



RETURN TO THE BATTLEFIELD

Operation Husky, the allied landing in Sicily



Bunker 1 in Marsala

I've spent my holidays with my family in Sicily during July 2013.

It was not the intention to chase military remains, but when I saw something I stopped to inspect it. The urge was too big to deny.

The allied landing that got the name Operation Husky took place on July 10th 1943 on the south and east coast of Sicily. Knowing that it was exactly 70 years ago that it happened, I was anxious to see which remains and monuments could be found. Silly enough I expected something like along the Normandy beaches.

We drove along a part of the British area, the Canadian area and a part of the American area

and we saw nothing! Just like nothing had happened. There is a monument to commemorate the US 82th Airborne Division, but I haven't seen that due to a traffic diversion. Is it strange that there was nothing to see? Maybe not. Italy was not occupied like France and probably the Italians saw the landing as a kind of "occupation".

In one occasion I saw a small Italian monument in the shape of a white pyramid with an Italian flag next to two bunkers. Unfortunately there was no way to stop the car or to get to the monument.

The bunkers

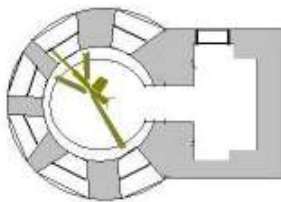
On the other hand there are still quite an amount of bunkers on the island. We saw a lot of them and a friend of ours who visited the island a few years earlier saw other bunkers.

Don't expect Atlantic wall bunker models.

These ones are small. The general shape is circular with a small entrance part in an L-shape. Inside there's one circular combat room for a machine gun and they have two to six embrasures. Their size varies also a bit. I've seen small and large ones. With "large" I mean a diameter of about 4 m. The walls are approximately 1 m thick.

The bunkers were constructed along the roads leading from the coast to the interior and on strategic locations like a railway. I found them at about 3 Km from the coast line.

In two cases I saw a bunker that I presume to be for a small anti-tank gun because it was not circular but rectangular.



If they had not a physical camouflage then they were painted in the color of the environment, sand-yellow. If they were not painted then they were covered with concrete or stones.



Bunker 1 in Marsala



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To have an idea about the topography, the south-east and the west coast is flat. There are mountains in the centre and in the north of the island. The south coast is also flat, but you have a rapid access to the mountains.



Map of Sicily
with the bunker
that I saw.



Two bunkers on each side of the railroad at Rossolini above Ispica



Along the
road from
Rossolini
to
Marzamemi
under
Avola.



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Two bunkers close to each other on either side of the road from Marina di Ragusa to Modica



Two bunkers near the Italian monument in the plain of Gela.



Between Gela and Licata



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Porto Empedolce near Agrigento. An anti-tank bunker.



Selinunte



Bunker 2 in Marsala.



Photo from Johan Verhas

Operation Husky

After the Africa campaign the allies were going to conquer first Sicily with the airfields and after that they were going to land south of Naples. The main idea was to force Italy to peace, but they achieved that only one year after the landing at Sicily.

The operation was a combined action of the British and the Americans under the command of General Eisenhower. Two armies were involved, the 7th US Army of General Patton and the 8th British Army of Field-Marshal Montgomery.

The landing was the biggest because lesser troops were involved in Normandy.

The Italian islands Pantellaria and Lampedusa had an airfield from which aircraft could seriously hamper the allied invasion fleet to Sicily. The bombing of the island started on May 8th. The British landed on Pantellaria on June 11th 1943 and on Lampedusa on June 12th without resistance.

The allied forces to conquer Sicily were the following.

Three divisions of the 7th US Army of General Patton of the 2nd Army Corps of General Bradley were going to set into action. The 45th Infantry Division was going to land near Scoglitti and Ponte Dirrilo. The 1st Infantry Division near Gela and the 3rd Infantry Division near Licata.



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Four divisions of the 8th Army of Fieldmarshal Montgomery were going to be involved. The 5th Infantry Division and the 50th Infantry Division of the 13th Army Corps of General Dempsey were going to land in the Gulf of Noto. The 51th Infantry Division and the 1st Canadian Infantry Division of the 30th Army Corps of General Leese were going to land near Portopalo and the 231st Malta Infantry Brigade of the 30th Army Corps was foreseen against Marzamemi.

The landing was foreseen on July 10th. But during the night from 9 to 10 July paratroopers of the 82nd US Airborne Division and the British 1st Airlanding Brigade were going to be dropped in four operations together with gliders to capture bridges. The Americans near Piaono Lupo and the Britons at Ponte Grande near Syracuse (Operation Ladbroke).

Initially it was Patton's task to cover the flank of the British army which had to advance via the east coast towards Syracuse, Catania to Capture Messina at the Street of Messina.

Opposite the allies the Italians had 200000 men in four infantry divisions and various coastal defence units, thus approximately in total eight divisions. The four divisions were the Aosta, Napoli, Assietta and the Livorno division. They were not at their full strength, except for the Livorno division. The other units consisted of older men, badly trained, without transport and with outdated guns.

Coastal defence was only around the three naval bases, Syracuse, Augusta and Palermo. At the rest of the coast line there were mine fields, obstacles, anti-tank moats and bunkers. Obstacles were only foreseen at the interior.



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The landing of the 51th Infantry Division at Capo Passero.



Capo Passero nowadays.
Nothing remains of the landing.



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The Germans had 30000 men at Sicily in two divisions, the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division of General Major Ebenhardt Rodt and the Hermann-Göring Division of General Major Paul Conrath. The divisions were well trained and had good equipment.

All these belonged to the 14th Panzer Armee Korps of General Hans-Valentin Hube. The Italian Airforce was also out of date.



Punta Ciriga where the Canadian 1st Infantry Division landed.

The Napoli and the Livorno Division were positioned on the east side of Sicily and the Aosta and the Assietta Division on the west side of the island. The 15th PzGren Div was divided into three task force whereby the largest was situated in the west. The Hermann-Göring Division was split up into two parts and positioned in the south and in the east.

From this period exists the famous "man who never existed". This was a diversion to give the Germans the impression that the landing should take place in Sardinia and the attack at Sicily would

be a mock attack. A man who died from pneumonia had the same symptoms as a drowned person and the British dressed him as an officer with a brief case attached at his wrist. It had to look like an airplane crash and the passenger had died. The body was dropped in front of the Spanish coast where he was picked up by German agents.

The invasion fleet counted 3500 ships, but unfortunately the area of the Mediterranean Sea was hit by a heavy storm so that the ships were too late and/or they were not at the right place. To make it worse the pilots had no experience with flying during the night and due to the storm they couldn't find the drop zones. Only 54 of the gliders reached Sicily where under only 12 at the right spot. The majority dropped in the sea. The dropping of the paratroopers was not better. Not even 100 men of the 1600 British paratroopers reached their target and from the 3400 Americans only small units could take their position on the target. Some of them were dropped at 40 Km from the target. But they did what they could : creating confusion by the Axis-forces!

The amphibian landings were good, there was only a little resistance.

The Italian commander of the island, General Guzzoni, ordered the 15th PzGren Div to move to the centre of the island to be prepared for a counter attack. The Hermann-Göring and the Livorno Division counter attacked near Gela to push the Americans back into the sea, but the attack failed due to the harassing actions of the American paratroopers and a attack of the Rangers and by artillery fire of the American cruisers. At the evening of the first day the bridgeheads of Scoglitti, Gela and Licata were secured. The British could take Ponte Grande and they entered Syracuse. The next day another counter attack against Gela was again stopped by artillery fire of the ships. Meanwhile a company of the 45th Infantry Division entered Ragusa.

The American troops got reinforces by air but due to a bad communication the 144 airplanes flew straight into friendly fire whereby they lost 23 airplanes.



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Hitler ordered to move the 1st Paratroopers Division from France to Sicily and to bring the 29th PzGren Div over the Street of Messina. This happened around 12th July.
On 12th July Augusta fell in British hands.



The beach to the east of Licata where the 3rd US Infantry Division landed.

Montgomery decided to have the 30th Army Corps advanced to the west of the Etna what was in fact the advance route of the 7th US Army. He made that decision because the 13th Army Corps was blocked in front of Catania.

Meanwhile Patton ordered and offensive recognition of the 3rd Infantry Division towards Agrigento and he advanced with the 1st and the 45th Infantry division towards Caltegrone.

Agrigento fell in US hands on the 16th.

Although that Patton had to cover the flank of the British Army, he started to make his own plans for

the conquest of Sicily. On the 17th Patton got the agreement of the commander, General Alexander, to take Palermo on condition the British 8th Army got enough protection. Montgomery started to realise that his forces were not strong enough to advance around the volcano and to break through to Catania.

Patton decided that the 1st had to advance to the north coast, the 45th north-west and the 3rd and the 2nd Armoured Division against Palermo.

The advance started on July 22nd at about 50 Km from Palermo and during the late afternoon, the US troops reached the coast and the outskirts of Palermo. At 1900 Hr of the same day Palermo surrendered.

US troops cleared the ports of Trapani, Castellamare and Marsala on the west side of the island on the 23rd.

The conquest of West-Sicily strategically did not mean not that much, but it left a good impression at Alexander. The American took 55000 prisoners opposite 57 killed and 170 wounded soldiers.

At the other side of the island the British (5th, 50th and 51st Inf Div) were still stuck in front of Catania opposite the Hermann-Göring Division and the Canadians fought at the west flank.

On the German side, the 22. PzGren Div was in the north, the 15. PzGren Div in the centre, the Hermann-Göring Div in the east and the German paratroops at a number of key positions. Remains of the Italian divisions were in Messina.

Montgomery admitted that he could not reach Messina on his own and had the 78th British Infantry Division brought over from Tunisia. Alexander asked Patton for assistance. The plan was to start an offensive on August 1st. The Americans would make a diversion by advancing along the coast road and the interior to the east. The 2nd Armoured Division face a difficult terrain and to spare the 82 Airborne Division and the 45th, he ordered to bring the 9th Infantry Division over from North-Africa.



On July 24 Mussolini was defeated in the vote at the Grand Council of Fascism, He had lost his credibility due to the failing defense at Sicily. The day after the king had him arrested. Field marshal Badoglio succeeded him as prime minister and he declared that he wanted to continue the war on the side of Germany but in secret he was busy with negotiations with the allies.

Due to the arrest of Mussolini Hitler decided to move a part of his troops to north-Italy which meant that a number of the German units were going to be withdrawn from South-Italy and Sicily. He gave Kesselring the order to prepare the evacuation of the German troops from Sicily.

The American advance towards Messina was exhausting due to the difficult terrain. On the 27th Kesselring withdraw his troops from Nicosia that fell in American hands. Then the city Troina was conquered by the Americans and Agira and Regalbuto by the Canadians.



A British soldier inspects an Italian bunker near Pacchino.

Source :

<http://www.histomil.com/viewtopic.php?t=3918&p=76494>

On the east coast the British started an assault against the Hermann Göring Division towards Catania on August 3. The next day they reached the southern side of the city at the end of the day and during the night they were almost in the center of the city. It took them a month to get into Catania.

To speed up the advance towards Messina, Patton ordered another amphibian operation to outflank the German defenses, but the operation was at the scale of a battalion. They landed to the east of San Sagata but

the Germans had already left the positions.

On August 10, General Hube, who had taken over the command of the island around July 19th, gave officially the order to withdraw the troops from the island over the Street of Messina (Operation Lehigh). The operation started on August 11th during the night and it took 4 nights before it was finished. (the Italians started already on August 3rd) The defense was assured by about 500 guns. They had for this operation 33 landing crafts for tanks, 12 flat ships, 13 barges and 76 motor vessels. Troops were transported during the night and equipment during the night as during the day.

The allied air force did barely anything against this evacuation because the anti-aircraft defense was too heavy and they wanted to spare aircraft for the invasion on Italy.

Taormina was evacuated on August 12th and on August 16th the last German troops where under men of the 15th PzGren Division were transported to the mainland.

At midnight of the 16th the first American troops of the 3rd Infantry Division entered Messina.

The entire campaign took 38 days.



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The Germans evacuated over the Street of Messina 40000 men, 9600 vehicles, 94 guns, 47 tanks, 1000 ton ammunition, 970 ton fuel and 15700 ton equipment. The Italians transported between 70000 and 75000 men, 500 vehicles and 75 à 100 guns.

The Germans lost 12000 men, the Italians 145000 men, the Americans 7500 men and the Britons 11500 men.

120000 men were taken prisoner.

Source :

- "De Tweede Wereldoorlog. De strijd te land, ter zee en in de lucht". Publisher : Market Books BV. Published in 1979.
- "De geallieerde landing op Sicilië", Author : Martin Blumenson. Publisher : Standaard Uitgeverij. Published in 1974.
- "Historical Museum of military landing in Sicily 1943", Publisher : Provincia Regionale di Catania, in 2002

SPOTLIGHT ON A MUSEUM

Museo Storico dello Sbarco in Sicilia 1943



This museum is located in an old factory that has been completely rebuilt, probably with lots of subsidies and opened in 2002. The result is nice. The rooms are spacious and the lighting on the mannequins is good. The subject is, of course, the allied landing in Sicily. You start with a movie and afterwards one of the people of the museum takes you to a reconstruction of a Sicilian village. You're at the middle of a square and you can look into the

different houses. Here you get an explanation in English, but you may not take pictures and that's a pity because the reconstruction is really good. Another thing that attracts your attention is that you sense a negative feeling against the allies in the explanation of the guide. The guide brings you into a shelter where you can experience



a bombardment complete shocks and trembles. You leave the shelter on the other side and you see the same square but now in a destroyed condition. From then on you can visit the museum at your own pace. The entire operation of Operation Husky is explained by diagrams and diorama's. Lots of mannequins are displayed with British, Canadian, American, German and Italian uniforms. The museum is proud about the wax statues of Roosevelt, Churchill, Hitler, Mussolini and Vittorio Emanuele III. A few pieces of artillery are displayed at the end of the exhibition.

One room is dedicated to the bunkers at Sicily. In the middle stands a reconstruction with a machine gun "in action" when



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you enter the room. Diagrams of the bunkers are displayed on panels. The only negative point of this museum is the lacking of any other language. If you don't understand Italian and you want to learn about Operation Husky, then you're lost.



Opening times :

- Opening hours in winter (from November 1 to May 31) from Tuesday to Sunday, from 09:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. (last entrance h. 3:45 p.m.)
- Open in summer (from June 1 to October 31) from Tuesday to Sunday, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. (last entrance h. 4:45 p. m.)

Address : Viale Africa - Centro Culturale "Le Ciminiere", 95100 Catania

The Museum is situated in Catania in the very central thoroughfare of Viale

Africa. It is easily achievable on foot in 10 minutes from the historic centre, or with the urban lines. It is situated a few meters from the Railway Station and from the bus terminal station of the companies SAIS and ETNA that connect Catania to the other Provinces and to the main towns of Sicily.

Telephone number : 095.4011929

e-mail : museosbarco@provincia.ct.it

Site : [http://www.provincia.ct.it/il_territorio/musei/museo dello sbarco in sicilia/](http://www.provincia.ct.it/il_territorio/musei/museo_dello_sbarco_in_sicilia/)

Other artifacts

Marsala

Here stands an Italian motorised gun Semovente DA 75/34 with a 75 mm gun. The tank was manned by 3 men. Weight 15 tons. The tanks stands at the little square at the crossing of the Via Sardegna and the Corso Antonio Garmsci.



Taormina

Here you can see a well preserved model of a manned torpedo. It's the Italian version of it, called Maiale. The torpedo was manned by two men and weighted 1500 Kg. It had two propellers and was more than 6 m long. In the front part there was a container to contain two sticking mines of 400 Pound TNT. In December 1941 Italian divers on a maiale damaged seriously with sticking mines the battle ships HMS Viliant and HMS Queen Elisabeth in the port of Alexandria.



The torpedo stands in the public garden of the city. The engine has still its equipment.



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BOOKS

Historical Museum of military landing in Sicily 1943

This publication tells the story of the Sicily campaign in a nutshell and it describes also what you can see in the museum. There are many photo's in it about the battle and a few actual ones of the collection of the museum. It's a nice to have if you don't have other books that describes the battle more in detail.

Publisher : Provincia Regionale di Catania, in 2002
64 pages, soft cover.
For sale at the museum
Language : English (I have an English version)



WEBSITES

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allied_invasion_of_Sicily
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Husky_order_of_battle
<http://www.war-experience.org/history/keyaspects/husky1943/>
<http://www.histomil.com/viewtopic.php?t=3918&p=76494>

Thanks to Yvonne Mayo for the spell check.

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