Landing in Sicily

Landing in Sicily was a Battle Honour granted to Canadian regiments that participated in the assault landings on the island of Sicily during the Second World War. The battle honour officially recognizes actions fought from 9 to 12 July 1943.

Background

The background to the assault landings in general are given in the article on Operation HUSKY. That code name was applied to the plan for the invasion of Sicily, which was finalized early in May 1943 and remained for the most part unchanged by D-Day, set for July 10. A significant feature that would change on D-Day was the name of the formations landing; Force 343 became the U.S. 7th Army and the British 12th Army, temporarily designated during the planning phase, reverted back to its historic designation of 8th Army.

Overall Plan

The 2d U.S. Corps was to land the 1st and 45th Divisions in the Gulf of Gela, with the 3rd Division and 2d Armored to land west and seize Licata and both the port and airfield there. Paratroops of the 82d Airborne Division were to land four miles to assist the 1st Division. The 8th Army's ambitious plan was to make five simultaneous landings on two coasts; on the right 13th Corps was to land the 5th and 50th Divisions, preceded by the 1st Airborne's gliders and amphibious landings by con troops. Their goals were Syracuse and Catania.

On the left, 30th Corps was to land the 1st Canadian Division and the 51st (Highland) Division along with the independent (Malta) Brigade astride the Pachino peninsula. The Highland Division was to land at BARK SOUTH beach and occupy Pachino with BARK EAST designated for the Malta Brigade and the Canadians, driving for Pachino airfield, landing at BARK WEST Special Service Brigade under command, comprised of No. 40 and No. 41 Royal Marine Commandos. It was expected the 8
would meet the U.S. 45th Division in the vicinity of Ragusa.

Naval Forces

- Force "H" – four battleships, four cruisers, two aircraft carriers, and eighteen destroyers – concentrated in the Ionian Sea as a deception plan, feigning an invasion of western Syria.

- Force "Z" – in reserve in the western Mediterranean, to reinforce "H" or replace casualties at Sicily, as necessary.

- Western Task Force – mainly U.S. Navy forces, divided into a Control Force and three Task Forces that corresponded to the three American beach landings.

- Eastern Task Force – mainly Royal Navy forces, divided into Force "A" (13th Corps/231st Brigade) arriving from the Middle East, Force "B" (51st Division, arriving from Tunisia) and Force "V" (1st Canadian Division arriving from the U.K.) Force "K" consisted of four cruisers and six destroyers tasked with close gun support for the landings.

Air Support

RAF fighter support from Malta and US fighter support from Tunisia was expected to operate with little opposition; enemy g. on Pantelleria and Lampedusa – small island garrisons lying between Allied-held Africa and the invasion beaches – were red Allied bombing and assured the element of surprise to the naval forces. Pantelleria became home to Allied fighter squadrons 100 miles from the invasion beaches. In all, over 4300 aircraft from 250 Allied squadrons were available to operate against smaller Axis force.

1st Canadian Division

Terrain

The Amber Coast (Costa dell' Ambra in Italian) extends from a point two miles west of the extreme end of the Pachino peninsula running five miles to the north-west in an arc, bounded by two headlands, the Cape of Ants (Punta delle Formiche) in the south and Castle Point (Punta Castellazzo) in the north. The long beach is divided in two naturally by "the Caves" (le Grotticelle), overhung by limestone. It was this stretch of sand that became BARK WEST, the left half coded SUGAR and TO ROGER.

The beach itself offered no real obstacle; behind lay a limestone ridge with a maximum rise of 10 feet, with gently sloping behind covered in sand and patches of poor soil. Behind SUGAR lay marshy terrain, including the Pantano Longarini, a large impassable to motor vehicles. Farmer's fields were bounded by "dry stone" walls, and a rough cart track connected the path running Pachino-Ispica to a point a mile inland from Grotticelle. A real obstacle lay to sea, where false beaches were discovered offshore, meaning infantry disembarking from landings might find themselves marooned on sandbars, on the wrong side of lagoons too deep to wade through to get to the island itself.

The real obstacles lay to sea, where false beaches were discovered offshore, meaning infantry disembarking from landings might find themselves marooned on sandbars, on the wrong side of lagoons too deep to wade through to get to the island itself. The long beach is divided in two naturally by "the Caves" (le Grotticelle), overhung by limestone. It was this stretch of sand that became BARK WEST, the left half coded SUGAR and TO ROGER.

The real obstacles lay to sea, where false beaches were discovered offshore, meaning infantry disembarking from landings might find themselves marooned on sandbars, on the wrong side of lagoons too deep to wade through to get to the island itself. The long beach is divided in two naturally by "the Caves" (le Grotticelle), overhung by limestone. It was this stretch of sand that became BARK WEST, the left half coded SUGAR and TO ROGER.

The real obstacles lay to sea, where false beaches were discovered offshore, meaning infantry disembarking from landings might find themselves marooned on sandbars, on the wrong side of lagoons too deep to wade through to get to the island itself. The long beach is divided in two naturally by "the Caves" (le Grotticelle), overhung by limestone. It was this stretch of sand that became BARK WEST, the left half coded SUGAR and TO ROGER.
Canadian Plan

The plan called for the 1st Brigade to land on ROGER east of le Grotticelle, destroy the enemy battery at Maucini, cap airfield at Pachino, and make contact with the British 30th Corps. The 2nd Brigade was to land to the west of le Grot SUGAR, destroy beach defences, assist the Special Service Brigade and occupy positions north of the Pantano Longarin from which it could patrol to the northwest. The Commandos of the Special Service Brigade, landing west of Punta Castellazz, given the responsibility of securing the extreme west flank of the 8th Army's assault zone; their landing was to precede H-1 ten minutes. The two infantry brigades were scheduled to land at H-Hour, set for 0245.

The monitor HMS Roberts provided gunfire support with its 15-inch guns, assisted by the cruiser Delhi and three destroyer brigade also had a destroyer and four smaller craft for close escort to shore; the run-in was to be silent unless the enemy fire, to preserve surprise.

The 3rd Brigade, 12th Army Tank Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment), and various artillery and medical units, held as reserve, were to be landed while the assault brigades advanced on high ground astride the Pachino-Ispica road. The third phase of the assault landing was to be an advance to the north-west alongside the 51st (Highland) Division.

The Landings

In the words of one historian, 'while the Second Brigade, on the left, encountered only minor difficulties, the First Brigade's came dangerously close to complete collapse."

2nd Brigade Landing

The Seaforths and PPCLI were transported to shore in LCA (Landing Craft, Assault), which were small, flat bottomed asa capable of carrying a single infantry platoon... The PPCLI found little small arms fire greeted them; the Seaforth Highlander themselves put ashore too far to the right - in fact, on the wrong side of the Patricians.

The day was a relatively easy one for the Seaforths;

The (Carrier Platoon), led by Major Forin, turned westward following the water-line to avoid mines. En route he ran into some of the Seaforth Platoons from "B" Company which were perplexed as to their location but he directed them to the right area. By about noon the carriers had met up with the remainder of the unit which was busy consolidating on the
intermediate objective overlooking the beaches northwest of the inland lake.

The addition of the carriers, together with "B" Company's arrival, brought the Seaforths up to strength except for the administrative echelons which were due to arrive later. At some points on the high ground the men could see Lipsa, a town nestled on a rocky ridge about seven miles to the northwest where the first real resistance was expected after landing. So far the enemy had been flushed out without too much trouble, and the Italian prisoners were a sort looking lot as they were despatched to compounds set up on the beach area now teeming with men, vehicles and supplies.  

The "silent" run in was abandoned as HMS Roberts bombarded Pachino airfield with its 15-inch guns, an experience the infantry in the landing craft reported as reassuring. Both units of the brigade reported only scattered small arms fire on the run-in which ceased as the troops reached land. According to the official history:  

Once ashore, they easily cut through or blew up the few wire obstacles in their path, quickly disposing of a few machine-gun posts manned by a handful of bewildered Italian soldiers. At about three o'clock the headquarters and the remaining companies of each battalion followed the assault companies ashore. An hour later Brigadier Vokes, who was still aloft with his headquarters, had received success signals from both his assaulting units. Thereafter the two battalions proceeded inland towards their first phase objectives.

The Special Service Brigade to their left landed farther west than planned, but the defenders in their sector evacuated their positions as soon as they faced danger, and the Commandos were quickly inland, making contact with the Seaforths in the vicinity southwest corner of the Pantano Longanari at 0640, having suffered light casualties. On the extreme left flank came the only resistance of the day, when late in the afternoon an Italian Blackshirt unit stopped the Commandos' advance with anti-tank mortar fire, then threatened to penetrate the junction between the Seaforths and the Special Service Brigade. The 4.2-inch guns of the Saskatchewan Light Infantry were brought to bear to support the Commandos, who had no heavy weapons of their own, i.e., accurate rounds forced a withdrawal of the Italians, who abandoned their guns, horses and large amounts of ammunition.

The 1st Brigade Landing

By this time, the two lead companies of the Commandos were ready to head for shore, in LCAs. The first flight of RCR did not reach 0400, two and a half hours late. The Maucini battery fired on the craft, but was silenced by return fire from the Allied rifle regiments landed in good order, though "A" Company of the Commandos, one of the reserve companies, landed 5,000 yards to the west, coming down in the Special Service Brigade's sector. The regiment suffered only two killed and three wounded during landing, one of the dead being Company Sergeant Major Charles Nutley, killed by machine gun fire at the water's edge as the craft approached. The 1st Division reported to 30th Corps at 0645 that it was on objective.

Reserve Landings

The reserve battalions of the 1st and 2nd Brigades (48th Highlanders and The Edmonton Regiment, respectively) followed their own landings on ROGER and SUGAR respectively. Following them came the divisional reserve, with a complete squadron of the Three Rivers Regiment landing on ROGER from Landing Ship Tanks (LST) by 1015, followed by the 3rd Canadian Brigade. The 42nd Field Regiment (Royal Devon Yeomanry), a British self-propelled field regiment attached to the 1st C Infantry Division, came ashore as well.

Other reserve battalions on Sicily were equally successful; the 30th Corps had captured Pachino and occupied the eastern half peninsula, as well as taken Avola and Cassibile to the east. Syracuse was taken, undamaged, by 0900. The Americans landed rougher than the 8th Army and taken their D-Day objectives, though their 3d Division faced strong air attacks at Licata's airfield. While complete surprise had not been possible - enemy aerial reconnaissance had clearly spotted the Allied fleet hours before H-Hour and the enemy concluded that a major invasion was imminent - the attackers were aided by the poor weather which prevented some enemy units from being alerted, as it was thought invasion unlikely during the storm that was seen on
Only the airborne attacks had not fared well; 50 of the 134 gliders carrying the British 1st Airlanding Brigade crashed in the only 12 arrived in the drop zone. The American 82nd Airborne Division was scattered over fifty miles between Licata and No winds, inexperienced pilots and anti-aircraft fire from both the enemy and Allied ships firing in the darkness contributed to placement. The paratroopers nonetheless played a part in preventing the German Hermann Göring Panzer Division from the American beaches.

Second Phase

After darkness on 10 July, units of the 2nd Brigade moved northwest of the Pantano Longarini towards Ispica, continuing to prisoners, while the 3rd Brigade advanced to Burgio, a large winery three miles to the west of Pachino. The West Nova Regiment captured 25 Italians for no loss, while the Commandos were withdrawn on 11 July back into Army reserve, having their mission. In all the first day had resulted in 7 Canadian other ranks killed, and 25 soldiers wounded (3 officers and 2 ranks). The Special Service Brigade had lost 6 killed and 19 wounded. The 1st Canadian Division reported 650 prisoners in at 1845, mostly Italians but included about 20 German Air Force men, and the total grew during the evening and night. Enen were estimated at 100.

On 11 July, the 1st Canadian Division resumed a general advance to the interior of the island as the left flank unit of the 8th the immediate objectives of 30th Corps being the Noto-Pozzallo road, and the Iblei Hills commanding roads leading to PalaZ Ragusa. The 51st Division (with the 231st Malta Brigade under command) and the 1st Canadian Division were ordered simultaneously with the Pachino-Rosolini road as the divisional boundary. The 1st Canadian Brigade was ordered to the ri 2nd the left, with the 3rd in reserve.

Just after noon, the advance on Ispica began with The Loyal Edmonton Regiment (still not aware that they had been renan regiment would not actually receive notice of their name change until October) setting off for a six mile march towards th which sat on a 150 foot cliff from which it commanded the coastal plain. Here, too, warning shots from the Edmontons brought an instant surrender of the garrison, weary from naval and aerial bombardment the night before. The Royal Canadian Artill able to coordinate with naval forces in the early stages of the Sicily campaign, and enemy supply lines on exposed coast, were prime targets. Combined with a weak enemy submarine effort, Allied aerial superiority, and good weather, conditions navy to operate were unmatched and long-range bombardment by off-shore vessels even caught the notice of the German commander, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring. The first Canadian Military Cross of the Italian campaign went to a Canadian observer for his exploits in communicating with offshore guns.

The Canadians were walking everywhere in the hot sun - or scrounging rides where they could be found, from carriers or because the Slow Assault Convoy had been attacked during the trip from Britain to Sicily, and 500 vehicles went to the botto Mediterranean when three ships were sunk by U-Boats.

The enemy was obviously not intending to make a stand; the 51st Highland Division entered Rosolini unopposed late in the 1 and PPCLI passed through the Edmontons later in the afternoon, marching through the night without opposition to a overlooking Modica. The Seaforths moved to Modica also, detaching a company to Pozzallo which had surrendered to parties of HMS Blankney and Brissenden. Distributing food to the locals in the wake of a collapsing government from ti granary, the Seaforths also collected 260 prisoners and a pile of equipment.

The 1st Brigade departed Burgio in the wake of the 51st Division; the RCR headed towards Ragusa riding on tanks of th Rivers regiment as well as making use of captured enemy vehicles. They arrived four miles to the east of the town, waited a artillery dropped several shells into it, then sent a patrol in to secure its surrender only to find the U.S. 45th Division had taken it. Modica, sitting in a deep gully, was also shelled early on the morning of 12 July by a 15-minutes concentration afte PPCLI sent in a patrol to secure the a large number of prisoners. Later in the day, however, after Canadian units moved on, soldiers re-appeared in the town and ambushed both a Seaforth ration and ammo party, and the RCR anti-tank platoon...
drove through what they thought was secured territory. The two parties, under fire, joined forces and called down artillery captured eight cannon in the main square of the town, all covering roads converging on the town. Several hundred more soldiers now flocked out to surrender.

Modica was also the location of the headquarters of the Italian 206th Coastal Division; their commander, Major-General d’Havet had not been pleased to find - according to some reports - that a sergeant of the PPCLI who had been on the initial patrol into the town had been the one to capture him. An apparent stickler for protocol, the general insisted on finding a suitable rank to whom he could personally surrender. The request went up the chain of command, and he was escorted to the divisional headquarters of 1st Canadian Infantry Division where the first enemy general officer to be captured by Canadian troops in the Second World War formally had his personal capitulation accepted.10

The 2nd Brigade had dutifully secured the flanks, with a platoon of Edmunds cleaning out Scicli with a troop of tanks in support. Just three shots fired by the tanks induced 1100 prisoners to surrender. The brigade moved on to Ragusa by nightfall, with more Italians waiting their turn to give up.

The 1st Brigade advanced north from Rosolini to join the RCR at Ragusa during 12 July also, and by the morning of 13 July arrived at Giarratana, taken without trouble by the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. The 1st Division was now thirty miles inland with landing points on the Pachino peninsula, “as the crow flies”, and over fifty miles by the circuitous hillside roads. Supplies were becoming stretched, particularly in light of the shortage of transport. Sleep had been at a premium for the men in the battle area. It was noted at higher headquarters also that the 1st Canadian Division was the only formation in the 8th Army not to have been acclimated to tropical conditions, coming directly from the United Kingdom rather than other points in the Mediterranean.

Aftermath

By the evening of 12 July 1 (Canadian Infantry Division) had taken Giarratana at which junction they were given a day’s rest by (8th Army commander General) Montgomery who fully appreciated the exhausting conditions they were undergoing. They were also treated to a series of Monty’s pep talks. At the end of the day Montgomery confided in his diary his confidence in his new Canadians.11

Divisional headquarters was relocated from Ispica to the vicinity of Modica, and new vehicles were obtained to ease shortages. General Montgomery was able to visit all units of the division, welcoming them to the 8th Army and expressing confidence in their abilities during the upcoming battles.

Battle Honours

The following Canadian units were awarded the Battle Honour "Landing in Sicily" for participation in these actions:

- **1st Canadian Armoured Brigade**
  - 12th Canadian Armoured Regiment (The Three Rivers Regiment)
- **1st Canadian Division**
  - 4th Reconnaissance Regiment (4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards)
  - The Saskatoon Light Infantry (MGS)
- **1st Canadian Brigade**
  - The Royal Canadian Regiment
  - The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment
  - 48th Highlanders of Canada
- **2nd Canadian Brigade**
  - Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry
  - The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada
  - The Loyal Edmonton Regiment
- **3rd Canadian Brigade**
  - Royal 22e Regiment
  - The Carleton and York Regiment
  - The West Nova Scotia Regiment

Notes

2. ibid
4. ibid, pp.32-33
7. Ibid
8. Ibid