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A Retrospective from Sicily's Battlefields

The 2012 Canadian-American Battlefield Study Tour

Robert Engen

On 9 June 2012, 69 years less a month since the beginning of Operation Husky in July 1943, another invasion of the island of Sicily commenced. This time it was a vanguard of academics, teachers, Canadian and American army officers, and museum researchers who touched down in Catania, intent on following in the footsteps of the Allied armies that liberated the island. This annual Canadian-American Battlefield Study Tour to Sicily was spearheaded by academics at the University of New Brunswick's Gregg Centre and supported by the Canadian Forces, the US Army Command and Staff College's Department of Military History, the US First Division Museum at Cantigny, and numerous university centres for the study of war. I had the privilege of being supported by the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies to join this tour on its exploration of the island, and returned home a week later with the impression that this is powerful, important tour.

The seven days of active touring and lectures followed the Allied Husky landings and subsequent campaign geographically in order to mirror the narrative of the war in Sicily. Emphasis was placed upon the paths of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division and the US 1st Division, but

Abstract: Every year since 2006, the Gregg Centre and its partners have offered a unique study tour option for civilian graduate students, teachers, and Canadian and American army officers. The tour focuses on the sea, air, and ground campaign waged on the island of Sicily in July and August 1943 to force Italy's surrender and defection from the Axis. Robert Engen was a participant on the 2012 tour and describes his impressions of the experience.

due to the nature of the country and the spectacular vistas afforded us it was possible to conceptualize the operations of the entire 15th Army Group in Sicily. The tour went from the Canadian landings at Pachino beach up through Syracuse to the edge of the Catania Plain, where we discussed 13 Corps' fierce battles. From there, the four-vehicle tour convoy traced the inland route of the Canadians, made stops at the American landing zone at Gela and battlefield of Barrafranca, walked the ground at Piazza Armerina, Valguarnera, Assoro, Leonforte and Agira, and spent a day examining the American fight at Troina. Side-trips were also made to Catenanuova, the *Museo Storico Sbarco in Sicilia* in Catania, and the Straits of Messina.

The roadside and hilltop lectures alone made the trip worthwhile. These were delivered with energy by

the tour historians, Lee Windsor, Greg Hospodor, John Curatola, and Cindy Brown, and reflected their emerging research on the Sicilian and Italian campaigns. This new interpretation challenges the established narratives of historians like Bill McAndrew, Douglas Porch, and Carlo D'Este, who have seen the Sicilian campaign as a bitter victory, noteworthy more for its lost opportunities and the graceful German withdrawal than for any real competence or flair on the Allied side. Study tour participants tested those assertions on the ground. For seven days the group explored the tactical, operational and strategic dimensions and objectives of the campaign in direct relation to the physical and human spaces of the island of Sicily. Based on their own research, the tour historians argued that the campaign's detractors were stuck in a 1980s manoeuvre warfare mindset; in 1943 the battle for Sicily was not about racing to Messina, but was instead about getting ashore, defeating the inevitable counterattacks, and coming to grips with the Germans and Italians in order to win the force-on-force battle. The battles were more attritional and based on maximizing enemy losses, and this, the instructors argue, was accomplished successfully even though Allied commanders initially hoped for a quick mobile victory.



Top: Cindy Brown introduces the group to the extensive planning put into Allied civil affairs on Sicily.

Middle: The Canadian landing beaches at Pachino.

Bottom: Greg Hospodor, associate Professor at Fort Leavenworth, lectures next to a German pillbox near Gela.



Plain (bristling with anti-tank guns and most of five Axis divisions in mid-July 1943) as General Bernard Montgomery did and to see, just as he did, echoes of the Somme battlefields of the First World War and the perils surrounding a frontal assault over such terrain. While the tour did not allow free-form exploration of the battlefields (nor would such be available on private property) a remarkable job was done of setting up “stands” for the lectures from which participants could oversee and judge the terrain.



The historian instructors are presently working on a new transnational history of the battle for Sicily, and I have no doubt that their findings will completely change how the Allied and Canadian performance in Sicily is assessed. Presently the best studies of the campaign, such as D’Este’s *Bitter Victory*, are the ones that stand most at odds with the new interpretations, giving the tour a two-fisted, combative approach to the extant scholarship. Criticisms of Allied decision-making and combat effectiveness were largely absent, but most prior historical judgments of the Allies and Canadians in Sicily have been extremely dour, so the tour’s interpretation was clearly aimed at redress. Particularly important was the revelation that most of the postwar historical assessment of Sicilian operations was based upon the German propaganda machine’s own attempts to put a positive spin on what, for them, was quite simply a disastrous campaign. The tour’s main argument therefore

Instead the Allies – and especially the Canadians – devastated the Axis forces arrayed against them, and utterly bankrupted German plans to establish their 1943 “winter line” in the rugged hills surrounding Mount Etna and hold the Allied 15th Army Group in Sicily indefinitely. Those German and Italian units that escaped the island in August 1943 were broken, and consisted of shattered divisions of walking wounded that

needed to be completely rebuilt before returning to battle.

This nascent interpretation of the Sicilian campaign was punctuated by seeing the physical environment in which the battles unfolded, a breathtaking experience for any historian of Operation Husky. It is one thing to condemn the slow progress of the British Eighth Army on maps; but quite another to stare out across the flat, river-run Catania

fits well with the work of other scholars such as Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies, whose book *The Myth of the Eastern Front* points out just how much of our historical understanding of the Second World War is based upon the German reckoning of how the war unfolded. Such views are controversial and will find detractors, but in coming years will also breathe new life into the study of the Mediterranean front during the war.

The tour was also comfortably and consciously situated within the adage that all history is contemporary history. Coalition warfare in the 1943 campaign was the most prominent theme, and during the daily stands and lectures the contours of Kandahar began to emerge in the rolling Sicilian landscape. German "booby-traps" and "demolitions" became "roadside IEDs." The assault on Assoro and the bloody Canadian battles between Nissoria and Agira were cast as reminiscent of mountain operations in northern Kandahar province. The tasks faced by the Allied Military Government set up in the wake of the Husky landings were the same challenges now faced by ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. The message was that what we are doing now on overseas battlefields has been done before, on this Mediterranean island 70 years earlier. But given that the study tour was partly a professional development

exercise for serving Canadian Army personnel, it is understandable that the shadow of Afghanistan would hang overhead. The mileage of these parallels may vary for historians, but

they still provide a rich, thought-provoking context for the writing of the campaign's new history. The frankness of the tour instructors in laying out the influence of modern



Photos by Norm Betts



Top: Looking from the German point of view.

Middle: A group picture with a friend of the Can-Am tour, Cristoforo Venturi. Venturi was a young boy during the invasion.

Bottom: The kindness of Sicilians. Can-Am tours are often invited to enjoy the hospitality of Sicilian civilians during the course of the tour. Here the group is sitting at the table of friend, Cristoforo Venturi.



Left: The Can-Am tour gets around in nine passenger vans to enable the group to get to the out of the way points that offer the best view of the battlefield.

Above: Lee Windsor lectures about the end of the campaign while crossing the Messina Straits.

ops on the study of history was appreciated.

Beyond the academic experience, the best elements of the tour were the interactions with the land and with the memories of the campaign. Lunch at the house of a local farmer between Vittoria and Gela, around which bloody fighting took place between American paratroopers and Axis defenders, where we had a chance to crawl through some of the well-preserved concrete bunkers. A tour of the Masseria Mandrascate villa outside Valguarnera; soldiers of the Princess Patricias had fought their way through the villa's fields on their way to the assault on Leonforte. Telling stories about the fallen soldiers by their gravesites in the Agira Canadian War Cemetery; each tour participant researched and shared what they knew about the life of an Allied soldier who died in Sicily. Personal moments such as these connected the war to the land, to its people, and to those left behind at the end of the war.

all the more noteworthy given just how much history Sicily wears on its sleeve, seeing as the island has been the crossroads of the Mediterranean for 2,500 years. It would have been easy to get caught up in tangents about the island's Greek, Roman, Arab, or Norman conquerors or its role in the *Risorgimento* (Italian unification) but this tour was professionally run and maintained its stated objective throughout with a practised determination. That said, tour leaders acknowledge that centuries and deep layers of Sicilian history cannot help but shape the 1943 campaign from the location of major cities and towns, to the pattern of roads and agricultural practice. The connection between historical epochs was made especially apparent during a point-of-interest lecture given at Syracuse on the Peloponnesian Wars.

The tour generated surprising amounts of debate and discussion even "off the clock": in constant chatter on the road in the tour vans, while wandering the streets and back

alleys of Sicilian towns, and over pitchers of the *casa vino* at the nightly meals in Syracuse and Enna. A challenging and energetic academic environment was swiftly created, harmonizing with the breathtaking Sicilian vistas that we explored. It was a delight to get to know the array of teachers, students, researchers, and soldiers who were on the trip, an intersection of knowledge and expertise that complemented the formal content beautifully.

The Sicily Study Tour is important. The content is intellectually challenging and the experience of Sicilian culture and society is eye-opening, as the tour takes one far from the island's normal tourist-worn paths. Academically there are still rough edges and points of contention, but these are small issues against the backdrop of a remarkable and unique experience, invaluable for any military historian and vital for scholars of the Second World War and the war in Italy. Currently the tour is primarily a professional development exercise for serving officers, but further support and contributions from private and scholarly institutions can help to expand the academic dimensions and participation in what is already a



Above: Assoro dominates the background as the tour wraps up for the day.

Right: The author, Robert Engen, on the battlefield. The home base for the Can-Am tour, is Enna, in the background.

top-notch field seminar. It is my sincere hope that, with the 70th anniversary of the Husky landings occurring this year, that more students, academics, and historians will have the opportunity to experience this unique and eminently worthwhile tour.

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