

= Operation Ladbroke =

Operation Ladbroke was a glider landing by British airborne troops during the Second World War near Syracuse , Sicily , that began on 9 July 1943 as part of Operation Husky , the Allied invasion of Sicily . The first Allied mission using large numbers of the aircraft , the operation was carried out from Tunisia by glider infantry of the British 1st Airlanding Brigade , commanded by Brigadier Philip Hicks , with a force of 136 Wacos and eight Horsas . The objective was to establish a large invasion force on the ground near the town of Syracuse , secure the Ponte Grande Bridge and ultimately take control of the city itself with its strategically vital docks , as a prelude to the full @-@ scale invasion of Sicily .

En route to Sicily , sixty @-@ five gliders released too early by the American and British towing aircraft crashed into the sea , drowning approximately 252 men . Of the remainder , only eighty @-@ seven men arrived at the Pont Grande Bridge , although they successfully captured the bridge and held it beyond the time they were to be relieved . Finally , with their ammunition expended and only fifteen soldiers remaining unwounded , the Allied troops surrendered to Italian forces . The Italians , having gained control of the bridge , sought to destroy the structure , but were frustrated by troopers of the 1st Airlanding Brigade who had removed the previously attached explosive charges . Other troops from the brigade , who had landed elsewhere in Sicily , aided further by destroying communications links and capturing gun batteries .

= = Background = =

By December 1942 , with Allied forces advancing through Tunisia , the North African Campaign was coming to a close ; with victory there imminent , discussions began among the Allies regarding the nature of their next objective . Many Americans argued for an immediate invasion of Northern France , while the British , as well as General Dwight David Eisenhower , argued that the island of Sardinia was the best subsequent target of the Allied troops . In January 1943 the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt settled at the Casablanca Conference on the island of Sicily , whose invasion and occupation could potentially provide the Allies with Mediterranean shipping routes and airfields nearer to mainland Italy and Germany . The codename Operation Husky was decided upon for the Allied invasion of Sicily , and planning for Husky began in February . Initially the British Eighth Army , under the command of General Bernard Law Montgomery , were to land on the south @-@ eastern corner of the island and advance north to the port of Syracuse . Two days later the U.S. Seventh Army , commanded by Lieutenant General George Patton , would land on the western corner of the island and move towards the port of Palermo .

In March it was decided that the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division , under Major General Matthew Bunker Ridgway , and the British 1st Airborne Division , under Major @-@ General George Frederick Hopkinson , would be dropped by parachute and glider just prior to the amphibious landings ; they would land a few miles behind the beaches and neutralize their defenders , thereby aiding the landing of the Allied ground forces . However , in early May these directives were radically changed at the insistence of General Montgomery ; he argued that with Allied forces landing separately at either end of the island , the defending Axis forces would have the opportunity to defeat each Allied Army in turn before both could unite . Instead , the plans were altered to land both the Eighth and Seventh Armies simultaneously along a 100 miles ( 160 km ) stretch of coastline on Sicily 's south @-@ eastern corner . At the same time , the plans for the two airborne divisions were also adjusted ; Montgomery believed that the airborne troops should be landed near Syracuse , so that they could seize the valuable port . The commander of the 82nd Airborne Artillery , Brigadier General Maxwell D. Taylor , further asserted that dropping behind the island 's beaches and overcoming its defences was not a suitable mission for the airborne troops , as they were only lightly armed and vulnerable to the ' friendly fire ' of the planned Allied naval bombardment . In the revised blueprint for the airborne divisions , a reinforced regimental combat team ( the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment , under Colonel James Maurice Gavin ) from the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division

would be dropped by parachute north @-@ east of the port of Gela to block the movement of Axis reserves towards the Allied beachheads . The British 1st Airborne Division was now to conduct three brigade @-@ size airborne operations : the Ponte Grande road bridge south of Syracuse was to be captured by the 1st Airlanding Brigade , under Brigadier Philip Hicks , the port of Augusta was to be seized by Brigadier Ernest E. Down 's 2nd Parachute Brigade , and finally the Primasole Bridge over the River Simeto was to be taken and secured by Brigadier Gerald Lathbury 's 1st Parachute Brigade .

= = Planning = =

As there were insufficient transport aircraft for all three brigades to conduct their operations simultaneously , it was decided that the first operation would be Ladbroke , whose objective was the capture of the Ponte Grande Bridge . The mission , under the command of Brigadier Philip Hicks , was conducted just prior to the amphibious landings , on the night of 9 July , while the remaining two operations took place on successive two nights . The 1st Airlanding Brigade was also given the additional tasks of capturing Syracuse harbour and the urban area that adjoined it , and either destroying or confiscating a coastal artillery battery that was in range of the amphibious landings . When training began for the operation , difficulties immediately arose . The original plan for the airborne operations had called for all three to employ parachutists , but in May Montgomery altered the plan ; after determining that airborne troops would be at a considerable distance from Allied ground forces , he believed that the force sent to capture Syracuse would be served best by gliders in order to provide them with the maximum possible amount of firepower . His airborne advisor , Group Captain Cooper of the Royal Air Force , argued that a glider landing conducted at night with inexperienced aircrews was not practical , but the decision was left unchanged .

Montgomery 's orders raised several issues , the first with the transport aircraft of the Troop Carrier Wings assigned to the airborne operations . When they had arrived in North Africa , it had been decided that the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing would operate with 1st Airborne Division and its counterpart , the 51st , with 82nd Airborne Division . A few weeks later this arrangement was switched , with the 52nd now operating with 82nd Airborne Division and the 51st with 1st Airborne Division ; this seemed a logical decision , as each Wing had operational experience with the division it had been paired with . However , the decision to turn the Syracuse assault into a glider @-@ based one was problematic ; the 51st had practically no glider experience , whilst the 52nd had much more but was already training for a parachute @-@ based mission . To switch both was impractical and would have led to a number of problems , which left 1st Airborne Division , and thus 1st Airlanding Brigade , with an inexperienced Troop Carrier Wing .

= = = Glider problems = = =

Further problems were encountered with the gliders to be used in the operation , and the glider pilots themselves . Until a few months prior to the operation , there was a notable shortage of serviceable gliders in North Africa . In late March a small number of Wacos arrived at Accra on the Gold Coast , but pilots sent to ferry them to North Africa found that they were in poor condition . Due to neglect and the deleterious effects of tropical weather , the pilots were able to assemble only a small number of Wacos and fly them back on 22 April . On 23 April , a larger number of the American gliders began to arrive in North African ports , but were not immediately available for use as the crates holding them were unloaded haphazardly , instructions were often found to be missing , and those men assigned to assemble the gliders were often inexperienced . However , when the decision was made to conduct a glider @-@ borne assault with 1st Airlanding Brigade , assembly was improved , and by 12 June 346 gliders had been put together and delivered to the Troop Carrier Wings . A small number of Horsa gliders were transported to North Africa for use by the brigade . Thirty took off from England and undertook a trip of approximately 1 @, 500 miles ( 2 @, 400 km ) in Operation Turkey Buzzard . After attacks from Luftwaffe fighter patrols and experiencing often turbulent weather , a total of 27 Horsas were delivered to North Africa in time for the operation

When sufficient gliders had arrived in North Africa , however , they were not all usable even in training ; on 16 June , most of the gliders were grounded for repairs , and on 30 June , large numbers of them had developed weaknesses in their tail @-@ wiring , necessitating another grounding period of three days . Given these problems and delays , 51st Troop Carrier Wing was not able to conduct a large @-@ scale glider exercise until mid @-@ June . On 14 June , fifty @-@ four Wacos were flown over 70 miles ( 110 km ) and then released to land at an airfield , and a larger exercise was conducted on 20 June ; but even these limited exercises were unrealistic , as they were conducted in broad daylight . The British glider pilots themselves also caused difficulties ; although there were a sufficient number of them to conduct the operation , they were highly inexperienced . Detached from the Glider Pilot Regiment for the operation , they had no experience with the Waco gliders and night operations involving them , as British doctrine had deemed such operations impossible . On average , the pilots had eight hours of flight experience in gliders . Few were rated as being ' operationally ready ' and none had combat experience . Colonel George Chatterton , the commander of the Glider Pilot Regiment , had protested their participation as he believed they were entirely unfit for any operation . When the training period for the brigade ended with a total of two exercises completed , the glider pilots had an average of 4 @.@ 5 hours training in flying the unfamiliar Waco , which included an average of 1 @.@ 2 hours night flying .

= = = 1st Airlanding Brigade = = =

The units of the 1st Airlanding Brigade were : the 1st Battalion , Border Regiment ; 2nd Battalion , South Staffordshire Regiment ; 181st ( Airlanding ) Field Ambulance and 9th Field Company , Royal Engineers . The Staffords were tasked with securing the bridge and the area to the south , while the Borders were to capture Syracuse . For the mission the 1st Airlanding Brigade were allocated 136 Waco and eight Horsa gliders . With the shortage of space in the gliders - Wacos could only accommodate fifteen troops , half that of the Horsa , thus the whole brigade could not be deployed . Six of the Horsas carrying ' A ' and ' C ' companies from the Staffords were scheduled to land at the bridge at 23 : 15 on 9 July in a coup @-@ de @-@ main operation . The remainder of the brigade would arrive at 01 : 15 on 10 July using a number of landing @-@ zones between 1 @.@ 5 and 3 miles ( 2 @.@ 4 and 4 @.@ 8 km ) away , then converge on the bridge to reinforce the defence .

= = = Italian forces = = =

The Ponte Grande Bridge was immediately outside the area defended by the Italian 206 Coastal Division , which would oppose the British seaborne landing . The fortress commander was Rear Admiral Primo Leonardi , with Colonel Mario Damiani in command of the army contingent . The Augusta @-@ Syracuse Naval Fortress Area , which included the Coastal Division , was protected by six medium and six heavy coastal artillery batteries , with eleven additional dual @-@ purpose coastal and anti @-@ aircraft batteries , with six batteries only of anti @-@ aircraft guns . Finally the Fortress contained an armoured train with four 120 mm guns . The army contingent was the 121st Coastal Defence Regiment , which included four battalions . There were also naval and air force battalions available , while the 54 Infantry Division Napoli was in a position to send reinforcements if required .

= = Mission = =

On 9 July 1943 , a contingent of 2 @,@ 075 British troops , along with seven jeeps , six anti @-@ tank guns and ten mortars , boarded their gliders in Tunisia and took off at 18 : 00 , bound for Sicily . In the hours that preceded the landing , twelve Boeing B @-@ 17 and six Vickers Wellington equipped with radar jamming devices flew back and forth along the coast in the Siracusa @-@ Licata sector ; between 21 : 00 and 21 : 30 , 55 Wellingtons of 205th Group carried out a diversionary bombing of the port and airport of Syracuse , causing a number of civilian and military

casualties , including the commander of the Italian naval base , Commander Giuseppe Giannotti . 280 puppets dressed in paratrooper uniforms were launched north of the landing area , in order to deceive the Italian defense . En route , the gliders encountered strong winds , poor visibility and at times were subjected to anti @-@ aircraft fire . To avoid gunfire and searchlights , pilots of the towing aircraft climbed higher or took evasive action . In the confusion surrounding these manoeuvres , some gliders were released too early and sixty @-@ five of them crashed into the sea , drowning around 252 men . Of the remainder , only twelve landed in the right place . Another fifty @-@ nine landed up to 25 miles ( 40 km ) away while the remainder were either shot down or failed to release and returned to Tunisia . About 200 American paratroopers , having been mistakenly parachuted in the area assigned to the Eighth Army , were captured by the Italian 146th Coastal Regiment ( 206th Coastal Division ) in the early hours of 10 July .

Only one Horsa with a platoon of infantry from the Staffords landed near the bridge . Its commander , Lieutenant Withers , divided his men into two groups , one of which swam across the river and took up position on the opposite bank . Thereafter the bridge was captured following a simultaneous assault from both sides . The Italian defenders from the 120th Coastal Infantry Regiment abandoned their pillboxes on the north bank .

The British platoon then dismantled some demolition charges that had been fitted to the bridge and dug @-@ in to wait for reinforcement or relief . Another Horsa landed roughly 200 yards ( 180 m ) from the bridge but exploded on landing , killing all on board . Three of the other Horsas carrying the coup @-@ de @-@ main party landed within 2 miles ( 3 @-@ 2 km ) of the bridge ? their occupants eventually finding their way to the site . Reinforcements began to arrive at the bridge , but by 06 : 30 they numbered only eighty @-@ seven men .

Elsewhere , about 150 men landed at Cape Murro di Porco and captured a radio station . Based on a warning of imminent glider landings transmitted by the station 's previous occupants , the local Italian commander ordered a counter @-@ attack but his troops failed to receive his message . The scattered nature of the landings now worked in the Allies ' favour as they were able to cut all telephone wires in the immediate area . The glider carrying the brigade deputy commander , Colonel O. L. Jones , landed beside an Italian coastal artillery battery ; at daylight the staff officers and radio operators attacked and destroyed the battery 's five guns and their ammunition dump . Other isolated groups of Allied soldiers tried to aid their comrades , assaulting Italian defences and targeting reinforcements . Another attack by a group of paratroopers on three 149 / 35 mm Italian coastal batteries failed , and the batteries were able to open fire on Allied landing craft and troops at 6 : 15 on 10 July . At 9 : 15 , the 1st Battalion of the Italian 75th Infantry Regiment ( " Napoli " Division ) captured another 160 American paratroopers on the Palazzolo Acreide @-@ Syracuse road . Another group of paratroopers attacked an Italian patrol led by Major Paoli , commander of the 126th Artillery Group ; Paoli was killed and his unit fell in disarray , and was thus unable to intervene in the later fight against British tanks near the bridge .

The first counterattack on the bridge was by two companies of Italian sailors , who were repulsed by the British . As the Italians responded to the Allied landings , they gathered more troops and brought up artillery and mortars to bombard the Allied @-@ controlled Pont Grande Bridge . The British defenders came under attack from the Italians while the expected British 5th Infantry Division relief did not appear at 10 : 00 as planned . At 11 : 30 the Italian 385th Coastal Battalion arrived at the bridge , followed soon afterward by the 1st Battalion , 75th ( Napoli ) Infantry Regiment . The Italians were positioned to attack the bridge from three sides . By 14 : 45 there were only fifteen British troops defending the bridge that had not been killed or wounded ( four officers and eleven soldiers ) . At 15 : 30 , with their ammunition consumed , the British stopped fighting . Some men on the south side of the bridge escaped into the countryside , but the rest became prisoners of war . With the bridge back in Italian hands , the first unit from 5th Infantry Division , the 2nd Battalion , Royal Scots Fusiliers , of 17th Infantry Brigade , arrived at the bridge at 16 : 15 and mounted a successful counter @-@ attack , which had been made possible by the prior removal of demolition charges from the bridge , preventing its destruction by the Italians . The 1st Battalion of the 75th Infantry Regiment , having no artillery , was unable to oppose the British tanks and had to retreat after suffering heavy losses . The survivors from the 1st Airlanding Brigade took no further part in the

fighting and were withdrawn back to North Africa on 13 July . During the landings , the losses by 1st Airlanding Brigade were the most severe of all British units involved . The casualties amounted to 313 killed and 174 missing or wounded . Fourteen accompanying glider pilots were killed , and eighty @-@ seven were missing or wounded .

= = Aftermath = =

After an enquiry into the problems with the airborne missions in Sicily , the British Army and Royal Air Force submitted recommendations in the aftermath of Operation Ladbroke . Aircrew were to be trained in parachute and glider operations , and pathfinders were to be landed before the main force , to set out their beacons . The landing plan was simplified with complete brigades landing on a drop zone , instead of the smaller battalion landing areas used on Sicily . Gliders were no longer released at night while still over water , and their landing zones would be large enough to accommodate the aircraft with room to spare . Following a friendly fire incident over an Allied convoy , more training was given to ship 's crews in aircraft recognition ; Allied aircraft were also painted with three large white stripes . Training for pilots of the Glider Pilot Regiment was increased , and improvements to the gliders were implemented , including better inter @-@ aircraft communication . To provide another method of delivering jeeps and artillery by air , the Royal Air Force started experimenting with how to use parachutes to drop them into combat , the jeeps and guns being carried in aircraft 's bomb bays . A second Royal Air Force transport group , No. 46 , was formed and equipped solely with C @-@ 47 Dakotas , instead of the mixture of aircraft in No. 38 Group . Together , the Royal Air Force groups were capable of supplying eighty @-@ eight Albermarles , eighty @-@ eight Stirlings , thirty @-@ six Halifaxes and 150 Dakotas , a total of 362 planes which did not include aircraft held as reserves .