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OPERATIONS IN CONNECTION WITH THE LANDINGS IN THE  
 GULF OF SALERNO ON 9TH SEPTEMBER, 1943.

*Admiralty foreword:—*

The Naval forces taking part in Operation "Avalanche" were under the general control of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean.

The Naval Task Force for the operation was under the immediate command of Vice-Admiral H. K. Hewitt, U.S.N., who was known as the Commander Western Naval Task Force. This Force was charged with the escort to and the landing of the Fifth Army at Salerno and with the subsequent support of this Army until it was firmly established on shore.

The Western Naval Task Force included the Northern Attack Force (Force "N") composed of British and American Ships and Craft and under the command of Commodore G. N. Oliver, R.N., and the Southern Attack Force (Force "S") composed of U.S. Ships and Craft and under the command of Rear-Admiral John L. Hall, Jr., U.S.N.

The Naval Covering Force (Force "H") was under the command of Vice-Admiral Sir Algernon Willis, while the Naval Air Support Force (Force "V") was under the command of Rear-Admiral Sir Philip Vian.

The report of the Commander Western Naval Task Force on this operation will be published by the U.S. Navy Department in due course.

*The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 8th March, 1945, by Admiral of the Fleet Sir ANDREW B. CUNNINGHAM, K.T., G.C.B., D.S.O.*

*Office of the Commander-in Chief,  
 Mediterranean Station,  
 Allied Force Headquarters.  
 8th March, 1945.*

I have the honour to forward the report of the Naval Commander Western Task Force

on the Operations in connection with the landings in the Gulf of Salerno on 9th September, 1943\*.

2. Owing to the unavoidable delay in forwarding the report of the Naval Commander Western Task Force due to more urgent demands on the time and facilities of his staff, it is not my intention to do more than comment on the salient features of this operation, the more so since many of the lessons learnt have been incorporated in other operations which have been carried out subsequently in this and other theatres. Except insofar as is stated in the succeeding paragraphs, I fully concur with the suggestions and recommendations of the Force Commander, whose report is very full and covers every aspect of the operation.

*Planning.*

3. My detailed remarks on the planning of Operation "Avalanche" are contained in Appendix I.

4. Having decided that the mainland of Italy was to be invaded on the West coast, it was clear that the seizure and development of the port of Naples was of paramount importance, since no other port in Western Italy could maintain the Military forces which it was intended to deploy.

5. The choice for the actual point of attack lay between the Gulf of Gaeta and the Gulf of Salerno. The former had the advantage of having an open plain as its immediate hinterland and it was clear that a successful landing in this area might lead to the early capture of Naples. On the other hand, its beaches

*Admiralty footnote:*

\* See Admiralty foreword.

were, at the best, indifferent and were beyond the reach of adequate single seater fighter cover based on Sicily. The first of these disadvantages might have been overcome, the second was insurmountable. Therefore, despite the fact that on 27th July information was received that H.M.S. UNICORN, acting in the capacity of a light Fleet Carrier, and four Escort Carriers could be made available from outside my Command, it was decided that the landings must take place in the Gulf of Salerno. Here the beaches were superior to those of the Gulf of Gaeta but the area immediately inland could be covered by artillery fire from the adjacent hills. Further, the roads to Naples led through narrow defiles, which could be easily defended. These disadvantages had, however, to be accepted.

6. Once again, as in Operation "Husky" \* the choice of D-Day was largely governed by the period of moon required for the employment of paratroops. The date finally selected for this operation was thus not entirely favourable from the Naval point of view, and the assault forces had to accept a disadvantageous light for the approach. In the event, airborne troops were not employed for the assault.

#### *Preparation, Training and Mounting.*

7. Due to the short time available between the final conquest of Sicily and mounting of Operation "Avalanche", there was little time available for rehearsal. In fact, as is stressed by the Naval Commander Western Task Force, it was necessary to overhaul the landing craft at first priority. Every possible repair facility in North Africa was pressed into service and the fact that more craft than had at first seemed likely were overhauled in time to take part in the operation enabled a faster build-up to be achieved than had been expected, and reflects great credit on the repair staffs concerned.

8. In this connection, however, I cannot concur entirely with the remarks of the Naval Commander Western Task Force in Part IV, Section I, paragraph 18 of his report, in which he states that "Naval Planning for Operation 'Avalanche' was affected by the late receipt of orders from higher authority and changes in the composition of the Naval Task Forces brought about by unforeseen releases of Landing Craft from Operations 'Husky' and 'Baytown' †." The increases in the numbers of Landing Craft assigned were largely due to the great efforts of the maintenance personnel. Further changes in the numbers and types of Landing Craft available were caused by the omission of the Naval Commander Western Task Force to provide six L.S.T.s, as required by my Operation Orders, to lift Air Force stores from Milazzo in Northern Sicily to the assault area. To take the place of these L.S.T.s a number of L.C.T.s were diverted from the Messina/Reggio ferry service at considerable expense to the Eighth Army build-up. This is referred to more fully in paragraph 21 of this report.

9. During the loading stages an unfortunate incident took place at Tripoli, due to the

loading without proper authority of some smoke containers into an L.C.T. already containing ammunition. Spontaneous combustion of the smoke led to the explosion of the ammunition which put out of action four L.C.T.s which could ill be spared. This incident serves to stress the necessity for careful supervision of the loading of assault convoys.

#### *Italian Armistice.*

10. The fact that an Armistice had been signed between the Allies and the Italians was broadcast by the B.B.C. on the evening of D-1. It had been fully realised that this announcement might well engender an unjustified sense of security in the minds of those taking part in the assault. Accordingly, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean and the Task Force Commanders sent signals warning all ships taking part in the operation that strong opposition from German forces must still be expected. There can, nevertheless, be no doubt that many took no heed of these warnings and viewed the proceedings with a sense of complacency which was not substantiated in the event.

#### *Intelligence.*

11. In general, the intelligence proved reliable and it is satisfactory to note that both beach intelligence and intelligence on fixed Coastal Defence installations were found to be accurate; the only additional defences encountered over and above those estimated being of the mobile type. That the security of the operation was not all to be desired was due to a variety of reasons, the chief of which were:—

(a) The logical selection of the beaches (from the enemy's point of view) for the reasons given in paragraph 5.

(b) The Armistice.

It is interesting to note, however, that although the assaulting forces were sighted by air reconnaissance on the 7th September, it was not until 0230 on 9th September that Alarm Number 3 ("Landing imminent or in progress") was instituted by the Germans.

#### *Assault.*

12. The assaults, with a few minor exceptions, went according to plan. The forces arrived at the correct lowering points at the times laid down in the orders. The distances of these lowering points for the deep draught L.S.I.(L)s—9 and 10 miles from the shore—was forced upon the Task Force Commanders by an expected minefield along the 100 fathom line. This expectation was fulfilled.

13. One Brigade of 56 Infantry Division was landed to the South of its allotted beach and became mixed with the other Brigade which had spread North of its sector, thereby causing considerable confusion for some hours.

The Scout Boat marking UNCLE GREEN beach was too far to the South, thus causing a gap in the 46th Division landing, which left an enemy strongpoint unneutralised. This strongpoint subsequently caused considerable trouble to the Division.

#### *Admiralty footnotes :*

\* Operation "Husky"—the landing in Sicily.

† Operation "Baytown"—the assault across the Straits of Messina, 3rd September, 1943.

14. The landing of the Rangers\* at Maiori was without opposition, but the Commando landing on Vietri was opposed by the gunfire of the shore batteries. Both these landings, however, were able to make considerable progress and to secure the left flank with the X Corps landing.

15. The organisation for clearing Landing Craft and Boats of Military stores on arrival at the beaches left much to be desired. In a large number of cases boats' crews had to clear their boats themselves, with consequent delay in returning for further loads. Further, in the stress of events in the early stages after the assault, arrangements for the transfer of stores from the beaches to disposal areas further inland were inadequate. Consequently there was much congestion on the foreshore: but, by D+2 and onwards, 3,000 tons per day were being discharged over the British beaches.

#### *Naval Forces other than Assault Forces.*

16. The existence of the main cover force, Force "H", was rendered unnecessary by the Italian Armistice, and two Divisions of the Battle Squadron were employed to cover the passage to Malta of such units of the Italian Fleet as succeeded in making good their escape (Operation "Gibbon"). In addition, four Cruisers were diverted to Bizerta on D-2 to load elements of the First British Airborne Division for discharge at Taranto (Operation "Slapstick"), a course of action rendered possible by the Italian Armistice.

17. The chief object of Force "H", therefore, became to provide fighter cover over the Escort Carrier force (Force "V").

#### *Air Activities.*

18. Fighter cover over the beaches was provided by Naval fighters from Force "V", and by land based fighter aircraft of the 12th Air Support Command. Fighter cover over Force "V" was provided by the Fleet Carriers of Force "H".

19. The high accident rate suffered by the Escort Carriers, which was at the time attributed almost entirely to the lack of natural wind, must, in the light of more recent experience in Operation "Dragoon"†, be considered largely due to insufficient deck landing practice immediately prior to the operation. Wind speeds experienced during Operation "Dragoon" were very similar to those prevailing throughout Operation "Avalanche", but in spite of the fact that during the former operation the Carrier forces operated for six days and the fatigue of the pilots thereby increased considerably in the later stages, the number of deck accidents was relatively smaller.

20. The plan assumed that Monte Corvino airfield would be captured on D-Day and put into operation for shore based fighters on D+1. The Escort Carriers were, therefore, only intended to operate for two days. There was, however, considerable delay in capturing Monte Corvino airfield and even after capture

it was under constant artillery fire from the neighbouring hills. It was, therefore, necessary to construct an air strip near Paestum nearer to the coast, and for Force "V" to operate at sea for 3½ days after which it was withdrawn to Palermo. Before doing so 26 aircraft were flown ashore to operate at Paestum.

21. Had the Military progress proceeded according to plan considerable embarrassment would have been caused by the late arrival of Air Force material for the preparation of Monte Corvino airfield. This was caused by the non-arrival at Milazzo of six L.S.T.s destined to ferry these stores to the assault area.

#### *Enemy Air Activity.*

22. Enemy air activity was not on a heavy scale and on the average only ten red alerts per day were experienced. Indeed, so light was the scale of attack that the fighters of Force "V" had few combat opportunities. This operation was notable, however, as being the first occasion on which several new types of missiles were used by the German Air Force. These new bombs caused considerable losses and damage.

#### *Events Subsequent to the Assault.*

23. On the whole, the Fifth Army was unable to establish itself ashore as quickly as had been planned. This was due in part to the fact that it had been anticipated that the coast defences would be manned by Italians, whereas in fact the Germans had taken over these defences a few days prior to the assault.

24. The port of Salerno was opened early on D+2 but by 1900 the following day the port was again under enemy gunfire and at 1500 on D+4 it was necessary to withdraw the port party for the time being.

25. Thus, despite the initial successes which attended the landings, by D+4 the Military situation had become unfavourable. The German Command had rallied quickly from the disorganisation caused by the liquidation of their erstwhile brothers-in-arms and had concentrated sufficient armoured forces with supporting infantry to drive a wedge into the Fifth Army defences and at one point had almost penetrated to the beaches,

26. By the following day, the situation had further deteriorated, all unloading ceased, and the Naval Commander Western Task Force requested me to provide heavier Naval support fire. Accordingly, H.M.S. VALIANT and H.M.S. WARSPITE were ordered to proceed to the "Avalanche" area, so as to arrive as soon as possible after first light on D+6. In addition, three cruisers from Force "V", EURYALUS, SCYLLA and CHARYBDIS, were ordered to proceed at their utmost speed to Tripoli to embark further Military reinforcements. Throughout D+7 Naval gunfire of all calibres shelled enemy formations and strongpoints and by 1400 on D+8 the situation was restored. It was while returning from these gun support duties that H.M.S. WARSPITE received two direct hits and one near miss from radio-controlled glider bombs. H.M.S. WARSPITE subsequently reached Malta in tow without further damage.

#### *Admiralty footnotes:*

\* Rangers—the American counterpart of British Commandos.

† Operation "Dragoon"—the landing on the South coast of France in August, 1944.

27. There can be little doubt that the psychological effect upon our troops of seeing these heavy ships bombarding close inshore played a large part in relieving a situation which at one time showed every indication of becoming extremely grave.

#### *The End of the Operation.*

28. The Military situation, stabilised on D+6, 15th September, gradually improved; indications of a general German withdrawal were seen on D+7. On 19th September, Eboli and, on 20th, Campagna and several other towns in the vicinity were captured. Five days later the port of Salerno was re-opened, followed quickly by the capture of Castellammare on 28th and of Torre Annunziata the next day. Naples was entered on 1st October and with its capture, Operation "Avalanche" drew to a close. The port of Naples had been carefully and methodically wrecked by the withdrawing enemy, but even so, two days later five Liberty ship berths, six coaster berths and eight holding berths were cleared. By the 6th October discharge over the Salerno beaches was almost completed, the port of Naples was functioning slowly, and on that day Operation "Avalanche" was officially deemed to have been completed.

#### *Lessons Learnt.*

29. Owing to the considerable period which has elapsed since Operation "Avalanche" was carried out and the fact that the experience gained therein has been embodied in other operations, it is redundant to remark at length upon the lessons learnt. Owing to the short period which had elapsed between Operations "Husky" and "Avalanche", but few of the difficulties brought to light in the first operation were remedied in time for the second. My remarks on Operation "Husky" still hold good, but to some extent these mistakes have now been rectified and it is not intended to elaborate upon them further.

#### *Conclusions.*

30. Operation "Avalanche" was the most ambitious amphibious operation so far launched. That it succeeded after many vicissitudes reflects great credit on Vice-Admiral Hewitt, U.S.N., his subordinate Commanders, and all those who served under them. That there were extremely anxious moments cannot be denied. The enemy employed new types of weapons and defended his positions with a ferocity which we have now come to regard as normal, but at the time it provided a severe test to our Military Commanders. I am proud to say that throughout the operation, the Navies never faltered and carried out their tasks in accordance with the highest traditions of their Services. Whilst full acknowledgment must be made of the devastating though necessarily intermittent bombing by the Allied Air Forces, it was Naval gunfire, incessant in effect, that held the ring when there was danger of the enemy breaking through to the beaches and when the overall position looked so gloomy. More cannot be said.

(Signed) ANDREW CUNNINGHAM,  
*Admiral of the Fleet,*  
*Late Commander-in-Chief,*  
*Mediterranean.*

## APPENDIX I.

### PLANNING.

On completion of the Sicilian Campaign there were many and changing factors involved in the decision as to the location of the main assault on the Italian coast. Not until August 19th was it decided that the planning and mounting of Operation "Avalanche" should be given first priority. Plans involving landings in the Gulf of Gioiia\* (Operation "Buttress"), in the Gulf of Taranto and on the Italian coast North of Brindisi (Operations "Musket" and "Goblet"), were all examined and progressed to a certain extent. Operation "Buttress" was in fact fully planned and detailed orders were issued to the ships concerned. This uncertainty led to an immense amount of work for my planning staff and for the British Naval Commanders involved, all of whom had two or more problems to examine.

2. It was the intention that the "Buttress" Force would become the Northern Assault Force for "Avalanche" and that an American force would provide the "Avalanche" Southern Assault Force. By this means it was hoped that it would be practicable to switch from Operation "Buttress" to Operation "Avalanche" without upsetting the detailed planning to any marked extent. For a variety of reasons this combination proved not to be so simple as had been imagined, the chief difficulty being that "Buttress" involved the use of only one port, namely Vibo Valencia, whereas in "Avalanche" the plan had to allow for the eventual capture and development of Salerno, Castellammare, Torre Annunziata and Naples.

3. As a result of the several plans under consideration, planning for Operation "Avalanche" was conducted almost simultaneously on the levels of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, the Western Task Force Commander, who had no other operation to plan, and the subordinate Task Force Commanders, one of whom, Commodore G. N. Oliver, R.N. (the Northern Assault Force Commander), was planning in detail for both "Buttress" and "Avalanche" concurrently.

4. Naval planning memoranda were issued as for previous operations in this theatre to disseminate the building of the plan to the subordinate Commanders. It is no exaggeration to say that without this system these subordinate Commanders could never have produced their own orders in time for the operation, as planning was taking place on all levels simultaneously, as stated in the preceding paragraph.

5. Further difficulty was experienced through the frequent changes of plan introduced by the Fifth Army, many of which took place at a very late date. The Commander Western Naval Task Force comments strongly on this point in his report.

6. The sailing and routing of the assault convoys called for careful timing and accurate

#### *Admiralty footnote:*

\* Gulf of Gioiia—on the North-West coast of Calabria.

navigation, as many of the convoy tracks had perforce to cross each other, due to the fact that the troops embarked in convoys sailing from Oran were required for the Southern Sector of the assault beaches. A special channel was swept through the minefields between Sicily and Tunisia to allow the assault forces to pass West of Sicily.

7. The decision by Commanding General Fifth Army to advance H-Hour by 30 minutes was not taken until 24th August and was one which involved a considerable number of alterations to the convoy sailing and routing programmes, all of which had to be signalled, as by that time the Operation Orders were in course of distribution.

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