

DIAVOLI VERDI E DIAVOLI ROSSI IN LOTTA PER CATANIA SICILIA 1943

Nel luglio del 1943, le truppe Anglo-Americane dopo aver sconfitto le forze dell'Asse in Africa del nord, gli Alleati spostarono la loro attenzione sulla Sicilia e pianificarono l'invasione dell'isola, come primo obiettivo dell'assalto alla fortezza europea. L'operazione fu chiamata, in codice, Husky. Il 9 luglio, una forza mista alleata, preceduta da lanci di paracadutisti, atterrò in Sicilia. La forza aviotrasportata consisteva in fanti a bordo degli alianti della 1st Airlanding Brigade, più le truppe di parà della 505th PIR, appartenente alla 82nd Airborne Division. Anche se gli aerei si sparpagliarono durante i lanci, i paracadutisti alleati riuscirono a tagliare le comunicazioni tra le truppe tedesche impiegate nel retroterra e quelle che difendevano le spiagge. La mattina del 10 luglio la forza d'assalto alleata, organizzata in tre ondate, sbarcò sulle spiagge sudorientali e sudoccidentali della Sicilia. Le città di Gela, Pachino e Siracusa furono conquistate rapidamente dagli Alleati, nonostante i feroci contrattacchi tedeschi.

Per sfondare le linee tedesche, il generale Montgomery decise di attaccare tra Siracusa e Catania. Il 12 luglio, per soccorrere il Kampfgruppe Schmalz dispiegato nei dintorni di Catania, l'FJR 3 di stanza nella Francia meridionale fu lanciato nei pressi della città di Catania. Presto i parà tedeschi, detti pure "diavoli verdi" s'impadronirono di diversi ponti, compreso il ponte di Primosele, lungo la linea del fronte che costeggiava il fiume Simeto, importante noto viario posto alle porte della città di Catania.

I paracadutisti tedeschi del Fallsch. MG-Btl. 1, unità comandata dal maggiore Schmidt, atterrarono sull'aeroporto di Catania e presero posizione a Sud del ponte di Primosele. Anziché essere rinforzati dai soldati tedeschi del Fallsch. MG-Btl. 1, com'era previsto, si ritrovarono però di fronte al loro equivalente inglese, la 1st Parachute Brigade, detti pure "diavoli rossi" comandata dal brigadier Lathbury, che era stata sganciata sullo stesso settore. Lo stato maggiore tedesco della 1 e della 2 compagnia, comandate rispettivamente dal maggiore Steiner e dal Leutnant Romberg. Comandato dall'Oberstleutnant Walther, l'FJR 4 si lanciò la notte del 16 luglio, mentre infuriava la battaglia nella zona limitrofa al ponte di Primosele sul fiume Simeto. L'unità fu seguita da ciò che rimaneva della 1 Fallsch. Art. Rgt. 1.

Iniziò un'aspra lotta per il controllo del ponte sul fiume Simeto. Il 19 luglio, la 51 e la 78 divisione britannica sfondarono le linee tedesche. Presto, le truppe inglesi, stabilirono precarie teste di ponte, riuscendo a resistere ai violenti contrattacchi sferrati dai tedeschi che coprivano la ritirata delle loro truppe verso Messina.

Fallschirmjäger in the hopeless Defence of Sicily

Unstoppable Allied advance

After allied successes in North Africa, plans were drawn up to invade the soft underbelly of Europe. Sicily was chosen as the objective, mainly as a diversionary operation to tie down as many German troops as possible in the Mediterranean theatre. Plans for D-Day were already being drawn up and if the allies could get a toehold in the south they would have the Germans fighting on two fronts in the west.

The allies began to deceive the Germans into thinking that the attacks would be on the Greek mainland, small actions were planned to assault some of the islands in the Dodecanese.

The German high command believed that the target would be the island of Sardinia and most of the Luftwaffe air defences were moved there, *(a big mistake as the invasion force met no air opposition)*.

Axis forces on Sicily comprised of 10 Italian Divisions commanded by General Guzzoni and General Hans Hube's 14th Panzer Korps, consisting of the Herman Göring Panzer Division and the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division.

The allied assault would consist of a combined air and sea assault *(quite reminiscent of Crete)*, the sea borne element consisted of 12 divisions of British, American and Canadian troops. Ahead of the sea borne element was the ariel armada with transport aircraft and gliders, which took off from airfields in Tunisia.

The airborne forces were landed late on the 9th July 1943 at Gela and Syracuse, high winds scattered many of the paratroops and some objectives could not be taken. The airdrops were followed by the allied armada at 3am on the 10th, which landed on the southeast coast of the island between Gela and Licata to the west extending to Casibile a few miles south of Syracuse. They landed virtually unopposed with many of the Italian forces on the coast surrenderring without a fight. The battle for the island had begun.

The German plan was to send the 14th Panzer Korps to counter the Allied advance and hopefully stall it long enough until reinforcements from the mainland arrived.

The reinforcements were to come in the shape of the 1st Parachute Division which was stationed in Southern France and on 11th July it was ordered to be ready to move to Rome. The 3rd Regiment *(Heidrich)*, the 1st & 3rd Battalion's, 4th Regiment and the Fallschirm-MG Battalion were immediately airlifted to Rome. On arrival the 4th Regiment and the MG Battalion boarded Gliders and JU-52's and were sent on to Sicily where they were dropped around Syracuse and Catania. The 3rd Regiment would wait a couple of days before they went into Sicily. The 1st Regiment was sent from southern France to a holding area near Naples until they were required. Other Army units were meanwhile being ferried across the Messina Straights to Sicily.

The Fallschirmjäger immediately went to work preparing defensive positions, to meet the expected Allied advance. The MG Battalion under the command of Major Schmidt were sent to defend the important Primasole iron road bridge over the River Simeto which was the only road access through the mountainous areas in the east of the Island, this would definitely be an Allied objective.

On the night of 12th & 13th July, the Paras already on the ground were joined by 2 Kompanies of Witzig's Fallschirm-Pioneers as well as some Fallschirm Anti-Tank and Artillery units.

These Paras were followed several hours later by men of the British 1st Parachute Brigade who jumped on Catania to capture the airfield *(although I have been told by a veteran British Para who jumped on Sicily that the jump on Catania airfield was an overshoot of the original dropzone)*. This action coincided with a British seaborne assault on the coast further south. German forces managed to contain them and within a few hours had beaten down the resistance inflicting heavy casualties

on the Red Berets.

On the 14th July, the 3rd Regiment jumped on to Catania airfield. The place was under heavy fire from Allied aircraft and Naval Guns but the jump was successful.

Overnight on the 14th/15th July, 200 British Paratroopers jumped on to the southern side of the Primasole bridge with the aim of capturing it by surprise. Confusion now set in amongst the men of the MG Battalion as they were expecting to be reinforced by the 2 Pioneer kompanies. Once the identity of these men from above was established a race began to get back to the bridge. The British Paras got there first and captured it; they removed most of the demolition charges and hastily prepared defensive positions under fire from the MG Battalion. The Fallschirmjäger made repeated attacks on the bridge during the 15th and after only holding onto the bridge for several hours the British Paratroops were forced to withdraw after running low on ammunition. The MG Battalion was reinforced by elements of the 4th Regiment during the 15th and both units prepared themselves for a British counter attack.

During the night of the 15th, the 2 Kompanies of Engineers jumped on to the airfield at Catania where they then foot marched to the Primasole Bridge. They were a welcome site to the defenders of the bridge, the British were concentrating for another attack. They took up positions recently vacated by the Red Berets on the southern side of the bridge.

The next day the British forces attacked, supported by newly arrived armour, they were beaten back with anti-tank weapons and concentrated MG and mortar fire. It was not long before they came back again, determined to wrestle the bridge from the Fallschirmjäger. This time they were without armoured support, instead they had Infantry reinforcements from the west. This attack was also quashed, men of the Fallschirm-Artillery unit had bought up an 88mm gun.

The British forces withdrew after taking heavy casualties. Before long they started to call down artillery on the Paras positions, destroying the 88mm gun and inflicting heavy casualties, especially on the Engineer Kompanies.

The weakened German forces could not hold the bridge, late in the afternoon of the 16th the British forces attacked once again and forced the Paras to withdraw. Then saw a cat and mouse game with the Paras retaking the bridge again 2 days later on the 18th and losing it again on the 19th. This time it was for good, the British forces were constantly being reinforced. The remnants of the 2 Pioneer Kompanies now amalgamated with the 4th Regiment withdrew further east, fighting a rearguard action on the way.

The British 8th Army now had an open route to eastern Sicily.

Meanwhile the 3rd Regiment had become surrounded in the town of Carlenini by British forces landed ashore further south several days before. After fierce fighting they managed to break through the encirclement and reach the relative safety of the German lines.

On the 20th July, General Hube withdrew all Axis forces from central Sicily and pulled them back eastwards.

On the 25th July, Mussolini was forced to resign and was replaced by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, this had serious repercussions in Sicily as many Italian units laid down their arms and surrendered to the Allies.

In the first week of August the German forces were desperate, the Allies were advancing from the west (*US*) and from the south (*British*), the Italian forces were now only a token presence.

No reinforcements would be coming to Sicily to contain the advance, there were too many commitments on the Ostfront. The German High Command gave the order to evacuate the island, under Operation Lehrgang (*course*)

The Fallschirmjäger were used to plug the gaps in the weakly held German line. Whilst the Allies were being stalled by the rearguards the German forces were ferried back across to mainland Italy. Some parts of the 1st Parachute Division were evacuated on the 11th August. Witzig's Pioneers provided rearguard, destroying ammo dumps and fuel storage's on the way, until they too were ferried across the Messina Straights on the 16th and 17th August

The allies had finally got their toehold in southern Europe; the next step would be mainland Italy.

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