

Germans were now withdrawing across the front of Seventh Army from west to east. They had already decided that the most they could hope to hold was the north-eastern portion of the island and on the 16th 15 Panzer Division was reconnoitring the northern slopes of Etna. XIV Panzer Corps was arriving to take command in the island and its intentions clearly were to rely no further on the Italians but to secure a defensible position with its own German troops which would cover Messina, to ensure an eventual evacuation, and deny us as long as possible the airfields in the Catania plain.

On 16th July I issued a second directive to both Armies. In it I laid down three axes of advance for Eighth Army: northwards through Catania; from Leonforte to Adrano to sever communications this side of Etna; and via Nicosia-Troina-Randazzo to sweep round the northern slopes of Etna. I was already concerned with the problem of the Messina peninsula. It is a long, mountainous, isosceles triangle with the great mass of Etna almost filling its base. The southern slopes of the mountain dominate the plain below and give perfect observation of any attack we could mount on the Gerbini airfields or the port of Catania. Our attack to drive the Germans from the island must therefore be canalized either side of Etna, in difficult country with few and bad roads. I hoped that Eighth Army would be able to mount a rapid attack on this formidable position before the Germans could assume a good position of defence. Seventh Army was ordered to protect the rear of this attack by seizing the central rectangle of roads around Enna and cutting the east-west road at Petralia. If it were found possible without involving heavy casualties General Patton was to capture Agrigento and Porto Empedocle, which would be useful for maintenance.

In accordance with this directive General Montgomery attacked northwards from his Simeto bridgehead on the night 17th/18th July. Two brigades of 50 Division made the attack but met very heavy resistance and gained little ground. The Air Force, at this period, was concentrating almost entirely on action to break the enemy's resistance at Catania. To this end, a continuous bombardment was maintained against all rail, road and air communications by which supplies might reach that area. The enemy had now concentrated the whole of the Hermann Goering Division in this area and added to it six battalions of 1 Parachute Division and two "Fortress" battalions rushed across from Calabria. The ground on this front was open but intersected with water courses which made difficult the employment of our armour. On the 19th General Montgomery informed me that he had decided not to persist with his thrust on the right, but to increase the pressure on his left. His first plan was to attack towards Misterbianco with 5 Division on the left of 13 Corps but this attack also met the same heavy resistance and could only draw level with 50 Division's bridgehead. 30 Corps now began to apply pressure. On the 20th 51 Division crossed the Dittaino River at Sferro and advanced on the Gerbini airfields but was driven back to the bridgehead by a counter-attack on the 21st. On 30 Corps' left the Canadian division, with 231 Brigade on its

right, was still making the wide sweep as originally planned but it was now clear that Eighth Army would not have the strength to encircle Etna on both sides against the stout resistance of the Germans. The Canadians were therefore ordered to advance to Leonforte and then turn east to Adrano, the centre of the three original thrusts, abandoning the proposed encirclement through Randazzo. The Germans were continuing to reinforce, for we identified part of 29 Panzer Grenadier Division opposing 30 Corps on the 20th. On that day General Montgomery ordered forward his reserve division, the 78th, from North Africa.

Seventh Army continued to make good progress following my directive of the 16th. The Provisional Corps took Porto Empedocle the same day and Agrigento the next, and II Corps captured Caltanissetta on the 18th. 15 Panzer Division had by now succeeded in making a rather scrambling retreat across Seventh Army's front, and were coming into line with the Hermann Goering Division to oppose 30 Corps' advance. There were therefore no German troops west or north-west of Seventh Army and there was no reason to anticipate effective resistance from the Italians on this front. Now that Eighth Army were stopped south of Catania I should need Seventh Army as the left arm of my enveloping movement round Etna. I therefore issued another directive to Seventh Army on 18th July. In this I ordered General Patton to push north after the capture of Petralia, which was provided for in my previous directive to him, and cut the north coast road. As soon as he had secured a line across the island from Campofelice on the north coast to Agrigento on the south he was to advance and mop up the whole western part of the island.

The rapid and wide-sweeping manoeuvres envisaged in this directive were very welcome to General Patton and he immediately set on foot the measures necessary to carry them out with that dash and drive which were characteristic of his conduct of operations. II Corps was given the task of securing the base in the centre of the island and cutting the north coast road, and the Provisional Corps, to which on 20th July he assigned 2 Armoured Division, was given that of the reduction of western Sicily. On the 20th the former entered Enna with the Canadians and the latter captured Sciacca, which had once been deemed an objective worthy of a separate amphibious landing. Progress was so good that I decided to push rapidly ahead with Seventh Army. On the 20th I directed General Patton to turn eastwards on reaching the north coast and develop a threat along the coast road and the road Petralia-Nicosia-Cesaro. This meant an alteration in the inter-Army boundary which entrusted the Americans with the operation north of Etna. In order to sustain this threat General Patton was ordered to capture at the earliest possible opportunity the port of Palermo and bring it into use as his main base of supply. American maintenance would then be switched from the south coast beaches and the ports of Licata and Empedocle to an axis running along the north coast from west to east.

The new directive was put into force with great rapidity and energy. The Provisional