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The Guns of Sicily

The 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery in Operation Husky

DAVID W. GREBSTAD

Abstract: Most studies on Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, focus almost exclusively on the work of the manoeuvre elements with only perfunctory references to the men who provided the fire support. The story of the Canadian gunners that fought their way through Sicily has been woefully overlooked and needs to be told. Amongst the hills of Sicily, these Canadian gunners overcame inexperience, intense heat, forbidding terrain and a resilient enemy to develop the war-winning fire support formula that would later allow the Canadian Army to successfully fight its way through Italy and Northwest Europe.

OTHER THAN THE Dieppe raid, the campaign in Sicily was the first divisional-level combat operation conducted by the Canadian Army during the Second World War. During this operation, the future leaders of the Canadian Army in North-West Europe developed their combat experience and refined the fighting methods that would eventually lead them to victory.¹ Any work that investigates Operation Husky focuses almost exclusively on the work of the manoeuvre element with only perfunctory references to the men who provided the fire support. The story of the gunners that fought their way through Sicily needs to be told. Amongst the hills of Sicily, these Canadian gunners developed the war-winning formula that would

¹ Mark Zuehlke, *Operation Husky: The Canadian Invasion of Sicily, July 10–August 7, 1943* (Vancouver: Douglas and Macintyre, 2008), 2.

allow the Canadian Army to fight its way through Italy and North-West Europe. The intent of this article is to shed some light on the formidable efforts of the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery during the Sicilian campaign in the summer of 1943.

OVERVIEW

A review of the strategic impetus behind the invasion of Sicily, and the machinations that brought 1st Canadian Infantry Division into the operation late in the preparations, is beyond the scope of this article. It is sufficient to say that in the spring of 1943, 1st Canadian Division was ordered to conduct operations in Sicily commencing on 10 July 1943. The division's commander royal artillery (CRA) was Brigadier Bruce Matthews.² The 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery for the operations in Sicily comprised A and C Batteries of the 1st Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery (RCHA),³ the 2nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA), the 3rd Field Regiment, RCA, the 1st Anti-Tank Regiment, RCA and the 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RCA. Also under command for the initial assault was the 142nd (Royal Devon Yeomanry) Regiment Self-Propelled (SP), Royal Artillery (RA) and the 93rd (Medium) Battery, RA.⁴ These two British artillery units proved invaluable to the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery. The Devons were equipped with Bishop 25-pounder self-propelled howitzers and thus had substantially greater mobility than the towed guns in the Canadian units. Furthermore, the long-range medium guns (5.5-inch howitzers) of 93rd (Medium) Battery could engage more distant targets than the 25-pounders.

The months leading up to the invasion were filled with intensive training and planning in Scotland. The division's move to the

² The CRA commanded all of the artillery assigned to the Division, including Field, Medium, Anti-Tank and Anti-Aircraft Artillery. It was the CRA's duty to coordinate the fire of these units, along with supporting fire from naval vessels, close support aircraft and bombers, all with a view to facilitating the Division Commander's manoeuvre plan.

³ 1st Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery comprised three gun batteries – A, B and C. Due to space limitations only A and C Battery deployed to Sicily. B Battery joined its parent regiment in Italy after the Sicilian campaign.

⁴ Headquarters Royal Canadian Artillery, 1st Canadian Division [HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div], Operation Order No.1, 6.



Gunners drill in Canada before being sent overseas in 1940. [Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies]

Mediterranean involved a torturous voyage from Scotland to the south-eastern tip of Sicily. En route, three ships were sunk by a German U-boat resulting in vehicles, communication equipment, and artillery pieces being sent to the ocean floor. Despite this setback, the 1st Canadian Division landed on the beaches near Pachino during the early morning hours of 10 July 1943. The division formed the extreme left (western) flank of both 30 Corps and Eighth (UK) Army commanded by General Bernard Montgomery, and was flanked further to the West by Seventh (US) Army, under General George Patton. Together, Seventh and Eighth Armies comprised the Fifteenth Army Group commanded by British General Harold Alexander.

The division's initial advances were rapid as the defenders withdrew northward under pressure towards more defensible ground, centered on the southern slope of Mount Etna. There the Germans and Italians exploited Sicily's rugged terrain to its fullest. The result was several weeks of hard fighting during which the Canadians literally had to blast the defenders out of successive ridge lines. After about a month of intense combat, the Allies forced the Germans to evacuate the island and withdraw across the straits of Messina onto mainland Italy.

UNBLOODED ARTILLERY

Almost all of the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery had been on the first “flight” of combat elements that left Canada in 1939. They spent the next three-and-half years conducting extensive training in the United Kingdom – initially to repel the anticipated invasion of Britain by the Germans, and then in preparation for the eventual return to the continent. With the exception of a brief foray to France in 1940, the units did not see combat, and thus were completely “green” when they landed in Sicily. The Canadians were among British and American formations who had recently shattered the Axis forces in North Africa, proving themselves in combat and acquiring new tactics, techniques, and procedures.

The Canadian Army that arrived in England in 1939 was trained to fight a war along the same lines as their British counterparts. The doctrine of the time spurned the terrors of attritional warfare that had dominated the First World War and featured a nearly blind commitment to breakthrough by manoeuvre.⁵ In the early years of the war, the key leaders of the British Army conducted exercises predicated on deep penetration and were dismissive of the requirement for concentrated fire support.⁶ This approach to battle survived the operational-level failures of France in 1940 and pervaded Allied thinking even up to the commencement of the North Africa Campaign. It was in the sands of Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia that the artillery would re-emerge as the predominant arm on the battlefield. Chased into Egypt by Rommel’s Afrika Korps, it was not until the British built up significant artillery that they were able to stop the German advance with massive artillery fires, and commence offensive operations. The Allied predilection for deep manoeuvre was replaced by a return to an artillery-based doctrine like that of the First World War, predicated on a deliberate assault behind barrages by massed artillery.⁷ This artillery-based doctrine that emerged from the deserts

⁵ John Mosier, *The Blitzkrieg Myth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 10.

⁶ Terry Copp, *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade in WWII* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2007), 32.

⁷ Major-General (Retired) J.B.A. Bailey, *Field Artillery and Firepower* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 297. While there were a number of derivations of barrages, in essence a barrage was a wall of artillery fire that would “lift” or move a prescribed rate in accordance with the estimated speed of advance of the attacking manoeuvre formations.



A Canadian anti-tank regiment training in England prior to the Sicily invasion. [Library and Archives Canada PA 142661]

of North Africa was quite foreign to the British – and therefore, Canadian – generals of 1942.⁸

The evolving doctrine forced a change in organization and attitude. Late 1942 and 1943 saw a wholesale centralization of artillery where previously doctrine had stressed decentralization. In the fall of 1942, General Bernard Montgomery, commander of Eighth Army, ordered that “the Divisional CRA [was to] have centralized command of their divisional artillery, which was to be used as a seventy-two-gun battery.”⁹ In September 1942, in another step towards the centralization of fire support, the British Army created the first Army Group Royal Artillery (AGRA)¹⁰ in which medium and field regiments were brigaded. Although nominally an army-level asset, in practice the AGRA was often allocated to a corps. Canada followed suit and created 1st Canadian AGRA in October 1942. The ability to concentrate overwhelming fires that resulted from the creation of the AGRAS was one of the major factors that led to final victory.¹¹

⁸ Copp, *The Brigade*, 32.

⁹ Bailey, *Field Artillery and Firepower*, 306.

¹⁰ Bailey, *Field Artillery and Firepower*, 72.

¹¹ G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery, Volume II: 1919–1967* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), 111.

Although the 1st Canadian Division and its artillery had been training together for nearly three years, in the 12 months leading up to the invasion of Sicily the doctrine for the organization and employment of divisional artillery changed wholesale. As a result, the Canadian gunners under their CRA, Brigadier Bruce Matthews, found themselves racing to catch up.

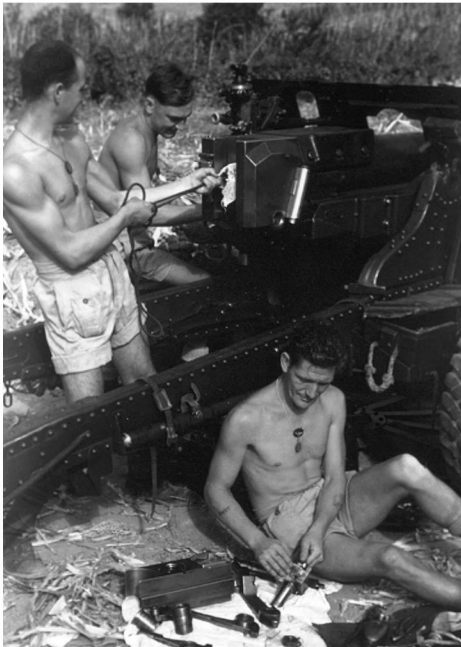
ORDERS FOR AN INVASION

The spring of 1943 brought orders for the 1st Canadian Division, commanded by Major-General Guy Granville Simonds, to participate in Operation Husky and mission-specific training began on 1 May 1943, only seventy days before D-Day.¹² Although they were still trying to familiarize themselves with the artillery-based doctrine that had emerged from the North Africa Campaign, the Canadian gunners' training was further hampered by a large-scale change in their equipment. All of the 25-pounder howitzers were fitted with new muzzle-brakes, while the Field Artillery Tractors (FATS) that towed the guns were replaced by new four-wheel drive variants known as Quads. New wireless sets were also issued, and the anti-tank artillery regiment converted one troop per battery to the heavy new 17-pounder anti-tank guns.¹³ In an after-action review of the events leading up to the operation, Brigadier Matthews recalled that the major equipment changes "were a great problem to all units, and coupled with the hundreds of minor adjustments to equipment of all sorts, tended to make things rather chaotic and seriously affected training in all departments."¹⁴ Despite the change in doctrine and equipment, the gunners successfully completed several weeks of intensive training in Scotland in preparation for the invasion. Training was facilitated by mentorship provided by an artillery veteran of the North Africa campaign, Eighth Army's brigadier royal artillery (BRA), Brigadier Meade E. Dennis. He, along

¹² Originally the Division had been under the command of Major-General Harry Salmon. While travelling to Cairo for a coordination conference prior to Husky, General Salmon was killed in an air crash. General Simonds was commanding 2nd Canadian Division at the time, and was transferred to command of 1st Canadian Division to replace Salmon.

¹³ HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Summary of Events Leading Up to Operations by 1 Cdn Div, 3.

¹⁴ HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Summary of Events Leading Up to Operations by 1 Cdn Div, 3.



A Canadian anti-tank regiment training in England prior to the Sicily invasion. [Canadian Forces Photo ZK 572]

with other British veterans of North Africa, had been dispatched by Montgomery to assist the Canadians in preparing for combat.¹⁵

The first convoy of ships departed Scotland on 28 June 1943 with the remainder following at regular intervals.¹⁶ The last element of the Divisional Artillery, the 1st Regiment, RCHA, departed Gourrock Harbour aboard the ss *Arundel* on 1 July. Tension must have been high amongst the members of the 1st Regiment as they were ordered to carry life preservers at all times and sleep fully clothed.¹⁷

As the gunners sailed away, the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery's war diarist noted contemplatively that "all ranks [watched] Scotland fade behind us and Ireland looming ahead. Most of us watched the same sight in reverse order three and a half years ago."¹⁸ Aboard the headquarters ship, the *Hillary*, Brigadier Matthews lectured the Divisional Artillery Headquarters on "Artillery Aspects of the Operation" and a Captain Arnold briefed the troops aboard

¹⁵ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada*, Vol.II, 135.

¹⁶ War Diary [WD], 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery [1st Cdn Div Arty], 28 June 1943.

¹⁷ WD, 1st Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery [1 RCHA], 1 July 1943.

¹⁸ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 28 June 1943.

on elementary Italian.¹⁹ Amongst the other units of the Divisional Artillery, the routine consisted of lectures, physical training, and in the case of the 1st Regiment, RCHA a route march aboard the ship.²⁰ Soon after the convoy entered the Mediterranean, the first tragedy of the Sicilian campaign struck the division. U-boats sank three ships – the *City of Venice*, the *St. Eseyllt*, and the *Devis* – on 4 July.²¹ While all units of the 1st Canadian Division suffered materially from this loss, the Divisional Artillery was particularly hard hit. It lost eight 17-pounder anti-tank guns, 10 25-pounder howitzers and six 40 mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns, and almost all of the vehicles of the Divisional Artillery Headquarters, although Brigadier Matthews' office caravan was spared.²² The preponderance of lost equipment came from the 3rd Field Regiment, RCA, and specifically 92 Battery. The 3rd Regiment's diarist lamented that "it was rather a disastrous loss for the [Regiment] as G section lost all their wireless sets and one of our three [batteries] was practically eliminated before the operation had even started."²³ This exacerbated the existing shortages, as the division was already short of its normal complement of fire support assets. The 1st Regiment, RCHA was left behind to join the Divisional Artillery on a later convoy, and when it deployed, it only brought two batteries.²⁴ As a result of losing these vessels, 3rd Field Regiment was compelled to organize itself on a two – rather than three – battery basis.²⁵ Likewise, 2nd Field Regiment lost an entire troop of personnel when their ship was torpedoed and they were taken to Algiers by a rescue ship, not to rejoin the regiment for seven weeks.²⁶ Considering the importance of artillery support to the prevailing Allied doctrine after the North Africa campaign, the loss of these fire support assets was a major blow to the division's ability to execute operations.

¹⁹ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 2–3 July 1943.

²⁰ WD, 1 RCHA, 5 July 1943.

²¹ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 4 July 1943.

²² WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 5 July 1943.

²³ WD, 3rd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery [3 RCA], 1–9 July 1943.

²⁴ Major G.D. Mitchell, Lieutenant-Colonel B.A. Reid, Lieutenant-Colonel W. Simcock, *RCHA – Right of the Line: An Anecdotal History of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery from 1871* (Ottawa: RCHA History Committee, 1986), 95.

²⁵ WD, 3 RCA, 1–9 July 1943.

²⁶ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada*, Vol.II, 139.

AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT AND THE FIGHT INLAND

The fire support plan that Brigadier Matthews developed for the assault phase of the campaign was rather straightforward. As the schedule did not have batteries coming ashore until last light on D-Day, fire support for the amphibious assault was initially provided by naval gunfire. The organic artillery would be available to support operations once they had established themselves on shore.

Matthews' plan for the assault phase decentralized the artillery in direct support of the two assault brigades, the 1st and 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigades. Each assaulting brigade could expect fire support from a battery and a half of self-propelled howitzers from the Devons, and a field regiment of towed 25-pounders.²⁷ The first artillery gun groups scheduled to arrive on the beach came from the Devons, divided into two groups of a battery and a half each. The Devons were followed by the guns of the 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments, RCA tasked to support 1st and 2nd Brigades, respectively.²⁸ The 1st Regiment, RCHA eventually came ashore on 13 July.²⁹ Consistent with the lessons learned in North Africa and changes in doctrine that stressed the centralization of artillery, all fire units were ordered to deploy as close as possible to the inter-brigade boundary in order to facilitate their centralization under the CRA after the assault phase was over.³⁰ The 1st Regiment, RCHA would either land and be directed to an assembly area or fall under command of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, depending on the situation at the time.³¹

Ammunition conservation was a grave concern. Once ashore, each regiment was authorized to fire up to 50 percent of its daily authorized ammunition allocation. Any firing beyond the 50 percent amount required the approval of the CRA.³² For the first six days of operations, the 25-pounders were authorized to fire 63 rounds per gun, per day while the medium guns were authorized 50. After six days that number was halved.³³ Despite these planning figures,

²⁷ HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Operation Order No.1, 5.

²⁸ HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Operation Order No.1, 5.

²⁹ WD, 1 RCHA, 13 July 1943.

³⁰ HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Operation Order No.1, 6.

³¹ HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Operation Order No.1, 6.

³² HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Operation Order No.1, 9.

³³ HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Operation Order No.1, 27.



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2014.

as it became harder to overcome German defences, the amount of ammunition that was expended increased exponentially.

The allocation of artillery observers to the assaulting brigades followed normal protocol, with the exception of the establishment of a Bombardment Unit of eight Ships' Forward Observation Officer (FOO) Parties that were created from the existing artillery FOO parties. These units were attached to each of the four assault battalions, the two Royal Marines commandos (40 and 41 Commando) and the reserve brigade.³⁴ The FOOS of the Bombardment Units had received special training at the Combined Operations Training Centre in Scotland prior to the invasion. The parties were a mix of regular artillery and naval personnel with additional radio equipment to allow them to communicate with the fire support vessels.³⁵ These FOOS would often operate well ahead of the infantry battalions they were supporting. In one instance, George "Duff" Mitchell, assigned to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), was provided with a Bren carrier and a small protection party.³⁶ Mitchell experienced difficulty with communications using the notorious No.18 Set radio, so he was very happy to have the more dependable No.22 Set that came with the Bren carrier. The No.22 Set enabled his signaller to establish communications with the HMS *Delhi* from which he directed a short barrage at the town of Ispica.³⁷

The *Delhi* was just one vessel of a large armada that provided naval fire support during the amphibious assault. Warships on call in the Canadian area of operations included two monitors, five gunboats, nine landing craft gun (large), six landing craft tank (rocket), and eight landing craft flak.³⁸ Particularly effective were the massive 15-inch guns of the monitor HMS *Roberts*.³⁹ The pulverizing fire of the Roberts' 879-kilogram shells facilitated the quick and efficient capture of the towns of Ispica, Modica and Ragusa. It was from Roberts that the CRA, who had left the headquarters ship Hilary,

³⁴ HQ RCA 1st Cdn Div, Operation Order No.1, 8.

³⁵ George (Duff) Mitchell, interview by Quiller Graham, 28 November 2000, Canadian War Museum Oral History Project, 31D Mitchell 1, Ottawa, ON.

³⁶ Mitchell interview.

³⁷ Mitchell interview.

³⁸ Directorate of History and Heritage, Canadian Military Headquarters [CMHQ] Report 126: Canadian Operations in Sicily, July–August 1943: Part I: The Preliminaries of Operation Husky, 23, <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/cmhqrd-drqgmc-eng.asp?txtType=2&RfId=126>>.

³⁹ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada*, Vol.II, 140.

directed the bombardment of the Sicilian littoral as the assaulting troops moved inland.⁴⁰ The first shore bombardment by this vessel occurred at 1530 hours on 10 July in the vicinity of Ispica. The war diary dryly describes the fire as simply “effective.”⁴¹

The landings were generally unopposed but did not go smoothly for the artillery. A storm passed through the area on 9 July resulting in high seas. The roiling surf posed a number of challenges for the gunners waiting to disembark. The 2nd Field Regiment’s war diarist recalled that “a feeling of excitement prevailed among the troops except the few who were seasick.”⁴²

In accordance with the plan, the first artillery elements landed were the self-propelled guns of the Devons who reported themselves established ashore at 1730 hours.⁴³ The Devons even captured 300 Italian prisoners of war their first day ashore.⁴⁴ The Divisional Artillery Headquarters landed on 11 July, moved north on the morning of 12 July, but suffered immensely in mobility due to its lack of vehicles. As the headquarters staff moved out, a flight of six German aircraft strafed its column. Gunner Howard Schultz, on loan to the Divisional Artillery Headquarters from the 1st Field Regiment, RCHA was killed and became the first fatal Canadian gunner casualty in Sicily.

Early on 11 July the troops of the 3rd Field Regiment assembled on the decks of their ship at 0230 hours and then waited for two to three hours before finally boarding a landing craft.⁴⁵ Once they reached the shore, the troops moved inland on foot to assembly areas, where they awaited the arrival of their guns and vehicles. The logic of employing a self-propelled regiment in support of the assault brigades became evident when many of the towed-artillery’s Quads became stuck in the loose sand and had to be towed to firm ground.⁴⁶

All of the guns and vehicles of 2nd and 3rd Regiments, RCA had been delivered on shore by 11 July.⁴⁷ Once the artillery began its

⁴⁰ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 10 July 1943.

⁴¹ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 10 July 1943.

⁴² WD, 2nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery [2 RCA], 9 July 1943.

⁴³ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 10 July 1943.

⁴⁴ Directorate of History and Heritage, CMHQ Report 127: Canadian Operations in Sicily, July–August 1943: Part II: The Execution of the Operation by 1 Cdn Inf Div. Section 1: The Assault and Initial Penetration Inland, 10, <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/cmhqrd-drqgmc-eng.asp?txtType=2&RfId=127>>.

⁴⁵ WD, 3 RCA, 10 July 1943.

⁴⁶ WD, 2 RCA, 10 July 1943.

⁴⁷ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 11–12 July 1943.

move inland, the towed 25-pounder howitzers had a difficult time moving on the goat-trails that passed for roads in southern Sicily. This would be a constant theme throughout the Sicilian campaign, and mobility was a particular problem for the 3rd Field Regiment which had lost so many vehicles to the U-boat attack. The 3rd Field Regiment tried a number of schemes to overcome its equipment shortages. On 11 July the regiment took control of four Italian 4.5-inch howitzers complete with horses, harnesses, ammunition and wagons. Although the regimental sergeant-major made a valiant attempt to press these assets into service, in the end the scheme was abandoned as the rate of advance was too slow and the gunners who “volunteered” as horse drivers complained of saddle sores.⁴⁸ Later, the 3rd Regiment dispatched some personnel to try to augment the unit’s meagre transportation. The party returned with a Fiat passenger car that had been employed by the Italian Army, a 3-ton diesel truck, and another early vintage Fiat passenger car.⁴⁹ These vehicles gave the 3rd Field Regiment a rather motley appearance, but the gunners’ commitment to execute their mission is commendable. The 3rd Field Regiment’s war diarist observed “how we move is a wonder to all of us. Men are hanging onto vehicles everywhere – on the tops, on the sides, and the [Regiment] bears more resemblance to a circus than to a Regiment of Field Artillery.”⁵⁰ This poor state of affairs led to the unit’s first casualty of the campaign. Lance-Sergeant Jack of 19 Battery, while clinging to the top of a Quad, was knocked off by a wire strung across the road and subsequently crushed by the gun and limber being towed behind. The unfortunate lance-sergeant died before the medical officer could reach him.⁵¹

Jack’s death took place while the field artillery was rushing forward to try to keep within range of the rapidly withdrawing defenders. Naval gunfire was thus vital during the first days. In fact, the first “Canadian” rounds were fired on 12 July by the 142nd (Royal Devon Yeomanry) Regiment (SP), RA whose self-propelled guns had greater mobility on the precarious Sicilian roads. The capture of the town of Modica by the PPCLI was facilitated by a 15-minute barrage by the

⁴⁸ WD, 3 RCA, 11–12 July 1943.

⁴⁹ WD, 3 RCA, 12 July 1943.

⁵⁰ WD, 3 RCA, 12 July 1943.

⁵¹ WD, 3 RCA, 12 July 1943.

Devon's that expended 575 high explosive rounds.⁵² The 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments, RCA did not fire their first rounds until 14 July, while 1st Field Regiment, RCHA did not join the fight until 17 July.⁵³ The lack of engagement was less than satisfactory to the gunners of the 3rd Field Regiment. On 12 July the regiment's diarist bemoaned that "to date the [Regiment] has not fired a shot!" and the next day, even more exasperated, he wrote "and we still haven't fired a round from our guns. Will we ever catch up to the Italians?"⁵⁴

What caused this rapid withdrawal in front of the Allied advance? Lee Windsor, in a recent publication, concluded that the hasty northward withdrawal was in fact the result of a pragmatic appreciation. When it became clear that the Allies would attempt a landing somewhere in the Mediterranean, the Axis powers faced a dilemma that is common to all armies on the defensive – much to defend with insufficient forces.⁵⁵ When the Allies landed on 10 July, the Axis only had sufficient local forces to strike at the Americans at Gela,⁵⁶ and these counterattacks were broken by the 1st US Division as it moved inland. Hitler, however, was determined to hang on in Sicily, which he hoped would prevent Benito Mussolini's fascist government from falling and thus keep the Italians in the war on the side of the Axis powers.⁵⁷ Given the resources available and the terrain, the Axis powers decided to establish a defensive line running from San Stefano on the northern coast, south to Leonforte and then east to Catania, creating an L-shaped perimeter that would secure the northeast corner of Sicily.⁵⁸ The apparent German and Italian fighting retreat was in reality a deliberate withdrawal to a more advantageous defensive position.

Thinking that the Axis powers were in retreat, Montgomery issued orders for Eighth Army to advance quickly to the north. The 13th Corps pushed north towards the Catania plain, while 30th Corps moved northwest towards Vizzini. At the vanguard of the 30th Corps manoeuvre was an ad hoc armoured column known as Harpoon Force,

⁵² CMHQ Report 127, 17.

⁵³ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada*, Vol.II, 145–146.

⁵⁴ WD, 3 RCA, 12–13 July 1943.

⁵⁵ Lee Windsor, "The Eyes of All Fixed on Sicily, Canada's Unexpected Victory, 1943," *Canadian Military History* 22, no.3 (Summer 2013): 9.

⁵⁶ Windsor, "The Eyes of All," 10.

⁵⁷ Windsor, "The Eyes of All," 13.

⁵⁸ Windsor, "The Eyes of All," 12.

followed closely by the 51st Highland Division. Montgomery hoped these formations could move in behind the Axis forces opposing the 1st US Division at Gela and cut them off, but unfortunately the 30th Corps ran into elements of the Italian 54th Napoli Division and the 206th Coastal Division supported by elements of the German Hermann Goering Division in Vizzini. What was intended to be a bold turning manoeuvre became a sharply contested affair.⁵⁹

The fight for Vizzini was the first major firing programme undertaken primarily by the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery. The surprisingly difficult fight for Vizzini brought Montgomery to order Harpoon Force and 51st Highland Division to abandon the northwesterly thrust and turn north towards the Catania plain, while the US forces swung to the west. This left a sizeable gap between the British and American forces that needed to be filled, and the 1st Canadian Division was the only formation in position to do so.⁶⁰

VALGUARNERA AND BEYOND

To fill the gap between the Seventh US and Eighth British Armies, the 1st Canadian Division was ordered to move towards the town of Enna. En route, the division ran into a rearguard force in Piazza Armerina which held them up for nine hours. The Canadians had run into the eastern flank of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division who had established a defensive position to the south and west of Enna in an effort to buy time for the 12th Italian Corps to move into the northern branch of the defensive line from San Stefano to Leonforte.⁶¹ After the Axis forces withdrew, the Canadians advanced to the area of Valguarnera, where the enemy had dug in along high ground with excellent command of the Catania plain. Assuming the enemy they encountered were withdrawing elements of the Herman Goering Division, 1st Canadian Division made a quick assault from the line of march. This initial attempt failed, and, on 18 July, the Canadians launched their first two-brigade assault on a road junction near the town of Valguarnera.

⁵⁹ Windsor, "The Eyes of All," 13.

⁶⁰ Windsor, "The Eyes of All," 14.

⁶¹ Windsor, "The Eyes of All," 19.

The battle for Valguarnera represented a transformation of the Sicilian campaign from a rapid advance behind a withdrawing foe to a gritty struggle against a determined enemy dug in amongst the rocky hills.⁶² The Canadians had in fact run into the hinge of the defensive line where the Axis forces intended to hold the northeast corner of the island. The Canadian divisional artillery now played a sustained part in the combat operations.

The fire plan to support the attack on Valguarnera included all of the regiments of the divisional artillery, less the 142nd (Royal Devon Yeomanry) Regiment, RA but augmented by fire from the 7th Medium Regiment, RA. The CRA's fire plan called for 68 rounds per gun to be fired, for a total of 5,984 shells.⁶³ This was the first Canadian concentrated divisional fire mission in combat since the First World War. After bitter fighting, the attack succeeded in ejecting the German defenders from the road junction and seizing the town of Valguarnera.

LEONFORTE / ASSORO

The Canadians encountered similar resistance to the east in the Catania plain. Montgomery's plan for a dash up the east coast to Messina was not coming to fruition. In a bit of classical British understatement he described the increasing enemy resistance as making things a "bit slow and sticky on the right."⁶⁴ While the 1st Canadian Division was fighting around Valguarnera, the Germans counterattacked the 13th Corps on the Catania Plain and in the west; the Americans who had swung wide to clear as far north as Palermo, were still a week away from closing with the enemy to the north. The only formation that had any potential to strike at a weak point was the 1st Canadian Division.⁶⁵ As a result the Canadians were tasked to advance north to Leonforte and then move east into the flank of the Germans, hopefully relieving the pressure on the Catania plain.

⁶² CMHQ Report 127, 28.

⁶³ WD, 1 RCHA, 18 July 1943.

⁶⁴ General Bernard Montgomery quoted by C.P. Stacey in *The Canadian Army 1939-1945: An Official Historical Summary* (Ottawa: Ministry of National Defence, 1948), 104.

⁶⁵ Lee Windsor, "The Eyes of All," 25.

The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (“Hasty P’s”) were tasked to seize the town of Assoro on the high ground to the east of Leonforte. This manoeuvre aimed to support a later assault on Leonforte by the 3rd Canadian Brigade. During the night of 20/21 July, the Hasty P’s conducted a daring night-time ascent up a cliff face and surprised the German garrison that occupied the ruins of a Norman-era fort atop the hill. The Hasty P’s coup de main has attained legendary status, due in no small part to the participation of eminent Canadian author Farley Mowat, who was an officer of the unit. Less well-known, however, is the four-hour harassing fire plan directed onto the road between Leonforte and Assoro that effectively distracted the German defenders.⁶⁶

The initial attempt to take Leonforte by 3rd Brigade ended in failure. It involved no fire support and was a poorly planned attempt to seize Leonforte in daylight.⁶⁷ For the second attack on Leonforte, Simonds employed the entire divisional artillery, reinforced by flanking artillery units for the heaviest Canadian barrage of the campaign up to that point. The intent of the barrage was to level the town of Leonforte.⁶⁸ The barrage, complemented by excellent counter-battery fire directed from the heights of Assoro by a Hasty P officer who had previously served in the artillery, allowed 3rd Brigade to secure Leonforte. The efficacy of the massive barrage became apparent several days later when the 2nd Field Regiment moved through the Leonforte/Assoro area and noted in its war diary that the town was completely ruined and the air was heavy with the odour of decayed flesh.⁶⁹

As the British divisions in the east had to build up supplies for their own renewed offensive Operation Hardgate, which began just before midnight of 29–30 July, the 1st Canadian Division became the main effort of Fifteenth Army Group.⁷⁰ Once Leonforte and Assoro were in Canadian hands, the division began an eastward move toward the town of Agira in order to attack the flank of the German defensive line on the Catania plain.⁷¹

⁶⁶ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 20 July 1943.

⁶⁷ Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 271.

⁶⁸ WD, 3 RCA, 21 July 1943.

⁶⁹ WD, 2 RCA, 25 July 1943.

⁷⁰ Windsor, “The Eyes of All,” 28.

⁷¹ Windsor, “The Eyes of All,” 26.

AGIRA

Simonds ordered an advance by 1st Canadian Brigade, led by the Royal Canadian Regiment and the 48th Highlanders, from the Leonforte/Assoro area eastward eight miles to the mountain-top town of Agira. Until this point, the Axis forces had been deployed in dispersed strong points. As they withdrew eastward under pressure from the 1st Canadian Division, however, they benefitted from contracting interior lines of communication and were able to deploy into mutually supporting defensive positions.⁷²

The attack was to commence at 1500 hours on 24 July. Simonds knew that it would require a prodigious amount of firepower to dislodge the defenders. The fire plan for the attack was conducted under the supervision of no less than the commander corps royal artillery (CCRA) of 30th Corps. The CCRA met with all of the commanding officers of the Canadian divisional artillery at the latter's headquarters on the morning of 24 July to coordinate the fire support plan. The fire plan consisted of a rolling barrage provided by seven regiments – those of 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery reinforced by 142nd (Royal Devon Yeomanry) (SP), RA, the 16th Field Regiment, RA, and the 7th and 64th Medium Regiments, RA from 30th Corps' 5th AGRA. In addition to artillery fire support, the division also received support from the tactical and strategic air forces. During the fire plan conference, the CCRA advised the artillery commanders that they would be witness to the first example of cooperation between heavy bombers and land forces, as the fire plan would include six squadrons of medium and heavy bombers based in Malta.⁷³

The complex fire plan included a number of moving pieces. In order to help coordinate the air support, the 1st Field Regiment fired a smoke screen 1000 metres ahead of the attacking infantry, beyond which the air force was free to bomb targets of opportunity.⁷⁴ Ahead of the advancing infantry, a creeping barrage fired by the remaining artillery units attempted to suppress the German defenders while the assaulting battalions closed with them.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the rigid schedule of the fire plan meant the barrage, which rolled forward in

⁷² Windsor, "The Eyes of All," 27.

⁷³ WD, 3 RCA, 24 July 1943.

⁷⁴ WD, 3 RCA, 24 July 1943.

⁷⁵ Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 299.

accordance with its timed programme, passed on when the infantry were held up by enemy fire, thereby squandering its neutralization effects. The 1st Canadian Brigade made three attempts to move through the intervening town of Nissoria towards Agira, but in each case the lead battalion was beaten back. Tragedy was narrowly averted when the Divisional Artillery Headquarters issued orders for the commanding officer of the 3rd Field Regiment to rendezvous with the CRA, and transmitted the incorrect coordinates, which sent the commanding officer and his intelligence officer into the as-yet unsecured Nissoria. The two officers spent an “exceedingly unpleasant hour in Nissoria awaiting the CRA” before the error was realized and the two made a hasty withdrawal to the heights of Assoro, the true site of the meeting.⁷⁶

The task of securing Agira passed from the tired 1st Brigade to the 2nd Brigade. The CRA and artillery commanding officers met with Simonds at an observation post atop Assoro.⁷⁷ All reinforcing regiments but 7th (Medium) Regiment, RA had been clawed back by the CCRA of 30th Corps, so the number of rounds to be fired was increased to 139 rounds per gun.⁷⁸ The second fire plan opened with a 17-minute barrage on the opening line. The barrage would then be lifted and move eastward in 28 successive steps, advancing 100 yards every 3 minutes.⁷⁹

It is important to recognize the extraordinary efforts of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. Although 139 rounds were called for in the fire plan, Simonds ordered 400 rounds-per-gun to be delivered to the gun positions.⁸⁰ This required 150 trucks and drivers to haul the ammunition from the beaches under what the war diarist of the 2nd Field Regiment described as “[the] most adverse conditions.”⁸¹ As over 500 trucks of the division were lost on the three ships that were sunk whilst en route to Sicily, the successful delivery of this ammunition was a signal achievement.⁸²

Throughout the battle for Agira, the guns were pushed well forward, often deploying less than 3,000 yards from the forward

⁷⁶ WD, 3 RCA, 25 Jul 1943.

⁷⁷ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 25 July 1943.

⁷⁸ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada*, Vol.II, 150.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 150.

⁸⁰ WD, 3 RCA, 26 July, 1943.

⁸¹ WD, 2 RCA, 26 July 1943.

⁸² Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 327.

infantry forces. In the fluid battlespace of Sicily, the gun positions came under intermittent fire from enemy machine guns and heavy mortars. On one occasion a German sniper became active off the left flank of the 1st Field Regiment, RCHA, but withdrew after a patrol was dispatched from the guns.⁸³ Despite these challenges, the fire plan to support the infantry past Nissoria was effective. The divisional artillery war diarist reported that 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade:

made the attack under cover of barrage, which was reported by the infantry to be perfect. The barrage was so even and steady that the infantry closed right up on it and were on the enemy before they recovered from shock of barrage. Prisoners taken confirm this view. The objective ... was taken with very few casualties to our troops.⁸⁴

Still, the day was not without tragedy. The 2nd Field Regiment, RCA was shelled by German artillery and suffered 13 casualties.⁸⁵

The lead elements of the division now sat only three miles from the objective of Agira. Another push was planned by the 2nd Brigade which eventually moved to within a mile of the town with the support of harassing fire and concentrations by the artillery.⁸⁶ A final push to move into the city was planned with another fire plan that called for nothing short of the complete destruction of Agira by indirect fire. Three hundred rounds were stockpiled at each gun position and at 1200 hours the infantry on the outskirts of the town were ordered to withdraw.⁸⁷ Minutes before the shelling commenced, an errant FOO, Captain G.E. Baxter from C Battery, 1st Field Regiment, RCHA supporting the PPCLI, accidentally wandered into Agira only to find that the enemy had departed. Fortunately for the town's inhabitants, who crowded around Captain Baxter to celebrate their liberation, Agira was spared destruction.⁸⁸

⁸³ WD, 1 RCHA, 26 July 1943

⁸⁴ WD, 1st Cdn Div Arty, 25 July 1943.

⁸⁵ Directorate of History and Heritage, CMHQ Report 136, Canadian Operations in Sicily, July–August 1943. Part II: The Execution of the Operation by 1 Cdn Inf Div. Section 3: Special Aspects of the Sicilian Campaign, 3, <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/cmhqrd-drqgmc-eng.asp?txtType=2&RfId=136>>.

⁸⁶ WD, 1 RCHA, 27 July 1943.

⁸⁷ WD, 1 RCHA, "Agenda: Assault on Agira," 27 July 1943.

⁸⁸ WD, 1 RCHA.

REGALBUTO AND THE SALSO RIVER

The final chapter in the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery's Sicilian story centres on the assault of the town of Regalbuto, seven miles east of Agira, tentatively scheduled for 30-31 July. With the 231st (Malta) Brigade under command, 1st Canadian Division seized the ridgeline south of the objective with a two-brigade attack conducted by the 231st and 1st Canadian Brigades, supported by an immense barrage of the three Canadian field regiments augmented by 165th Field Regiment, RA and the 7th, 64th and 70th Medium Regiments, RA.⁸⁹ Once the ridgeline south of Regalbuto was secured, the division prepared for a deliberate assault into the town behind another large barrage. Fortunately, as in the case with Agira, forward patrols found the town deserted of enemy and the fire plan was not required.

The division continued north along the Salso valley protecting 30th Corps' left flank. Divisional combat continued for almost another three weeks, but with the narrowing front created by the massive Mount Etna, the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery was not called upon to fire any large concentrations for the remainder of the campaign. Tragically, on the last day of the campaign an American B-25 Mitchell bomber was shot down and crashed into the 2nd Field Regiment's command post, causing 29 casualties.⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

This article provides a brief overview of the efforts of the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery during the Sicilian Campaign. It demonstrates that historians have yet to explore this vital chapter in the campaign. Unfortunately, many of the existing histories on the Sicilian campaign lack an in-depth investigation into the artillery's role within 1st Canadian Division. In this way, this work addresses a topic that will help paint a fuller picture of Canada's role in Italy.

This article demonstrates that the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery was thrust into a combat role with no combat experience, having recently emerged from a significant reformation in artillery organization and tactics. The Divisional Artillery conducted a

⁸⁹ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada*, Vol.II, 152.

⁹⁰ CMHQ Report 136, 3.

torturous maritime approach to the area of operations, suffering a severe loss of equipment and personnel to enemy action on the high seas. Once the Division came into contact with a highly trained enemy making the best use of Sicily's topography, the artillery's role became paramount. The infantry no longer operated beyond the range of the guns because their advance became bogged down by the withering machine gun, mortar and artillery fire of the defenders. As the Division ran into increasingly obstinate defences, the amount of artillery that was required to dislodge the enemy grew exponentially.

However, there was still much to learn. Despite the impressive amount of shelling conducted in the assault on Agira, the fire plan has been correctly criticized for its lack of flexibility. Likewise, the vast majority of rounds fired during the creeping barrages did not land anywhere near the enemy and had no neutralizing effect whatsoever. The evolution of fire support was a work in progress, and experience in Sicily was an important step in the development of a very effective artillery-based doctrine. As Terry Copp observes, "the artillery based doctrine ... has been widely criticized by historians for its rigidity ... but it also suggests that the doctrine evolved out of the unique situation confronting the Allies in 1943-44: the necessity of attacking strong defensive positions with inferior armour and infantry weapons."⁹¹

The gunners who fought their way through Sicily have a story that requires greater attention. They faced many hardships throughout the campaign but nonetheless persevered. In the end, they helped to develop the war-winning artillery formula that would allow the Canadian Army to successfully fight its way through Italy and Northwest Europe.



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⁹¹ Copp, *The Brigade*, xi.