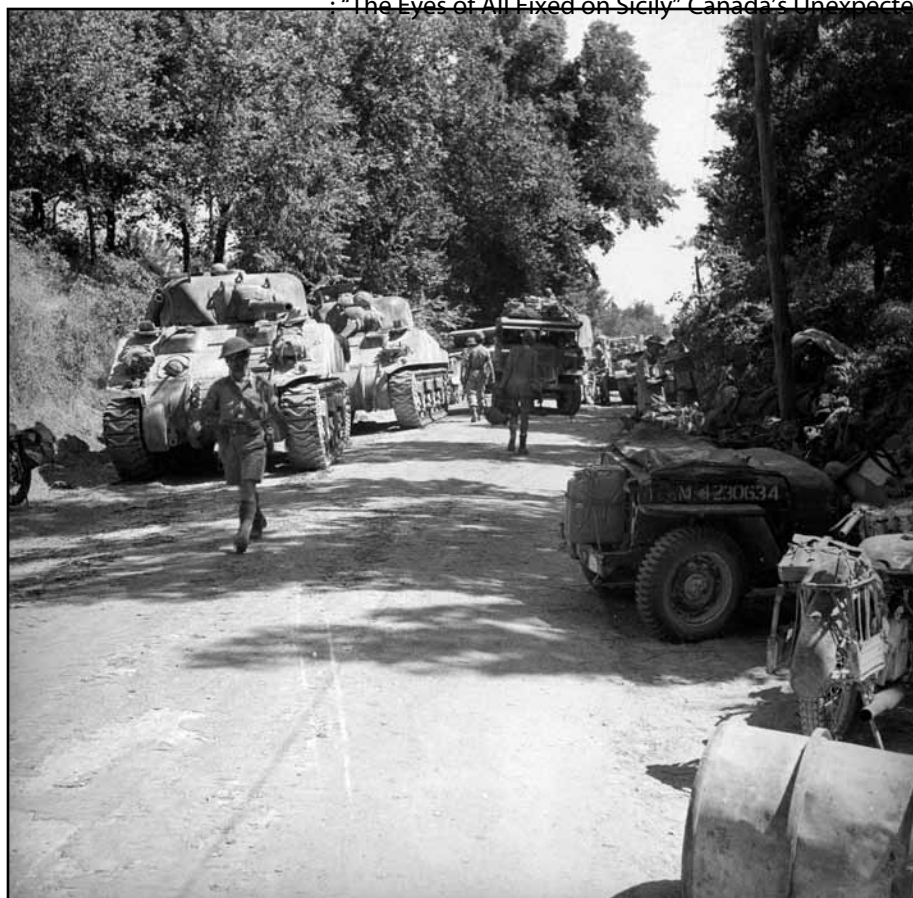
chased out of Grammichele, identified as Battlegroup Hahm. The Canadians appreciated how after Grammichele the enemy broke contact and fell back some 30 kilometres to Piazza Armerina. As they drew closer to Enna the Germans backed up more deliberately and violently, reinforced by more Italian infantry, tanks, and artillery.⁹⁰ Simonds and his staff believed that 1st Canadian Division threatened the fault line between 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to the west and the Goering Division main body to the east. At that point the Canadian mission still centred on blowing through this nuisance rearguard and pressing ten kilometres further to intercept 15th Panzer Grenadier Division at the major road junctions

at Enna and Leonforte. Simonds therefore abandoned his road-bound advance in column and split the division into two. Brigadier Howard Penhale's 3rd Brigade was to mount back up in trucks and drive on Enna under cover of darkness, "ready to debus and engage the enemy as soon as contact was made." The divisional artillery hitched up to follow them.⁹¹ Brigadier Howard Graham was to march 1st Brigade northeast across country, capture Valguarnera and encircle Battlegroup Hahm. Valguarnera, perched on an Erei mountain outcropping overlooking the Dittaino River valley, was the key. From there a secondary provincial road ran due north across the broad valley to Leonforte.

Canadian War Museum 19890223-228



British troops clear a house in Centuripe, Sicily.



Canadian Sherman tanks prepare for an attack east of Enna.

Battlegroup Ens. In the early morning of 18 July the Van Doos fixed the attention of two battalions of Group Ens at the Grottacalda fork. The West Nova Scotia Regiment marched wide out to the west to hook behind the enemy while the Carleton and Yorks attacked hard on their east wing supported by nearly all the divisional artillery.⁹⁵ The Germans at the Grottacalda fork got little help from their artillery and headquarters area around Valguarnera. That same morning the Hasty Ps ambushed convoys carrying infantry and artillery reinforcements to the Grottacalda position and fought off German counterattacks to re-open the route. The Royal Canadian Regiment arrived later, right around the time the Hasty Ps ran low on the ammunition. The Royals thus took over the job of separating Group Ens' base at Valguarnera from their forward battalions.⁹⁶ Group Ens had no choice but to withdraw in broad daylight down secondary farm tracks, blowing up precious oil and fuel dumps that could not be carried along. The next day General Rodt reported up the German chain of command that his division was under heavy pressure and that "another strong enemy formation (1½ - 2 divisions) took Valguarnera."⁹⁷ Later he admitted that "Panzer Grenadier Regiment 104 was maneuvered out of position and turned from the east."⁹⁸

Figures concerning Axis casualties are difficult to verify with certainty. A total of 73 Italian and 250 German prisoners were rounded up around the two sites over two days.⁹⁹ This first major Canadian roundup of German prisoners--many of whom were forthcoming with information--helped to fill in Eighth Army's picture of enemy locations and intentions. Clearly 15th Panzer Grenadier Division had

After 1st Brigade cut off the enemy rearguard and secured a base at Valguarnera, Brigadier Christopher Vokes' 2nd Brigade would strike across the Dittaino Valley and seize Leonforte.⁹² Leonforte stands on an equally imposing outcrop on the Dittaino Valley's north side and carries Highway 121 connecting Enna to Catania through its narrow main streets. Controlling the Valguarnera-Enna-Leonforte triangle would certainly block west to east traffic, but as the Canadians soon found out, 15th Panzer Grenadier Division was already in the triangle with orders to stand and fight.

That night both sides were in for a shock. The Royal 22e Régiment led 3rd Brigade's motorized rush towards Enna while 1st Brigade units set off on their fateful night march. At first, things seemed to go very wrong. The Van Doos met a wall of fire almost immediately at the Grottacalda fork. They leapt from their trucks and went into action. Not only was the road to Enna solidly barred, but German panzer

grenadiers emerged from the fire-lit darkness to counterattack.⁹³ At the same time, 1st Brigade's battalions disappeared into night shrouded hills south of Valguarnera. Short range No.18 radio sets lost contact in the steep hills. The same rugged terrain prevented tanks and tracked Bren carriers from following the lead companies with more powerful, vehicle mounted No.22 radio sets. Nevertheless by morning on 18 July the Hasty Ps emerged from the hills overlooking Valguarnera and cut the road between it and the main German position at the Grottacalda fork.⁹⁴

By morning on 18 July the picture became clearer to General Simonds. In front of his division stood no Hermann Goering rearguard but most or perhaps all of Karl Ens 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, tanks from 215 Panzer Battalion, substantial German artillery and supporting Italian detachments. Partly by accident and partly by design Simonds' simultaneous night attack on Enna and Leonforte turned into an encirclement action around

been intercepted. Estimates of enemy dead and wounded left on the field range from 180 to 240. At a minimum Battlegroup Ens lost over 400 of its German fighting troops around Valguarnera. Canada lost 40 men killed and 105 wounded.¹⁰⁰ Casualty figures mattered in the days to come.

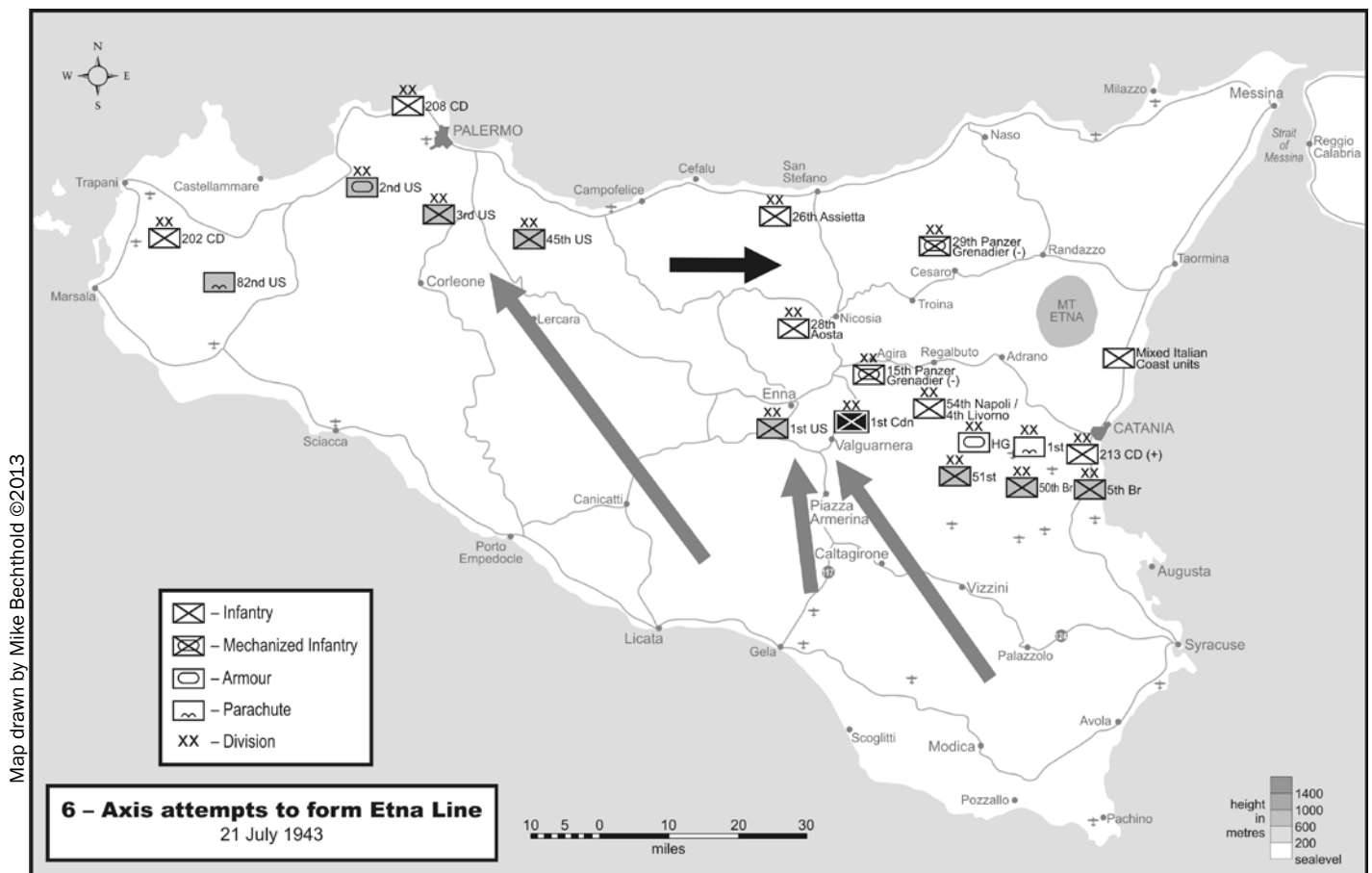
The Canadian action around Valguarnera on 18 July provided the first hard intelligence on enemy locations in central Sicily even if their intentions remained unclear. That same day 60 kilometres to the east, Italian and German troops violently counterattacked 13th British Corps on the open Catania Plain.¹⁰¹ These attacks checked the British advance towards Catania but exposed German and Italian troops to British artillery fire directed by observation posts on Primosole's heights and forward observers with the leading troops. By then both sides deployed substantial numbers of heavy guns around the eastern half of the Catania Plain and movement across it required great

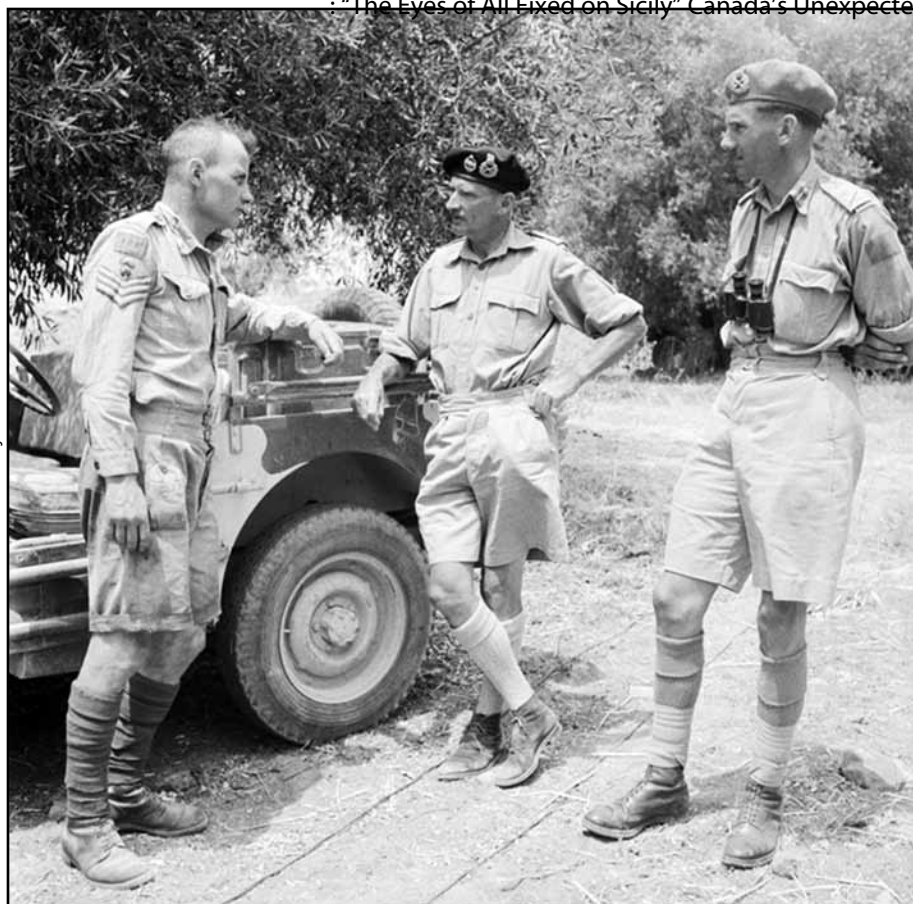
effort and sacrifice.¹⁰² Eighth Army closely watched 30th Corps and especially 51st Highland Division's thrust through the perceived weak point on western end of the Catania Plain around Gerbini. The Highland Division remained the only Eighth Army formation not in contact with a major enemy force and Montgomery hoped it still might reach Mount Etna and outflank the Catania position.¹⁰³ The Canadian mission was to keep 15th Panzer Grenadier Division from interfering.

On the afternoon of 18 July, before the battle of Valguarnera finished, Simonds called Canadian commanders and staff together to adapt to the new situation. German prisoners confirmed that 15th Panzer Grenadier Division planned to fall back on and possibly through Leonforte.¹⁰⁴ Continuing northwest to Enna was pointless now that the Canadians were in close contact with 15th Panzer Grenadier Division retreating north to Leonforte right

in front of them. At Valguarnera 1st Canadian Division got a hand inside 15th Panzer Grenadier Division's belt and could not afford to let go. The task would not be easy. Between Valguarnera and Leonforte lay 15 kilometres of rolling hills covered in post-harvest grain stubble and devoid of concealment. The Dittaino River flood plain runs west to east like a moat in front of the towering hill mass crowned by Leonforte and Assoro. From those natural fortress towns German artillery observers called down long range artillery fire on anything they could see. Given time German and Italian engineers could add enough manmade defences to make the position very dangerous if not impregnable. The Canadians had no intention of granting the enemy that time.¹⁰⁵

The 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade attacked across the wide Dittaino Valley chasm that night using darkness to mask their approach. The rest of the division





Sergeant Russell McPhee, Royal Canadian Engineers, talks to General Bernard Montgomery, commander of British Eighth Army, and Major-General Guy Simonds, commander of 1st Canadian Division, August 1943.

the Italians had "low morale and no rations" they still checked 231st Brigade's advance beyond Raddusa Station onto the Dittaino Valley floor. Italian artillery and dual purpose light and heavy anti-aircraft guns swept the rolling hills at long range.¹⁰⁹

Allied reports from this period contain surprise bordering on disappointment at the Axis willingness and capacity to stand and fight in Sicily. By D+10 the picture of new German arrivals and the number of Italians remaining in the fight grew clearer. By 18 July American troops had taken over 25,000 Italian prisoners. British and Canadian troops had taken 29,000 prisoners of which something over 1,000 were German.¹¹⁰ That left 135,000 Italian soldiers in the field blended with a German ground force that had grown to about 60,000 troops. The Germans maligned their allies, but Italian units had repeatedly blocked and delayed Allied units advancing inland, effectively covering the flow of German units into the main battle line. In fact, Italian units were critical to the defence as Allied intelligence staff predicted they might be before the campaign began in May:

The Italian Army has proved that it can conduct itself with credit in close country where it is fighting behind prepared defences, with alternate positions in the rear or on its flanks and in a situation where there is small danger of encirclement. It is moreover commonplace that Italian units fight with greater tenacity when stiffened by Germans in the conditions described.¹¹¹

The estimate proved extraordinarily accurate.

held firm shoulders at Valguarnera until US 1st Division cleared Enna to the west. The 1st Canadian Infantry Division lunged across the Dittaino Valley floor 35 kilometres west of their sister 51st Highland Division pressing towards Gerbini. To help fill in the massive gap in between General Leese placed Brigadier Roy Urquhart's independent 231st British Malta Brigade under Canadian command. By 19 July, 231st Malta Brigade captured Raddusa and pressed into the Dittaino Valley ten kilometres east of the Canadian thrust.¹⁰⁶

So began the attack by the reinforced 1st Canadian Division against the Axis main battle line's inland hinge, even if no one in the Allied camp understood it as such on 19 July. During the next 48 hours all of Eighth Army clashed with the enemy along the Axis main battle line. To the east at Catania 13th Corps faced more Axis "counter-attacks which included hostile tanks." In the centre 51st Highland Division crossed the Dittaino River at Sferro and Gerbini

but met "stiff opposition." German counterattacks across the open Catania Plain proved costly as did British attacks. Eighth Army reported the Germans "are fighting fiercely... have suffered very heavy losses in dead during the day."¹⁰⁷ They may have, but the Axis line also stabilized and thickened as reconstituted and re-organized Italian units linked up under command of General Hube's German headquarters. Livorno Division's re-constituted 34th Regiment, Napoli Division's 76th Regiment, the 16th Corps artillery and miscellaneous Blackshirt and surviving mobile group units took station amid German units holding the line between Leonforte and Catenanuova. The Italian presence created a mostly continuous front that enabled German troops, guns and tanks to concentrate on commanding heights and road junctions along the main battle line.¹⁰⁸ Italian units still had teeth too. The British 231st Brigade's 19 July battle at Raddusa Station was fought entirely against Livorno Division troops. Even though

On 19 July most of the 200,000 Axis troops still in action were on or near their main battle line in northeast Sicily threatened by only three British, one Canadian, and one US division. The other four US divisions mopped up isolated Italian garrisons in western Sicily and closed in on Palermo. They could not turn fully eastward to join the battle for another week.¹¹² Eighth Army's three British divisions were solidly blocked by the equivalent of one Italian and two German divisions across the Catania Plain. Eighth Army intelligence realized that General Hube's 14th Panzer Corps Headquarters was ashore and that "the enemy is far from selling out on his remaining bridgehead in Sicily with the great natural advantages of the Etna position and the defensive line he holds in front of it."¹¹³

Only on the far left in the Canadian sector at Leonforte did any prospect remain to strike an enemy weak point. The 1st Canadian Division operated in the only sector on Eighth Army's front where the defenders had just arrived in their main defensive zone. Battlegroup Ens was still very lethal

and backed by more German and Italian artillery than ever before, but they needed time to properly prepare their defence. Instead, during two successive days and nights, 1st Canadian Division pressed through Axis outpost positions on the valley floor before the enemy could blow all the bridges.¹¹⁴ "In their hasty withdrawal the enemy had been forced to leave behind considerable weapons, ammunition and equipment."¹¹⁵

The Germans gave up the valley floor quickly but demonstrated their desire and ability to hold the Leonforte-Assoro mountain fortress with artillery fire. They rendered vast swaths of the valley floor uninhabitable. Long range 170 mm guns reached all the way across the valley to Valguarnera and struck among 1st Royal Canadian Horse Artillery as the regiment moved its guns forward.¹¹⁶ By 20 July it was clear that the Germans would not give up their positions without a major fight. Major-General Simonds issued orders for the whole division to deploy. His problem was that pressing the division ten kilometres

across the shell swept valley to Leonforte exposed long flanks to an enemy force known to have tanks. To the west Simonds solved the problem by linking up with 1st US Division at Enna. To shield the more open and dangerous eastern wing Simonds sent Brigadier Penhale's 3rd Brigade to join 231st Malta Brigade. Together they spread their six infantry battalions each with some 400 riflemen across the 15 kilometre gap along the valley floor between them and 51st Highland Division to the east.¹¹⁷

Simonds concentrated the rest of the division on the enemy force waiting for them at Leonforte and Assoro. On 21-22 July, 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment's one Italian and three German battalions defending Leonforte and Assoro were enveloped by four Canadian battalions. Both Axis and Canadian forces included artillery, tanks, mortars, heavy machine gun, and anti-aircraft units making the battle a remarkably equal contest. Colonel Ens' Panzer Grenadiers fought well but were nearly surrounded and badly shot up in the twin actions

Sherman tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment cross the Dittaino Valley.





A patrol from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry enters Agira, 28 July 1943.

which constitute Canada's most impressive feats of arms in Sicily. German prisoners and captured reports reveal that 104th Regiment lost an estimated 722 officers and men killed, wounded, and captured as of 21 July, not counting the heaviest fighting at Leonforte on 22 July; 335 German and Italian prisoners went into the cage between 21 and 23 July. By 23 July Canadian intelligence staff predicted that "we must expect a re-organization of the Regt [104th] anytime now."¹¹⁸ Axis forces scrambled to plug the hole in their line, although General Rodt questioned the value of holding the hinge at Agira after the vital Leonforte-Assoro fortress fell and "because of the losses suffered" there.¹¹⁹ Other 15th Panzer Grenadier Division units and parts of the newly-arriving 29th Panzer Grenadier Division deployed around the rupture to contain the Canadian advance.

The 29th Division's commander was informed that he must aid 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, "which had been decimated by heavy losses during the first round of fighting."¹²⁰ German desperation to stop a Canadian breakthrough created opportunities for Allied air forces. American and British fighter-bombers flying from Gela and Pachino attacked 29th Division units rushing to the front in large daylight truck convoys.¹²¹ Captured telephone transcripts reveal how the raids caused "considerable casualties... considerable loss of vehicles."¹²² In total even though the Axis main battle line held firm at Catania on 23 July and was not yet threatened on the northern wing, its centre hinge was in trouble.

On 23 July, General Simonds turned 1st Canadian Division eastward on to Highway 121 in readiness to attack the flank of the

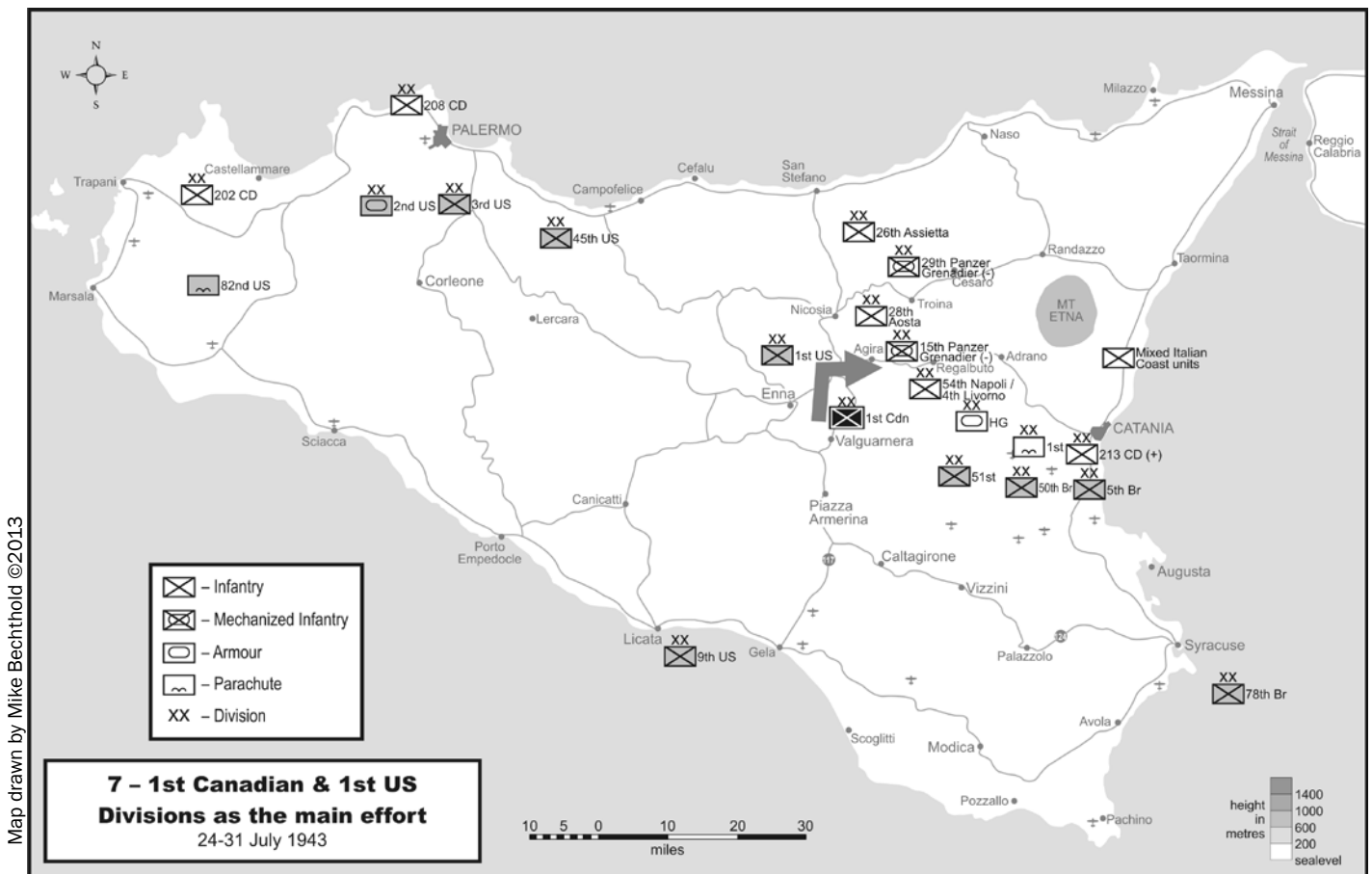
main German line on the Catania Plain. That same day Allied intelligence staff pieced together that 29th and 15th Panzer Grenadier Divisions were massing north of Leonforte with 28th Aosta Division.¹²³ The 1st US Division fought on towards Nicosia to help but faced a large Italian and German force northwest of Enna and could not arrive for days.¹²⁴ Meanwhile the Canadians prepared to meet a German counterattack to retake Leonforte. Counterattack or not, German and Italian units occupied the high ground north of Leonforte in force, overlooking the Canadian route east towards Agira.¹²⁵ Axis troops also benefited by retreating east along Highway 121 towards Italian and Hermann Goering Division units at Agira, Regalbuto, and Catenanuova. In consequence Canada's Sicily battlefield fundamentally changed. Until 23 July, the Canadians attacked enemy forces isolated from

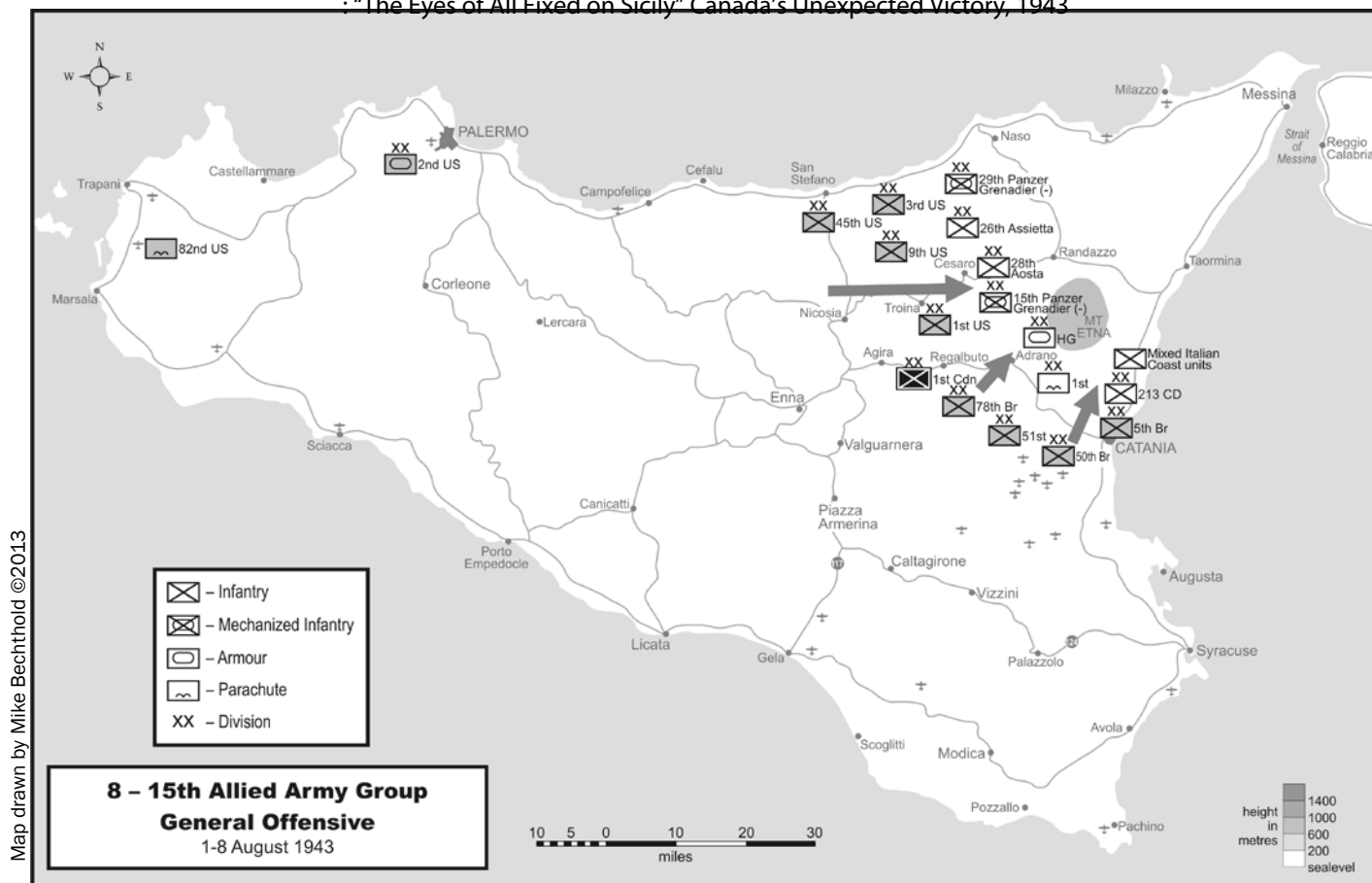
neighbouring units. Valguarnera and Leonforte-Assoro typified those days and earned the grudging respect of their German opponents who complained that Canadian and British "fieldcraft (Indianerkrieg) superior to our own troops. Very mobile at night, surprise break-ins, clever infiltrations at night with small groups between our strong points."¹²⁶ After 23 July, enemy units deployed north and east of Leonforte dug in close enough to each other to provide mutually supporting observation and fire.¹²⁷ The nature of the fighting changed according. The Saskatoon Light Infantry war diary recorded that day that "the first flush of attack is over and now the division is settling in to a hard grind."¹²⁸

As the Canadians began their drive into the buckling Axis hinge the rest of Eighth Army fought off German counterattacks across the Catania Plain. Most of Seventh US Army was still clearing western Sicily, entering Palermo with great

fanfare on 22 July and Trapani the next day. On 23 July Generals Montgomery, Patton, and Alexander designed plans for both Allied armies to assault the Axis force in concert. Eighth Army shifted from pursuing an evacuating enemy to preparing a deliberate offensive to destroy the German-Italian force dug in before them. General Montgomery began marshalling men, artillery, and shells for Operation Hardgate. Eighth Army staff arranged to bring their reserve British 78th Infantry Division from North Africa through central Sicily and secretly stage it south of Catenanuova where the Dittaino River spills out onto the Catania Plain. There Montgomery prepared his main attack to break the enemy line through to Adrano at the foot of Mount Etna. To the east 13th Corps and the Royal Navy would launch feint attacks on the heavily defended east end of the line at Catania. Allied air forces prepared fighter bomber and medium bomber

strikes against the string of fortified towns and cities overlooking the Catania Plain.¹²⁹ To the north Patton would open Palermo as his new main supply base, bring ashore his reserve 9th US Infantry Division from Africa and wheel his army east towards Axis divisions assembled north of Leonforte.¹³⁰ Only then would the Allies deploy ten divisions to attack the equivalent of four German and three Italian divisions. But these preparations demanded time. US engineers needed time to repair damaged port facilities at Palermo and to move American men and machines from western Sicily to the east to join the lonely 1st US Division fighting alongside the Canadians. Eighth Army's three British divisions were exhausted and needed to rest and absorb replacements. The British also needed time to stockpile artillery shells necessary for the coming reckoning, but the balance of their trucks were only scheduled to land in Syracuse on 24 July.¹³¹





The forces, weapons, ammunition and supplies necessary for Operation Hardgate would not be ready until late July. Until then 1st Canadian Division and its attached Malta Brigade were the principal weapon of the entire Allied force on Sicily. Their mission was to attack eastward along both sides of the Dittaino River, either rolling up the flank of the main Axis defence line or forcing enemy troops to shift inland to stop them. Montgomery expected the latter thereby thinning the main Catania positions prior to Eighth Army's main assault from Catenanuova to Adrano scheduled to begin at the end of the month.¹³² In this context the reinforced Canadian division opened a week-long battle for the Dittaino Valley. The Canadian 1st and 2nd Brigades and 231st Malta Brigade attacked along the north side from Nissoria to Agira and Regalbuto. On the south side 3rd Canadian Brigade was reinforced by spare beach organization troops from the Royal Marines and the Hampshire

Regiment no longer needed at the shore line. Together they attacked an Italian and German pocket holding south of the Dittaino River around Mount Scalpello overlooking Catenanuova.¹³³

That last week of July was Canada's toughest and costliest of the campaign. Every move the Canadians made brought down observed mortar and artillery fire. On the north side of the Dittaino 1st and 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigades backed by Three Rivers Regiment tanks and the divisional guns fought a grim struggle for the ridges between Nissoria and Agira while the Malta Brigade threatened Agira's southern approaches. At first, General Rodt pulled much of Colonel Ens' 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment out of the Canadian path, apparently to rest, but Canadian pressure towards Agira forced him to throw it back into the fight.¹³⁴ Two or three battalions from 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, tank, anti-tank guns, anti-aircraft batteries and the last of 4th Livorno

Division joined in the attritional battles around Agira.¹³⁵ At the same time 3rd Canadian Brigade hauled weapons and ammunition by pack mule to conceal their approach across the bald and exposed south side of the Dittaino River before battling their way on to Monte Scalpello overlooking Catenanuova.¹³⁶ German fortress and Goering Division troops, along with parts of 54th Napoli Division gave up the prominent ridge with great reluctance. From 24 to 29 July the Canadians cleaved a wedge into the seam between the two wings of the Axis line. Battle Group Ens was battered and sent to a rest area near Troina and reconstituted with personnel from a German construction battalion and 800 "Slavs" from the divisional replacement battalion.¹³⁷ The Livorno Division gave up hundreds of prisoners and an unknown number of dead. Private C. Otto Meyer from 29th Panzer Grenadier Division sent to join the battle west of Agira wrote to his parents:

All of us here have prepared ourselves to accept our fate, never to enter Germany or Italy again. Now already only 1/3 of our company remains. All others killed, wounded, missing, captured or ill. Daily we become less. I always say to myself, it can't be worse anyplace than it is here at the present.¹³⁸

A few days before, in the midst of Canada's battle for the Dittaino Valley, King Vittorio Emanuele III dissolved Benito Mussolini's Fascist Government in Rome and arrested Mussolini. Adolf Hitler found out late on 25 July. Earlier in the day, Hitler's headquarters seemed satisfied that German reinforcements to Sicily made them strong enough in tanks and artillery to hold the line until rough fall weather made Allied landings anywhere else in the Mediterranean unlikely. That view turned upside down when reports arrived that evening about Mussolini's arrest. Hitler ordered German troops to abandon Sicily immediately and pulled additional German divisions from the Atlantic Wall and Russian front to garrison Europe's Mediterranean coastline. "This [on the eastern front] must be given away. It's absolutely clear: Here [southern Europe] we're dealing with critical decisions. If worst comes to worst, even more must be withdrawn from the East."¹³⁹

Orders from Berlin became the Operation Lehigh evacuation plan issued in Sicily two days later. By then Kesselring convinced Hitler not to abandon Sicily immediately because Mussolini's arrest did not cause Italy's immediate surrender. Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio's provisional government kept up a façade alliance with Germany even as

they negotiated peace with the Allies. Kesselring predicted that chaos would reign when Italy officially surrendered and believed German and Italian troops must continue fighting in Sicily to delay Italy's defection to the Allies and buy time for Germany's takeover of southern Europe.¹⁴⁰ The 14th German Panzer Corps and a dwindling number of Italians still fighting with them were thus ordered not to leave Sicily until forced off by "enemy action." Forward units were informed that "the present position must be held at all costs."¹⁴¹ German and Italian units remained dug-in and prepared to stand on 31 July when the entire Allied 15th Army Group backed by powerful naval and air forces attacked them everywhere at once.

In 1st Canadian Division's area at the centre of the Axis line the fighting never stopped. On 31 July, 1st and 2nd Canadian Brigades and 231st Brigade attacked the Goering Division's inland wing at Regalbuto while 3rd Brigade stormed the dry Dittaino River bed and into Catenanuva officially opening Eighth Army's Operation

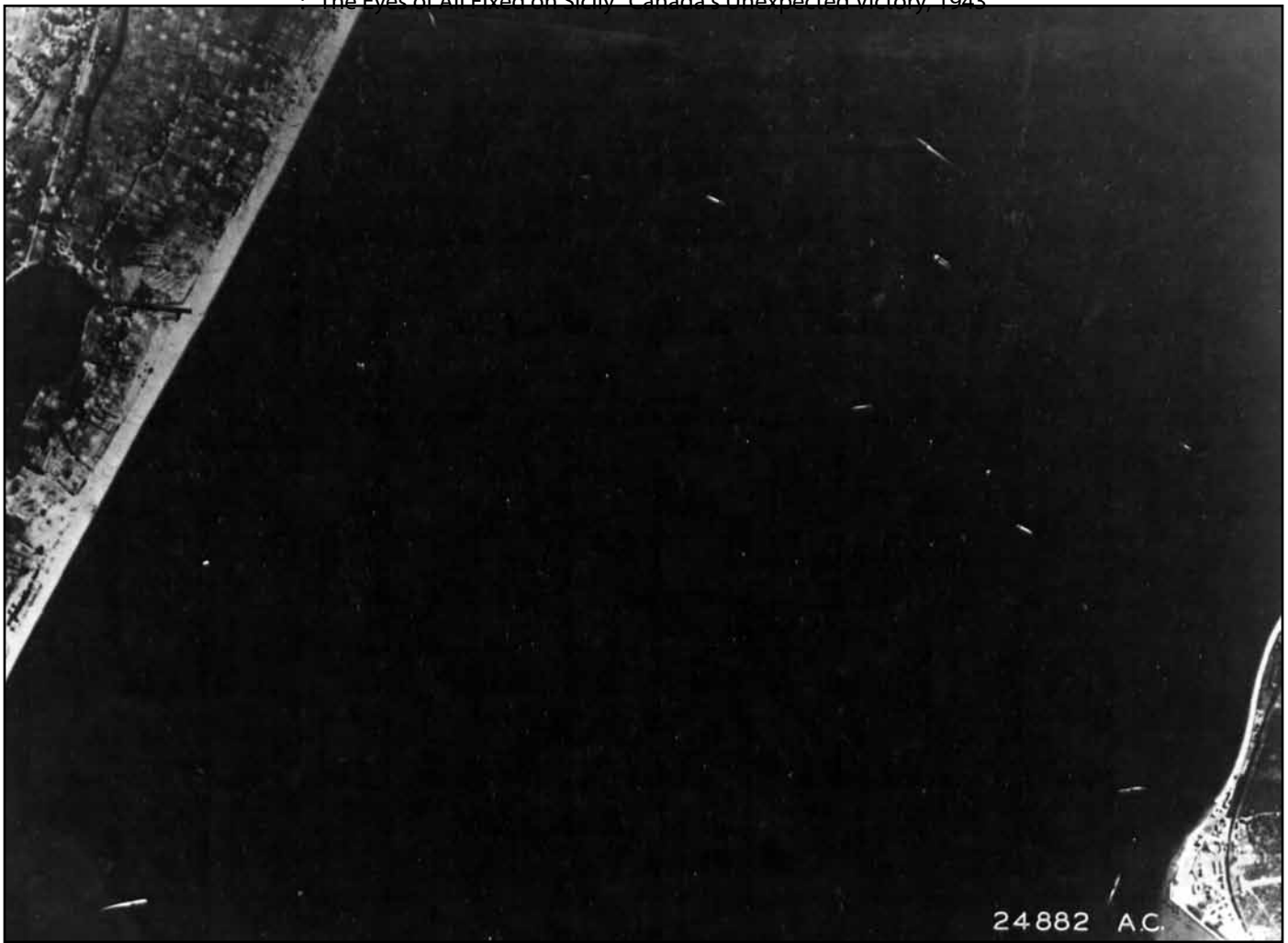
Hardgate. Behind the Canadians came the fresh and veteran 78th British Infantry Division. Together they fought along rock-strewn, fire-swept slopes to Centuripe and the Salso Valley northeast of Regalbuto. The Germans counterattacked with Goering Division tanks and engineers and 3rd Parachute Regiment brought west from Catania to stop the breakthrough. The 382nd Panzer Grenadier Regiment shifted to the Salso Valley to stop 2nd Canadian Brigade from linking up with the Americans. The Germans transferred pieces from every major formation in Sicily to hold their collapsing centre in front of the Canadians in late July and early August, weakening those forces along the British and American paths towards Messina. Kesselring warned Hitler on 2 August that "if it is not possible to hold the pivot Regalbuto" then he must pull back into the final evacuation bridgehead. Kesselring's fears materialized when the Canadians and 78th Division pressed across the Salso Valley and cut the Axis line at Adrano.¹⁴² By then the whole of Eighth Army joined in the general offensive and clawed into



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The Pipes and Drums of the Seaforth Highlanders perform in Agira, 30 July 1943.

US Air Force photo 24882 AC



This air photo shows the German evacuation from Sicily across the Strait of Messina in progress. The Italian mainland is at the lower right and the beaches north of Messina are at the upper left. The small white streaks on the surface of the water are the wakes of vessels making the voyage to the mainland or back.

the volcanic hills at the foot of Mount Etna. On the northern wing of the Axis line Lieutenant-General Omar Bradley's 2nd US Corps attacked the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division and the comparatively intact 26th Assietta and 28th Aosta Divisions while the 1st US Division, joined by the fresh 9th Division, fought what General Patton saw as the largest and "most desperate American battle of the campaign" at Troina.¹⁴³ When it was over General Rodt reported 1,600 additional casualties on top of those lost in the Canadian sector in late July. The 4,000 man fighting component of 15th Panzer Grenadier Division that started the campaign was wrecked.¹⁴⁴

Two days after Adrano and Troina fell, 1st Canadian Division was pulled out of the line to rest and reconstitute for the follow-on mission to invade the Italian mainland. At the same time German units formed rearguards and began their infamous retreat to Messina. They withdrew up coastal strips on either side of Monte Etna, laying mines, blowing and booby-trapping bridges, and flooding tunnels behind them making pursuit by Allied land forces impossible. Under the cover of powerful anti-aircraft artillery German troops escaped across the Straits of Messina in barges and small engineer ferries at a dozen places along the narrow gap between Sicily and mainland Italy.

The Royal Canadian Air Force did what it could to stop them alongside Allied aircrew from a dozen nations. Three Wellington bomber squadrons from RCAF 331 Wing flew 350 sorties over the Straits, losing five planes to anti-aircraft fire along with 25 of the 30 men who crewed them.¹⁴⁵

On 17 August the guns finally fell silent on Sicily. The Allies accomplished all they had set out to and in only 38 instead of the expected 42 days. Sicily's airfields and ports became bases for Allied planes and ships, Axis control of Mediterranean shipping routes was broken, Mussolini was gone, peace negotiations with Italy were underway, and most importantly

nearly one million German soldiers were on the move from Russia, Germany and northern France to the Mediterranean coast of Europe. Despite later reflection on what more they might have done to stop 50,000 Germans from escaping Sicily, in early August 1943 Allied senior commanders were consumed with planning the next strategic steps.¹⁴⁶ Their next mission to invade mainland Italy cemented the deal whereby the Italians not only surrendered but actively joined the cause against Germany. That mission opened the Italian campaign on 3 September 1943 and diverted 20 percent of German military power to the Mediterranean theatre. Allied strategic aims of assisting Russia and pinning down German units in Western Europe prior to the invasion of Normandy in 1944 were well achieved.¹⁴⁷

The Germans struggled to put a positive spin on this strategic catastrophe to "raise morale and confidence at home." General Hube suggested to Marshal Kesselring that they must "describe battles in Sicily as a big success." Hube argued that evacuation from Dunkirk in 1940 "was presented to the British public as a great success" even though the British abandoned their heavy equipment. Because the Germans managed to ferry some of their trucks and tanks off the island then "the Sicilian campaign is actually a full success." Hube suggested that Germans be told how "in spite of tremendous superiority of men and material the enemy required six weeks to take the island" and his troops inflicted casualties on the Allies of about "1/3 of the fighting strength." Hube also pushed the message that his divisions evacuated from Sicily "are now on the mainland, ready and able for battle."¹⁴⁸ German Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels seems to have followed Hube's recommendations claiming in an August radio broadcast that the

Allies lost 33 percent of their ground force on Sicily in addition to 20 British warships and thousands of airplanes. Goebbels also claimed that only two understrength German divisions held off 20 Allied divisions in Sicily.¹⁴⁹ The most enduring myths of the Battle for Sicily seem to have originated in German propaganda.

Hube and Goebbels may have been right to conceal Husky's outcome from the German people lest they abandon hope in Hitler's war. Among the approximately 60,000 German soldiers evacuated from Sicily were some 19,261 wounded; in addition, 5,000 were killed and 6,663 taken prisoner in the campaign. Given that at least half of the 70,000 German soldiers on Sicily served in transport, service, and headquarters units casualty rates in fighting units were crippling. German units evacuated from Sicily were hollow shells that needed thousands of replacement soldiers to rebuild. Allied staff estimated that Italy's armed forces lost 2,000 killed and 5,000 wounded, although those numbers are difficult to verify given that the Italian Army administrative structure collapsed into civil war at the end of Husky. It is more certain that 137,000 Italian troops were captured and 62,000 escaped to the mainland. In total, the enemy suffered 32,000 German and 144,000 Italian casualties compared to 19,000 of the Allies.¹⁵⁰

German losses in Sicily hampered their effectiveness more than they cared admit. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division was the most badly crippled. After absorbing three replacement battalions and survivors from four disbanded battalions the division was still short 1,600 men from its fighting regiments. It did not re-appear on the Italian front until October 1943. The 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, in action only during the second half of the Sicily battle, lost 50 percent of its fighting strength.¹⁵¹ It was revived with new

replacements and thrown into the counteroffensive against the Allied invasion at Salerno in September 1943. Afterwards Kesselring complained that formations rescued from Sicily and hastily rebuilt suffered from "the lack of battle experience and incomplete training of the young reinforcements who, as soon as their leader has become a casualty, are completely helpless in the face of a much better trained enemy."¹⁵² Kesselring kept these private views secret and publicly expressed Hube's version of events that Germany's four Sicily divisions escaped "completely fit for battle and ready for service."¹⁵³

Canada's contingent on Operation Husky inflicted its share of the cumulative damage that broke Fascist power in Rome and Axis military power on Sicily. The 1st Canadian Division faced and outfought parts of every major Axis formation on Sicily without real numerical and firepower superiority until August. In partnership with US 1st Division the Canadians nearly destroyed 15th Panzer Grenadier Division and had a hand in battering 29th Panzer Grenadier, 1st Parachute, and Hermann Goering Divisions. General Oliver Leese, the 30th Corps commander, commended Major-General Simonds and his troops who "took up the forefront of the Corps battle from Vizzini. For three weeks, with the Malta Bde [Brigade] under your command, you have fought continuously against a stubborn German resistance, both by day and by night." General Montgomery told the Canadians that "I now consider you one of my veteran divisions."¹⁵⁴ For the first time in the Second World War the Canadian Army proved it could fight the best formations in the German Army and win. The public at home noticed. Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King wrote to Simonds: "In Canada the eyes of all fixed on SICILY. We know that there is heavy fighting ahead. We know too

that Canadian forces will do honour to our country and to themselves. Please give all the assurance that our hearts are with them, that Canada is proud of the decisive courage of her army overseas and that Canada will not fail her fighting men."¹⁵⁵

Canadian troops may have proved their military value, but their story in central Sicily also revealed how much death and destruction lay ahead before Hitler's Germany gave up its war. American veteran infantryman and literary scholar Paul Fussell captured North American expectations. "At first everyone hoped, and many believed, that the war would be fast-moving, mechanized, remote-controlled, and perhaps even rather easy."¹⁵⁶ The fighting in Sicily included spells of rapid motorized warfare, but whenever Axis forces chose to dig in and hold ground only firepower and hard fighting defeated them. Canada paid its share of the blood price for Sicily: 1,664 Canadians were wounded, 84 were taken as prisoners, 1,200 contracted malaria and battled illness relating to it for the rest of the war if not their lives, and 562 men were killed.¹⁵⁷ It should go without saying that the ugliness of victory in Sicily was much exceeded by the violence and ruthlessness of Nazi German occupation in Europe. The fighting had to go on, but the liberation of Europe was underway.

Notes

- This essay forms part of a body of work undertaken between The Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society at the University of New Brunswick and the Department of Military History at the US Army Command and General Staff College with support from the Cantigny First Division Museum. This essay includes a preliminary survey of largely untapped Italian Army archival materials. Early research raises more questions than answers and reveals how little is known in English-language histories about Italy's role in the Battle for Sicily.
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- See Helmut Heiber and David Glantz, *Hitler and his Generals: Military Conferences, 1942-45* (New York: Enigma Books, 2003), pp.132-144, 172-217; Horst Boog, *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol.VII: *The Strategic Air War in Europe and the War in the West and East Asia, 1943-44/45* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.521-523.
- J.B. Conacher, Canadian Military Headquarters [CMHQ] Report No.135, p.63.
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- Nigel Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield: Monty's War Years, 1942-1944* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), p.301.
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- Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-45* (New York, Macmillan, 2007), p.173.
- Samuel W. Mitcham with Friedrich von Stauffenberg, *The Battle for Sicily: How the Allies Lost Their Chance for Total Victory* (New York, Orion Books, 1991), p.xiv.
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- C.J.C. Molony, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, vol.5: *The Campaign in Sicily 1943 and the Campaign in Italy, 3rd September 1943 to 31st March 1944* (London: HMSO, 1973), p.82
- Frido von Senger Und Etterlin, *Neither Fear Nor Hope* (London: Macdonald, 1963), p.126.
- James Sadkovich has long argued that English language histories fail to consider Italian sources or appreciate Italy's complex role in the war. See his: "Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no.1 (January 1989), pp.27, 28.
- Albert Garland & Howard G. Smyth, *United States Army in World War II, The Mediterranean Theatre of Operations: Sicily and the Surrender of Italy* (Washington, 1965), pp.12-18.
- Charles T. O'Reilly. *Forgotten Battles: Italy's War of Liberation, 1943-1945* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001).
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- The National Archives [TNA] WO 204/7273 Allied Force Headquarters G-2 "Estimates of the Garrison of Sicily and its Likely Tactical Employment," 15 May 1943; F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, vol.3, part 1 (London: HMSO, 1984), pp.69-74.
- Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, pp. 291-296.
- Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, pp.2-5, 14-24.
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- LAC RG 24 War Diary, 1st Canadian Divisional Troops Company, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, July-December 1944; Arnold Warren, *Wait for the Waggon: The Story of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1961), p.227. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, pp.34, 45-46.
- Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, pp.22-23; Garland & Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.96-97.
- Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, p.20; Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, p.77; Garland & Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, p.98.
- MS C-077, 15th Panzer Grenadier Division Report, 12-14; MS No.C-095 "Liaison Activities with Italian Sixth Army," pp.22-23.
- TNA WO 169/8494 Eighth Army War Diary, 10 July 43; Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, pp.77-82; Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.147-165.

34. "Canadian Operations in Sicily, July – August, 1943," CMHQ Report No.127, Historical Section, Canadian Military Headquarters, 16 November 1944, p.11.
35. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army War Diary, 10, 11 July 43; l'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore [SME/US], *54^a Divisione Fanteria "Napoli"* Message to XVI Corpo Armata, 12 luglio 43.
36. Eighth Army's Intelligence Summary prepared with information available as of 19:00, 10 July cited in Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, vol.3, part 1, p.89.
37. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army War Diary, Messages to 15th Army Group, 12-14 July 1943.
38. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army War Diary, Messages, 11-12 July; Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, p.304; Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, pp.87-88.
39. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army War Diary, Message Montgomery to Leese, 12 July 1943; Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield* pp.302-305; Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, pp.87-89; Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.206-207.
40. Quoted in Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, p.304.
41. TNA WO 201/613 War Diary 30 Corps Headquarters Narrative, 12 July 1943.
42. Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, p.209.
43. Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, pp.302-306.
44. FMS MS C-095 von Senger Report, pp.36-42.
45. Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, pp.90-92.
46. Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.204-205; 211-213.
47. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army War Diary, Main HQ, Message Montgomery to Alexander, 22:30, 13 July 1943.
48. TNA WO 201/613 30th Corps War Diaries, Post-Operations Narrative, 13 July 1943; TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army War Diary, Message Montgomery to Alexander, 22:30, 13 July 1943.
49. SME/US *54^a Divisione Fanteria 'Napoli'* Report on Actions at Palazzolo and Vizzini, luglio 43; Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.208-209.
50. Rodt, "15th Panzer Grenadier Division in Sicily," pp.4-10.
51. TNA WO 201/613 War Diaries 30 Corps Headquarters Narrative, 13-15 July 1943.
52. Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, pp.105-106; Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, p.209.
53. Directorate of History and Heritage, National Defence Headquarters [DHH], AHQ Report No.14, ExceReport from OBS Daily Report, 14 July 1943, p.12.
54. Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, pp.307-308.
55. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army War Diaries, Messages Montgomery to Alexander, 14-16 July 1943.
56. Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, p.305.
57. TNA WO 201/62151, War Diary 51st Highland Division, 11-12 July 1943.
58. Warren, *Wait for the Waggon*, p.232.
59. DHH, Report No.136, Canadian Military Headquarters, "Canadian Operations in Sicily, Part II Section 3, Special Aspects of the Sicilian Campaign," p.18.
60. LAC, RG24-C-2, Vol.14691, HQ Royal Canadian Engineers, 1st Canadian Infantry Division, CRE's Situation Report, 14 July 1943.
61. The Three Rivers Regiment (12th CAR) landed with 1st Division at Pachino. The rest of Canada's Tank Brigade in came ashore on 13 July and served as Eighth Army's reserve.
62. See Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*.
63. LAC RG 24 Vol.15702, War Diaries, Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment [HPER], 15 July 1943; CMHQ 135, pp.4-5.
64. US National Archives and Records Administration [NARA] RG 338 US Seventh Army G-3 Operations Report, Sicilian Campaign, July-August 1943, p.5.
65. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army Daily Narrative 15 July 1943; Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, vol.3, part 1, p.91.
66. DHH AHQ No.14, OBS Sitrep 12 July 1943, p. 11.
67. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army Daily Narrative 15-17 July 1943, Messages Montgomery to Alexander, 16 July 1943.
68. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army War Diary Daily Narrative 15 July 1943, Messages Montgomery to Alexander, 15-16 July 1943; TNA WO 201/613, 30th Corps Post-Operations Narrative, 13 July 1943; CMHQ No.135, pp.5-6.
69. NARA RG 338, US Seventh Army G-3 Operations Report, Sicilian Campaign, July-August 1943, Section II "Second Phase," pp.6-7.
70. NARA, RG 301, 1st Infantry Division, Report by 2nd Battalion, 18th US Infantry, 1-31 July 1943; Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, p.223.
71. LAC RG 24 Vol.15296, War Diary 48th Highlanders of Canada, 15-16 July 1943.
72. The British and American engineers faced similar problems in Catania and on the north coast highway respectively in August but arguably neither was such a unique combination of problems in such a compact area. LAC RG 24 C-3 Vol.14691, War Diary, HQ Royal Canadian Engineers, 1st Canadian Division, 15-16 July 1943.
73. LAC RG 24 T-6700, War Diary, Adjutant and Quartermaster Branch, 1st Canadian Division, 15-16 July 1943.
74. LAC RG 24 Vol.15113, War Diary, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, 16 July 1943.
75. LAC RG 24 C-3 Vol.14408, War Diary, 1 RCHA, 1st Canadian Division Intelligence Summary No.2, 16-17 July 1943.
76. On July 16th General Rodt was unaware of Livorno Division units covering his east flank and deployed his own force of engineers and anti-aircraft gunners to the task. FMS C-077 Rodt Report, p.17; SME/US *4^a Divisione Fanteria "Livorno,"* 15 luglio 1943
77. FMS, MS C-077 Rodt Report, 20; MS C-095 von Senger Report, pp.37-45.
78. Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, p.233.
79. Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.214-215.
80. FMS MS C-095 von Senger Report, pp.44-45.
81. The United States Army used the Continental Regimental System during the Second World War. A regimental combat team included three infantry battalions, similar to the German system and equivalent to a Canadian and Commonwealth brigade.
82. NARA RG 301, US 1st ID, 26 RCT History of the Invasion of Sicily, pp.33-36.
83. This comment was logged on 13 July, but most 15th PG Division messages and reports carry incorrect dates. DHH, AHQ 14, p.12.
84. Generale di Brigata Ottorino Schriber, formally commander of 207th Coastal Division, took command of this large ad hoc group on 12 July, Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.197-8, 233. SME/US *4^a Divisione Fanteria "Livorno,"* 15 luglio 1943; FMS, MS C-077 Rodt Report, pp.17-19.
85. DHH, AHQ 14, pp.12-13.
86. NARA RG 407, II US Corps G-2 Estimate No.4, 16 July 1943.
87. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army, Message Montgomery to Alexander, 16 July 1943
88. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army Narrative, 17 July 1943.
89. LAC RG 24 Vol.15288, War Dairies, West Nova Scotia Regiment [WNSR]; Vol.15050, The Carleton and York Regiment [CYR]; Vol.18205, The Three Rivers Regiment, 17 July 43.
90. LAC RG 24 C-3 Vol.14408, War Diary 1 RCHA, 1st Canadian Division Intelligence Summary No.2, 16-17 July 1943.
91. LAC RG 24 Vol.15238, War Diary R22eR, 17-18 July 1943; CYR, 17 July 1943; HQ RCA 1st Canadian Division, 17 July 1943; CMHQ No.135, p.13.
92. The Divisional Commander, Royal Engineers, Lieutenant-Colonel Walsh kept rough notes from the meeting which capture the essence that the mission remained to intercept 15th Panzer Grenadier Division at Enna. LAC RG 24-C-3, Vol.14691, War Diary, HQ RCE, 1st Canadian Division, App No.10; Vol.13726, War Diary 1st Canadian Infantry Division, 17 July 1943; CMHQ 135, pp.11-14.
93. LAC RG 24 War Diary Royal 22e Régiment [R22eR], 17-18 July 1943; CMHQ No.135, pp.13-14
94. LAC RG 24 Vol.15072 War Diary HPER, 17-18 July 1943.
95. LAC RG 24 Vol.15288 War Diary WNSR, 18 July 1943; War Diary R22eR 18 July 1943; CYR 18 July 1943
96. LAC RG 24 Vol.15205, War Diary Royal Canadian Regiment, 18 July 1943; HPER 18 July 1943.
97. DHH, AHQ No.14, p.13.
98. FMS C-077, Rodt Report, p.20.
99. LAC RG 24-C-17 Vol.13738, War Diary Adjutant & Quartermaster Branch, 1st Canadian Infantry Division, 18-19 July 1943.

100. CMHQ 135, p. 18; Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, pp.90-100.
101. TNA WO169/8494, Eighth Army Narrative 18 July 1943.
102. Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, pp.113-114.
103. TNA WO 204/6936, Eighth Army Situation Reports No.09, 18 July 1943.
104. TNA WO 201/613, 30th Corps Post-Operations Narrative, 18-19 July 1943.
105. LAC RG 24 C-3 Vol.14691, War Diary 1st Canadian Division, RCE, Notes on Divisional Orders Group, 18 July 1943.
106. TNA WO 201/613, 30th Corps Post-Operations Narrative, 18-19 July 1943.
107. TNA WO 204/6936, Eighth Army Situation Reports No.10, 19 July 43.
108. SME/US 4^a *Divisione Fanteria "Livorno"* Log 15-21 luglio 1943; XVI Corpo Armata Log, 18-20 luglio 1943; Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, p.112.
109. TNA WO 201/613, 30th Corps Post-Operations Narrative, 18-19 July 1943
110. NARA RG 338, Seventh Army G-2 Report, 17 July 1943; TNA WO169/8494 Eighth Army Narrative 18 July 1943.
111. TNA WO 204/7273, Allied Force Headquarters G-2 "Estimates of the Garrison of Sicily and its Likely Tactical Employment," 15 May 1943.
112. NARA RG 338 Seventh Army G-3 Operation Report (Operation Husky), July-August 1943.
113. Eighth Army Intelligence Summary of 19 July quoted in Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, vol.3, part 1, p.94.
114. LAC RG 24 C-3 Vol.14691, War Diary 1st Canadian Division RCE, 19-20 July 1943.
115. LAC RG 24, War Diary PPCLI, 19 July 1943.
116. LAC RG 24 C-3 Vol.14408, War Diary LRCHA 19 July 1943.
117. LAC RG 24 Vol.15288, War Dairies, WNSR; Vol.15050, CYR, 20-22 July 1943; CMHQ No.135, p.22.
118. LAC RG 24-C-3, Vol.13726, War Diary, 1st Canadian Infantry Division, Intelligence Summary No. 5, 23 July 1943; RG 24 C-17 Vol.13738, 1st Division A&Q Branch, 21-23 July 1943.
119. FMS C-077, Rodt Report, pp. 20-21.
120. Interview with Major-General Walter Fries, commander 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, quoted in Timothy Saxon, *The German Side of the Hill: Nazi Conquest and Exploitation of Italy, 1943-45* (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 1999), p.152.
121. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, p.110.
122. DHH, AHQ Report No.14, p.13.
123. NARA RG 301, Seventh Army G-2 Estimate of Enemy Situation No.5, 23 July 1943.
124. Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, p.304.
125. LAC RG 24 C-3 Vol.14321, War Diary 1st Canadian Division, RCA, 23 July 1943.
126. DHH, AHQ Report No.14, Extracts from 15th Panzer Grenadier Division Report on Sicily, p.24.
127. German positions three kilometres north of Leonforte remained a problem until US 1st Division arrived on the Canadian left around 27-28 July. LAC RG 24 C-3 Vol.14321, War Diary 1st Canadian Division, RCA, 23-27 July 1943; Vol.15926, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 23-24 July 1943.
128. LAC RG 24 Vol.15246, HQ 1st Canadian Division Support Battalion (Saskatoon Light Infantry), 23 July 1943.
129. TNA WO 169/8494, War Diary, Eighth Army, Messages, Eighth Army to 15 Army Group, 21-23 July 1943.
130. NARA RG 338, US Seventh Army G-3 Operations Report, Sicilian Campaign, July-August 1943, Sections II & III; Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.302-305.
131. Molony, *The Campaign in Sicily 1943*, p.137.
132. TNA,WO 169/8494, War Diary, Eighth Army, Messages, Eighth Army to 15 Army Group, 21-29 July, 43.
133. TNA,WO 201/613, 30th Corps War Diaries, Post-Operations Narrative, 23-31 July 1943
134. LAC RG 24-C-3, Vol.13726 War Diary 1st Canadian Division, Intsums 6 & 7, 26-28 July 1943.
135. *Ibid.*; US II Corps identified 29th Division's reconnaissance battalion and one or two battalions from 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment between Nissoria and Agira. NARA RG 407, II Corps G-2 Report No.8, 24 July 1943.
136. LAC RG 24 Vol.15238, War Diary R22eR, 23-29 July 1943; Vol.15288, War Diary, WNSR, 23-29 July 1943.
137. FMSMSC-077, Rodt Report, p.38; Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.324, 336.
138. The letter was written on 31 July after the battle of Agira ended and before the soldier was killed in the battle of Troina fighting 1st US Division. He was from 4th Company, 1st Battalion, 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 29th Division. NARA RG 301, US 1st Infantry Division, Translations of Captured German Documents.
139. Glantz, OKW Conferences, 25 July 1943, pp.173-5, 210.
140. FMS, MS C-013, Albert Kesselring, "Special Report on Events in Italy Between 25 July and 8 September," pp. 3-12, 17-21; Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, pp.285-286; 307-308.
141. LAC RG 24-C-3, Vol.13726 War Diary 1st Canadian Infantry Division Intelligence Summary No. 9, Appendix A, 1 August 1943.
142. Extracts from OBS Reports to OKW, 2-6 August, DHH AHQ Report No.14, p.20.
143. NARA RG 338, US Seventh Army G-3 Ops Report, July-August 1943, Section III, pp.21-23.
144. Eberhard Rodt reports the Troina losses in detail, but not those in the Canadian sector between Valguarnera and Agira. FMS MS C-077, Rodt Report 25.
145. B. Greenhouse, S.J. Harris, W.C. Johnston, W.G.P. Rawling, *The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force*, vol.3: *The Crucible of War, 1939-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp.650-651.
146. TNA WO 169/8494, Eighth Army Message Traffic concerning Operations Buttress, Baytown and Avalanche, 24 July -30 August 1943; WO204/6937, 15th Allied Army Group Messages to Allied Force HQ Mediterranean, 2- 22 August 1943.
147. Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, vol.3, part 1, pp.103-7; Boog, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol.7, pp.497-501.
148. G.W.L. Nicholson and the Canadian official history team first published details of this memorandum. Despatch from Hube to Kesselring, dated 14 July, but most certainly 14 August 1943, DHH AHQ No.14, pp.16-17.
149. Intercept of Goebbels broadcast transcribed in 21 August 1943 issue of "The Red Patch," 1st Canadian Division's newsletter, LAC RG 24 Vol.15238, War Diary R22eR, August 1943 Appendix No.46.
150. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, pp.174-175; D'Este, *Bitter Victory*, pp.606-609.
151. DHH AHQ Report No.14, p.23.
152. OBS Memo to OKW regarding losses sustained in Italy from 1 September to 10 October 1943, 14 October 1943, cited in DHH, AHQ Report No.14
153. The view that the Germans outfought the Allies on Sicily and escaped "in good order" is best expressed in Mitchem and von Stauffenberg, *The Battle of Sicily*, pp.293-303.
154. Quoted from Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, pp.177-179.
155. Message from Prime Minister to General Simonds. LAC RG 24-C-3, Vol.13726 War Diary 1st Canadian Infantry Division, 20 August 1943.
156. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.3.
157. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, pp.174-176.

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