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THE CONQUEST OF SICILY FROM 10TH JULY, 1943 TO 17TH AUGUST, 1943

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 9th October, 1946, by HIS EXCELLENCY FIELD-MARSHAL THE VISCOUNT ALEXANDER OF TUNIS, K.G., G.C.B., G.C.M.G., C.S.I., D.S.O., M.C., former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fifteenth Army Group.

The Decision.

At the Casablanca conference in mid-January, 1943, it was decided by the Prime Minister and President Roosevelt, assisted by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, that after Africa had been finally cleared of the enemy the island of Sicily should be assaulted and captured as a base for operations against Southern Europe and to open the Mediterranean to the shipping of the United Nations. I attended the conference and was designated the Commander-in-Chief of the group of Armies entrusted with the operation. As I was also appointed to an identical rôle in command of the operations then proceeding in Tunisia, in which I was soon involved in the day to day conduct of an intricate and difficult battle situation, it was not possible for me to take direct control immediately of the planning of the operations. A tentative outline plan had already been produced by the Joint Planning Staff in London, supplemented at Casablanca, and this was given, as a basis on which to work, to the nucleus of my future Headquarters, known for security purposes as "Force 141," which assembled at Bouzarea, near Algiers, on 12th February, 1943. This planning staff was headed by Major-General C. H. Gairdner, as Chief of General Staff.* The operation was given the code name HUSKY.

Although provision had thus been early made for the planning of the operation it was none the

* Succeeded in May by (the late) Major-General A. A. Richardson. The Headquarters was "integrated", i.e., Anglo-American, but organised on the British Staff System, just as Allied Force Headquarters, also integrated, was organised on the American system.

less surrounded with great difficulties. The prerequisite that the whole of the North African coastline should be cleared of the enemy meant that the battle in Tunisia took first priority and, until that was concluded, it would be impossible to know what resources would be available for the invasion of Sicily. The question of the date to be aimed at was also affected. It was calculated at Casablanca that the Tunisian campaign would be completed by 1st May and the target date for Sicily was provisionally fixed at the favourable moon period in July. The Combined Chiefs of Staff subsequently directed that an attempt should be made to advance this date to the corresponding period in June. This proved impossible, owing to the need for adequate training for the assaulting divisions and the preparation of the necessary administrative basis for the operation, and on 15th April the Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed that 10th July should be the target date.

Elements of the Problem.

The problems to which the main attention could be directed in the early stages of planning were those presented by geography and logistics and the probable scale of enemy resistance. The island of Sicily has been compared to "a jagged arrowhead with the broken point to the west." The total area is about ten thousand square miles, the greatest measurement from east to west is one hundred and fifty miles and the length of the coastline is about six hundred miles. In the north-eastern corner Cape Peloro is separated from the peninsula of Calabria by the Straits of Messina, only two miles at their narrowest. Cape Passero, the south-eastern corner, scene of a British naval victory in 1718, is about fifty-five miles due north of the island of Malta and about four hundred miles from Benghazi. At the western end of the island Cape Boeo (also known as Cape Lilibeo) is about ninety miles to the north-east of Cape Bon in Tunisia. In the straits between Tunisia and Sicily lies Pantelleria