

Such was not the case however—at 1200 D - 1 the wind was blowing force 4 from the north-west but there was no evidence of imminent increase and no question of postponement arose. By 1700 the wind was force 6 to 7* and a nasty sea had risen. It was manifestly too late for postponement but considerable anxiety was felt, particularly for the small craft convoys making up against the sea. The wind mercifully started to ease from 2330 onwards, by H hour it was slight, and by morning had ceased, leaving only a tiresome swell and surf on the western beaches.

Attainment of Surprise.

23. This little blow had various effects but the most noteworthy was its contribution to our unexpected success in gaining complete surprise. The very efficient cover plan and the deceptive routeing of the convoys both played their parts. In addition the vigilance of the enemy was undoubtedly relaxed owing to the unfavourable phase of the moon to which we had been so unwillingly subjected. Finally came this wind which indeed came dangerously close at one time to making some, if not all, of the landings impracticable. These last two, to us, apparently unfavourable factors had actually the effect of making the weary Italians, who had been alert for many nights, turn thankfully in their beds saying "tonight at any rate they can't come!"

But they came.

The Landings.

24. In consequence of the wind not all assault waves reached the beach at H hour, but none was seriously late. Some of the L.C.T. convoys were very late, the most being that for BARK EAST† which was six hours late, having furthest to go against the wind. One L.C.T. was swamped and capsized. The performance of the small craft of both nations in this period was most creditable. They made valiant efforts to keep their rendezvous and in large measure were successful.

25. The assaults were landed in all sectors in the right place, nearly at the right time and with negligible opposition. In some areas some interference was encountered after daylight from coast defence and shore batteries, but in most cases they were readily silenced by ships' gunfire and the landings proceeded steadily with no appreciable interference other than the swell.

The Western Task Force, on their exposed western beaches, bore the brunt of opposition both by gunfire and surf, the latter particularly at CENT‡ beaches which were most nearly a lee shore. Losses of craft by broaching in this area were considerable. That the surf was in no wise allowed to interfere with the smooth progress of the landing reflects highly on the determination, resource and sound training of the Western Task Force.

Admiralty footnotes:

* Definitions in the Beaufort scale of windforce—

Force 4—moderate breeze (11–15 m.p.h. at sea level);

Force 6—strong breeze (21–26 m.p.h. at sea level);

Force 7—high wind (27–33 m.p.h. at sea level).

† BARK EAST—one of the British assault beaches (see Plan).

‡ CENT and DIME—American assault beaches, west of the Eastern Task Force assault area. DIME beaches were in the vicinity of Gela; CENT beaches were south-east of Gela, at places between DIME and Cape Scalambri.

26. After the landings the troops moved steadily inland on both fronts, apparently encountering but little opposition except inland of Gela in the DIME* area of the Western Task Force, where the floating reserve (Kool Force) was ordered to be landed in support. A determined counter attack by the Hermann Goering Panzer Division started to develop in this area from 0900 on D day and had some success, reaching almost to the beaches on the evening of D + 1. Naval gunfire played a prominent and praiseworthy part in stopping and turning this attack, being notably effective against tanks. By 2230 on D + 1 the situation had been restored and no further serious threat to the security of our bridge-heads developed.

Syracuse was entered by our troops at 2100 D day and the port swept and open by 0830 D + 1.

Air Action during the Assault.

27. The degree of air opposition encountered in the assault and later could by no means be described as serious; but caused some casualties among shipping and had some nuisance value.

In this respect the Western Task Force was less fortunate than the Eastern Task Force and was somewhat bothered, particularly by fighter bomber aircraft coming low over the hills from inland in such a manner as to evade detection by radar.

28. The provision of S.E.† fighter cover in the assault areas prior to the capture of adequate Sicilian airfields, presented a difficult problem to the Air Command, with only the limited airfield facilities of Malta, Gozo and Pantellaria lying within reasonable fighter range. The number of fighter sorties necessary to maintain even squadron strength in both assault areas was prodigious.

The Air Command had to strike a balance in the allotment of their resources between the value of defensive patrols and offensive action at the enemy airfields—both having the same object—the security of the assault from enemy air interference.

It was pointed out in my operation order that much of the air's effort would be unseen by the naval forces, and the strength of fighters to be expected was outlined.

29. By results I consider that the air appreciation was proved sound. To one who had fought through the Mediterranean campaign from the beginning it appeared almost magical that great fleets of ships could remain anchored on the enemy's coast, within 40 miles of his main aerodromes, with only such slight losses from air attack as were incurred.

The navies (and consequently the armies) owed a great debt to the air forces for the effectiveness of the protection afforded them throughout the operation. Nevertheless, there was palpably room for improvement in the close air cover of the assault areas, and, in particular, in the effectiveness of the liaison between the Naval Force Commanders and the fighter forces upon which they had to rely. This improvement was in fact effected in the next major amphibious operation which was undertaken in this theatre.

Admiralty footnote:

* (See foot note † of previous column.)

† S.E.—single engined.