

East Command and the United States force from North Africa.

The strategic conception of the operation was influenced very largely by administrative considerations. It was still an essential element of the doctrine of amphibious warfare that sufficient major ports must be captured within a very short time of the initial landings to maintain all the forces required for the attainment of the objectives; beach maintenance could only be relied on as a very temporary measure. The experiences of operation TORCH, the North African landing, though difficult to interpret in view of the special circumstances of that operation, were held to confirm this view. This meant that attention was at once directed to the three major ports of Messina, Catania and Palermo. Messina was clearly out of the question as an immediate objective. It was strongly defended, difficult of access and well out of range of air cover that had to be provided from Tunisia and Malta. An assault on Catania could be given air cover, though the port itself was at the extreme end of our range, and successful exploitation would give us control of the main group of enemy airfields in the island, from which it would be possible to provide cover over the Straits of Messina, our final objective. On the other hand it was calculated that the port could only maintain four divisions in the first month and six divisions subsequently, and this would be insufficient for the reduction of the whole island. Palermo would give us sufficient maintenance facilities provided the enemy allowed us time enough to build up to the strength required. The disadvantages of an assault in that area were that it left the enemy in possession of Catania and Messina through which to reinforce, and the eastern and south-eastern groups of airfields, while exploitation towards Messina, our final objective, would be difficult.

The plan therefore proposed a simultaneous assault in the west and south-east. On D-day the Eastern Task Force (British) was to land at four points, Avola, Pachino, Pozzallo and Gela, with forces totalling three infantry divisions, four parachute and two tank battalions. The tasks of the force were to capture the ports of Syracuse and Augusta and the airfields at Pachino, Comiso and Ponte Olivo. At the same time an American force of one infantry division and a tank battalion from the Western Task Force (United States) was to land at Sciacca and Marinella in the south-western corner of the island to capture the airfields, in particular the large airfield at Castelvetrano, in order to be able to provide air cover over the landings in the Palermo area. On D plus 2 the main American landings would be made in the Palermo area, from the Gulf of Castellammare to Cape Zaffarano, east of the port, in a total strength of two infantry divisions and two tank battalions. The tasks of this force were to capture Palermo and cut off the enemy in the west of the island by linking up with the force at Castelvetrano. On D plus 3 the Eastern Task Force was to make another landing, with one infantry division, plus a brigade group, and an airborne division, in the Catania area, to capture the port and the Gerbini group of airfields. A reserve division was allotted to each Task Force, to follow up into Catania and Palermo, when secured, and by D plus 7 it was hoped that sufficient forces would be ashore to

deal with any forces which could be brought against them.

Modification of the First Plan.

The month of February and the early days of March were the most critical periods in Tunisia, where I assumed command on 19th February, and it was impossible for me to give the plans for Sicily any detailed attention. I did, however, suggest certain modifications to General Gairdner when he saw me at the end of February, for the consideration of his planning staff. These were directed to eliminate certain unsatisfactory points in the original London plan; to ensure, for instance, that divisions were employed as such and not split up unnecessarily, to provide a Force Reserve and to ensure a more concentrated use of our airborne forces to neutralise the beach defences by cancelling a proposed operation against communications in Calabria. I also considered at this time concentrating the efforts of both Task Forces against the south-eastern corner of the island. This was a proposal to which I was later to return but on first consideration it was rejected on the ground that port facilities in this area would be insufficient to support our whole force, and it still seemed essential to ensure the early capture of Palermo. To overrun the island if defended by a garrison of eight enemy divisions, which was the current Intelligence estimate of the probable enemy strength, would require at least ten divisions and I was informed that only with the use of both Palermo and Catania could we be sure of maintaining that number.

It would be unnecessary to describe in detail the many conferences at which the strategy of the attack was thrashed out until they resulted in the adoption of the final plan. Nor need I emphasise again the difficulties involved; I myself and my two future Army commanders were engaged actively in the field and even when a conference would have been physically possible the hazards of air communications in the uncertain weather of a North African spring often meant that we could not meet. The staff at Bouzarea were short-handed and many of the heads of branches, still fully employed at my Eighteenth Army Group Headquarters, were unable to take over as yet or divert their attention from the Tunisian battle. All that was possible was to work out loading tables, training schedules and all such matters which must of necessity be taken in hand long before the date of the assault, while preserving complete flexibility of mind about the objectives which might eventually be selected for the assault. Flexibility was, indeed, the keynote of the whole planning period and every proposed solution was examined on its own merits. It is for this reason that it is difficult to show in detail how the final plan grew to completion but it will be useful to consider the main aspects that presented themselves and sketch the way in which they contributed to the ultimate solution.

The air situation received my first attention. From our bases in Malta and Tunisia we could give air cover over the southern half of Sicily south of a line running from Trapani to Catania; both these two places, however, were near to the limit of effective air action. The plan provided for an early attack on all three groups of airfields, but at the cost of a loss of concentration. The Eastern Task Force, in particular, would be dispersed in assaults all along