

Battlefield Tour '05 – Operation HUSKY

Eagle Tour 05, the yearly NRDC(IT) battlefield tour (BT), took place in Sicily, throughout the provinces of Catania and Syracuse facing the Ionian Sea, the province of Ragusa facing the Mediterranean Sea and the province of Enna in the Centre of the Island. The BT, the only one planned for 2005, lasted 6 days (travel included), from the 8th to the 13th of March, a Tuesday to Sunday Tour organised by the Engineer Division, as by tradition in HQ NRDC(IT).

The training audience was composed by 50 officers, both Senior and Junior from the NRDC(IT) Staff.

The aim of the exercise was to study and tour the Allied Campaign of 1943 (Operation Husky, 9 July - 27 August) in order to prepare the Headquarters staff for combined and joint operations and exercises. In addition to that, Eagle Tour 05 was designed to demonstrate some of the enduring characteristic of conflict. Whilst we shall study historical events within a wide political and military strategic context, the focus of the exercise was to draw out relevant lessons for contemporary operations at the operational and high tactical levels of war, including consideration of the land-air and land-maritime interfaces. Specific battlefield tour objectives were:

- to consider the military strategic and operational level dimension of command decision making and resource allocation;
- to highlight the application of the principles of war and practice of operational art during the campaign, major operations and battles under study;
- to illustrate the significance of the environmental and component factors in the planning and conduct of major operations and battles;
- to stimulate the conduct of original research,

expanding knowledge of military history at the strategic, operational and high tactical level of conflict;

- to consider the relevance and lessons of military history for operations today;
- and to take into account the impact of technology on the conduct of war.



World war II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind.

Highly relevant today, WWII has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about the military preparedness, global strategy and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism.

The battlefields today are largely similar to what they were 62 years ago. Apart from the fact that new roads have replaced some of the old ones, the

countryside of Sicily has changed hardly at all since the battle. It remains an attractive tourist and farming area, visited regularly by veterans of both sides, although very few now, and military students, either alone or in organised tours, such as ours.



NRDC(IT) group left Solbiate Olona on Tuesday March, the 8th (DAY1) and reached Catania by plane and from there Modica by coach, the most appropriate means of transportation throughout the entire battlefield tour. The beautiful city of Modica was our base while on the island, it was where our hotels were located. Truly, while landscapes are close to the ones in 1943, we found little trace of the fortifications, as they have been largely replaced by renewed countryside and urban infrastructure. Moreover, it is understandable that little memories of the battles still remain and as a

matter of fact we didn't see as many monuments and WWII-related topology as we did last year in Normandy. On DAY 2 we visited the US landing sector at Scoglitti, where the US II CORPS under Bradley fought the IT 18 COASTAL BDE. The two historians, Dr. David Hall and Dr. Niall Barr (the same ones who guided us through Normandy), illustrated how an operational lodgement on a hostile shore was secured by the Americans. That was a campaign decisive point and provided a stimulus for discussion on amphibious assault techniques, past and present. Later in the morning, at the border between the Ragusa and the Caltanissetta provinces, we focused on the airborne operations by US 82 AB DIV against the Axis defensive positions passed the Dirillo bridge, on the Allied Avenue of Approach (AA). In the afternoon we took a chance to visit (guided tour) the amazing village of Ibla, now a block of the city of Ragusa.

DAY 3 started with a lecture by our historians, before moving to Pozzallo. It was one of the principal landing beaches used by the 1 CA INF DIV of the XXX BR CORPS under Leese during its assault on the Sicilian shores on July the 10th, 1943. The thin Italian defences were manned by elements of the 206 COASTAL DIV. In contrast to their determined efforts against the American



landings further to the west, Axis forces did not intervene effectively against the British-Canadian assault forces, even though effective defensive positions were in place, such as the bunkers and the pillboxes we visited on the hill overlooking the shores to control road-junctions. In the afternoon we moved towards Syracuse and more is to be taken into account when considering the strong Fortress Area defending the ports of Augusta and Syracuse. The coastal batteries didn't play the role they were given by the Axis Commanders and the British assault operations (XIII BR CORPS under Dempsey) were actually not affected by any real Axis effort.

DAY 4, Friday, started with a visit to Augusta, that was the northern part of the Fortress Area toured the day before in the South part of it, base of the IT 83rd NAVY Hydroplane RECCE GROUP. There again, none of the Axis troops seriously opposed the British landings. The next stand said a different story. It was located on the side of 'Johnny 1', a British parachute battalion objective that was designed to secure the southern approach to the Prompsole Bridge. The now famous crossing (the original



bridge no longer stands) over the river Simeto was the objective of the British air assault (Operation FUSTIAN) on the night of 13-14 July to capture and hold the final key crossing on the road to Catania. The German airborne reinforcement (12-17 July 1943), the XIII BR CORPS failure to link up quickly with the 1 BR Parachute BDE at Primosole Bridge on July the 14th and the heavy fighting in the vicinity of Primosole dashed Montgomery's hopes for a quick and easy end of the campaign. That stand illustrated the importance under a JFLCC perspective of recognising and securing key terrain and, as such, achieving a decisive point in a battle. Before lunch we had a chance to honour the fallen in the invasion of Sicily by having a small wreath ceremony in Syracuse, at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cemetery. In the afternoon we had a guided visit to the Island of Ortigia, the ancient part of Syracuse.

DAY 5 was the Cultural Day and the group moved to Piazza Armerina to enjoy the beauty of the mosaics of an ancient Roman villa, where a tourist guide told us a lot about our past everyday life habits. Finally, on Sunday (DAY 6) the battlefield tour ended with the group returning to Ugo Mara barracks, a bit tired, but having gained a lot out of the exercise ET05.

In fact, HQ NRDC(IT) had a unique chance to review the setting of the liberation of the first piece of European soil from the Nazi-Fascism dominion: the Allied invasion of Sicily was a large scale landing operation which offered a lot of lessons to be learnt to all functional branches.

