

The Guns of Sicily

By ‘*Sigurd*’

Introduction

“The Canadian role in Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, is yet another story that has been ill told.”¹

- Mark Zhulke, *Operation Husky*

The Canadian Army’s campaign in Sicily represented “the first divisional-scale combat operation in World War II... where many officers and men – who would form the backbone of the First Canadian Army in future campaigns and battles – began their transformation from trained neophytes into combat veterans.”² Consequently, Canadian operations in Sicily provide a valuable insight into Canadian organization and tactics. Unfortunately, any work that does investigate Operation HUSKY focuses almost exclusively on the work of the manoeuvre element with only perfunctory references to fire support. The story of the gunners that fought their way through Sicily needs to be told. Amongst the hills of Sicily, these gunners developed the war winning formula that would allow the Canadian Army to fight its way through Italy and North-West Europe. The intent of this paper is to shed some light on the formidable efforts of the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery* in Sicily during the summer of 1943.

Overview

A complete review of the strategic impetus behind the invasion of Sicily, and the machinations that brought 1st Canadian Infantry Division† there is beyond the scope of this paper‡. It is sufficient to say that in the spring of 1943, 1st Canadian Division was ordered to conduct operations in Sicily with a D-day of 10 July, 1943. The months leading up to that date were filled with intensive training and planning in Scotland. The division’s move to the Mediterranean involved a torturous trek from Scotland to the south-

* The 1st Divisional Artillery was commanded by Brigadier A.B. (Bruce) Matthews and consisted of the 1st Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery (less B Battery); 2nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA), 3rd Field Regiment, RCA, 1st Anti-Tank Regiment, RCA and the 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RCA.

† 1st Canadian Division was allocated to XXX (UK) Corps which, along with XIII (UK) Corps, comprised 8th (UK) Army under then General Bernard Montgomery. Along with 7th (US) Army under General George Patten, the two armies formed 15th Army Group under British General Harold Alexander.

‡ For a complete review of the Canadian role in Operation HUSKY see C. P Stacey’s *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War: Volume II. The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945*. A more recent treatment is given by Mark Zhulke in *Operation Husky: The Canadian Invasion of Sicily, July 10-August 7, 1943*. For an in-depth investigation of the whole allied campaign, see Carlo D’Este’s *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily, 1943*.

eastern tip of Sicily. En route, three ships were sunk by a German U-boat resulting in vehicles, communication equipment and artillery pieces being sent to the ocean floor. Despite this set back, the 1st Canadian Division landed on the beaches near Pachino during the early morning hours of 10 July, 1943. The division formed the extreme left of both XXX Corps and 8th (UK) Army, flanked to the West by 7th (US) Army. The division's initial advances were rapid as the Italian first line of defence either melted away, surrendered wholesale, or put up a token resistance. The second line of defence, centered on the southern slope of Mount Etna, was manned by Germans who employed the natural defences of Sicily's rugged terrain to their fullest. This resulted in several weeks of hard fighting during which the Canadians literally had to blast the Germans out of successive ridge lines. After about a month of hard fighting, the allies eventually forced the Germans to evacuate the island and withdraw across the Straits of Messina onto mainland Italy.

Unblooded Artillery

Almost all of the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery had been on the first 'flights' of combat elements that left Canada in 1939³. They spent the next four years conducting extensive training in the United Kingdom – first to repel the anticipated invasion of Britain by the Germans; and then to return to the continent. Except for a brief foray to France in 1940, the units did not see combat until they landed on the beaches of Sicily. The Canadians were cast alongside combat-experienced veteran formations of the US and British Armies who had recently defeated the Axis in the North Africa Campaign and had acquired a respectable amount of combat-proven experience, as well as new tactics, techniques and procedures.

The Canadian Army that arrived in England in 1939 was trained to fight a war along the same lines as their British counterparts. The doctrine of the time spurned the terrors of attrition warfare that had dominated the First World War and espoused a blind adherence to a manoeuvreist breakthrough.⁴ Eminent Canadian historian Terry Copp observed that the key leaders of the British Army “were still planning exercises in which armoured and infantry brigades, without continuous artillery support, moved over great distances rehearsing the encounter battle.”⁵ This doctrinal approach to battle survived the

operational-level failures of France in 1940 and pervaded Allied thinking even up to the commencement of the North Africa Campaign. It was in the sands of Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia that Artillery would re-emerge as the predominant arm on the battlefield. Chased into Egypt by Rommel's Afrika Korps, it was not until the British built up significant artillery that they were able to stanch the German offensive with massive artillery fires, and commence offensive operations. Major-General (Retired) J.B.A. Bailey observed that "the British reverted to the tactics of the First World War based on static defence and the infantry assault, supported by massive artillery firepower. This combination, not the tank, was responsible for almost every major British success until the end of the war."⁶ The artillery-based doctrine that emerged from the deserts of North Africa was quite foreign to the British – and therefore, Canadian – generals of 1942.⁷

The change in doctrine forced a change in organization and attitude. Late 1942 saw a massive centralization of artillery where previously the doctrine had stressed decentralization. In the fall of 1942, General Bernard Montgomery directed that "the divisional CRA* have centralized command of their divisional artillery, which was to be used as a seventy-two-gun battery."⁸ In September of 1942, in another step towards the centralization of fire support, the British Army created the first Army Group Royal Artillery (AGRA)⁹ in which medium and field regiments were brigaded. Although nominally an Army-level asset, in practice the AGRA was allocated to a Corps. Canada followed suit in October, 1942. The ability to concentrate overwhelming fires that resulted from the creation of the AGRAs was one of the major factors that led to final victory.¹⁰

Although the division and its artillery had been training together for years, in the year leading up to the invasion of Sicily the doctrine surrounding how divisional artillery was organized and employed changed wholesale. As a result, the green Canadian gunners under their CRA Brigadier Bruce Matthews found themselves racing to catch up.

* Commander Royal Artillery. In modern Canadian doctrine this is the Commander Divisional Artillery.

Orders for an Invasion

The spring of 1943 brought orders for the 1st Canadian Division, under command of Major-General Guy Granville Simonds*, to participate in Operation HUSKY and mission-specific training began on 1 May 1943, only 70 days before D-day. Although still trying to familiarize themselves with the new artillery-based doctrine that had emerged from the North Africa Campaign, training was further hampered by a large scale change in equipment in the divisional artillery. Colonel Nicholson, author of *The Gunners of Canada* observed that:

All 25-pounders in the Division received new barrels fitted with muzzle brakes. Gun-towing vehicles and all transport with two-wheel drive had to be replaced. New wireless sets were issued of the same types as used in British units. In the 1st Anti-Tank Regiment one troop of each battery was converted to the new 17-pounders which were just coming from the factories.¹¹

Despite the change in doctrine and equipment, the gunners successfully completed several weeks of intensive training in Scotland in preparation for the invasion. Training was facilitated by mentorship provided by an artillery veteran of the North Africa Campaign, 8th Army's Brigadier Royal Artillery (BRA) Brigadier Meade E. Dennis. He, along with other British veterans of North Africa, had been dispatched by Montgomery to assist the Canadians in preparing for combat.¹²

The first convoy of ships departed Scotland on 28 June, 1943, with the remainder following at regular intervals. The schedule was based on the speed of the convoy ships with the intent that the whole of the convoy would arrive at the rendezvous point off Sicily at the same time. It was during the crossing from Scotland that the first tragedy of the Sicilian campaign struck the division. As mentioned previously, three ships[†] were sunk by German U-boats in the Mediterranean on the 4th and 6th of July. While all units of the division suffered materially from this loss, the Divisional Artillery was particularly hard hit. Forty guns were sent to the bottom of the Mediterranean along with all the vehicles for the Headquarters, 1st

* Originally the division had been under the command of Major-General Harry Salmon. While travelling to Cairo for a coordination conference prior to Husky, General Salmon was killed in an air crash. General Simonds was commanding 2nd Canadian Division at the time, and was transferred to command of 1st Canadian Division to replace Salmon.

† The *St. Essylt*, the *City of Venice* and the *Devis*.

Canadian Divisional Artillery.¹³ Available fire support was already suffering as 1st Field Regiment, RCHA was left behind to join the Divisional Artillery on a later convoy, and when it deployed, it only brought two batteries, A and C.¹⁴ As a result of the sinkings, 3rd Field Regiment was compelled to organize itself on a two-, rather than three-battery basis. Likewise, 2nd Field Regiment lost an entire troop of personnel when their ship was torpedoed and they were taken to Algiers by a rescue ship, not to rejoin the regiment for seven weeks!¹⁵

Amphibious Assault and the Fight Inland

Allied forces began landing on the south east shores of Sicily in the early hours of 10 July. As the schedule did not have batteries coming ashore until last light on the 10th, fire support for the amphibious assault was provided by naval gunfire. To accommodate this, a Forward Observation Officer (FOO) party was attached to each of the four assault battalions, with two others being attached to the reserve brigades.¹⁶ These FOOs would often range well ahead of the infantry battalions they were supporting, provided with a Bren carrier* and a protection party of four soldiers.¹⁷ They would hunt for targets to engage and had the fire of four cruisers, six destroyers and the 15-inch guns of the monitor *HMS Roberts* at their disposal.¹⁸ The quick and efficient capture of the towns of Ispica, Modica and Ragusa was facilitated by the pulverizing fire of the *Roberts*, observed by the FOOs moving forward of the battalions, and coordinated by the CRA who had left the beachhead and went aboard the monitor on 11 July.¹⁹

Once ashore, the towed 25-pounder howitzers proved to have a difficult time moving on the goat-trails that passed for roads in southern Sicily. As a result, naval gunfire was the preferred means of fire support during the initial stages of the operation as the enemy was constantly out of range of the artillery due to their hasty withdrawal. Consequently, the first rounds fired by the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery were not fired until 12 July. To some embarrassment, the first 'Canadian' rounds were fired by the 142nd (Royal Devon Yeomanry) Regiment (SP), RA whose self-propelled guns had greater mobility on the less-than-desirable Sicilian roads. 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments, RCA did not fire their first rounds until 14 July, while 1st Field Regiment, RCHA did not fire until 17 July.²⁰ The first major firing

* A Bren carrier was a tracked armoured personnel carrier.

programme undertaken by 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery – less 1st Field Regiment, RCHA – occurred on 14 July when it fired in support of a flanking formation, the 51st (UK) Highland Division, as it occupied the town of Vizzini. The entire divisional artillery did not fire a centralized concentration of all organic regiments until 18 July in support of a divisional attack near the town of Valguarnera.²¹ Not only does this date represent the first Canadian concentrated divisional fire mission in combat since the First World War, but it served to mark a decisive change in the nature of the Sicilian Campaign. The battle for Valguarnera represented the transformation from a rapid advance against a hastily withdrawing enemy, to a gritty struggle against a determined enemy dug in amongst the rocky hills of Sicily. Consequently, the role of the artillery in the campaign became significantly greater.

Valguarnera and Beyond

Once resistance increased on the Catania front, in particular against XIII (UK) Corps, 1st Canadian Division was ordered to move towards the town of Enna. En route, the Division ran into a delaying action in the town of Piazza Armerina which held them up for nine hours. After the enemy withdrew, the Division continued its advance until it came upon the area of Valguarnera, where the enemy had dug in along high ground with excellent fields of view into the Catania plain. Initial attempts to force the objective failed, and on 18 July, 1st Canadian Division launched its first two-brigade, divisionally-coordinated, assault on a road junction near the town of Valguarnera.

The Canadians were now facing Germans who were not going to melt away in the face of an advancing enemy. The fire plan to support the attack included all of the regiments of the Divisional Artillery – less the 142nd (Royal Devon Yeomanry) Regiment, RA – reinforced by the 7th Medium Regiment, RA. The CRAs fire plan called for 68 rounds-per-gun to be fired, for a total of 5,984 shells.²² The attack was a hard fought contest, and ejected the German defenders from the road junction. It is important to note that the first use of massive artillery concentrations coincided with the first encounter with a determined, professional enemy. Future engagements were even more demanding.

Leonforte/Assoro

The resistance the Canadians encountered near Valguarnera was similarly experienced to the east in the Catania plain. Montgomery's plan for a dash up the east coast to Messina was not coming to fruition – in a bit of classical British understatement he described the increasing enemy resistance as making things a “bit slow and sticky on the right.”²³ As a result the Canadians were tasked to advance north to Leonforte and then move east into the flank of the Germans, hopefully relieving the pressure on the Catania plain.

The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (Hasty P's) were tasked to seize the high ground to the east of Leonforte, thus leveraging the assault onto Leonforte. The Hasty P's conducted a daring night-time ascent up a cliff face and surprised the German garrison that was occupying the ruins of a Norman-era fort atop the hill. The Hasty P's *coup de main* has attained legendary status, due in no small part to the participation of eminent Canadian writer and Hasty P officer Farley Mowat. Less well-known is the four hour harassing fire plan that distracted the German defenders.²⁴ The initial attempt to take Leonforte by 3rd Brigade ended in failure. It involved no fire support whatsoever and was “a poorly planned initial attempt to bounce Leonforte in broad daylight.”²⁵ For the second attack on Leonforte, Simonds “pulled out all the stops, directing all divisional field regiments along with the 7th Medium Artillery Regiment, RA, to drench Leonforte with shells for thirty minutes of fire in what was the heaviest Canadian bombardment since the landing.”²⁶ The momentous fire plan, coupled with excellent counter-battery work directed from the heights of Assoro, allowed 3rd Brigade to successfully take Leonforte. Once Leonforte and Assoro were in Canadian hands, the division began its movement eastward toward Agira.

Agira

Simonds' plan to take Agira was for an advance by 1st Canadian Brigade from the Leonforte/Assoro area eastward eight miles to the mountain-top town of Agira. The advance was to be supported by a series of artillery barrages. H-hour for the attack was 1500 hours on 24 July. The fire plan consisted of a rolling barrage of seven artillery regiments – the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery

reinforced by the 142nd (Royal Devon Yeomanry) (SP), RA; the 16th Field Regiment, RA; and the 7th and 64th Medium Regiments, RA. The schedule was to be:

A timed programme of artillery concentrations on successive targets along the route; a creeping smoke barrage 1,000 yards ahead of the forward troops would conceal them by a screen 2,000 yards long; and in front of this curtain Kittyhawk fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force would bomb and strafe targets along the road while six squadrons of medium bombers attacked Agira and its immediate vicinity.²⁷

Unfortunately, the rigid schedule of the fire plan meant it passed on when the infantry were held up by enemy fire, allowing the neutralization effects to go begging. Three attempts were made by 1st Canadian Brigade to move through the intervening town of Nissoria towards Agira, but in each case the lead battalion was beaten back.

1st Brigade was pulled out of the fight and the task given to 2nd Brigade. The CRA put together another robust fire plan. All reinforcing regiments but the 142nd (Royal Devon Yeomanry) (SP), RA had been clawed back by the CCRA, so the number of rounds to be fired increased to a total of 139 rounds-per-gun.²⁸ The intent for the second fire plan was to open with a 17-minute barrage on the opening line. After 17 minutes, the barrage lifted and moved eastward in 28 successive steps, advancing 100 yards every 3 minutes.²⁹ A moment must be spared at this point to recognize the herculean efforts of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. Although 139 rounds were called for in the fire plan, Simonds ordered 400 rounds-per-gun to be delivered to the regiments. This required 150 trucks and drivers to deliver the ammunition from the beaches to the gun positions. As over 500 trucks of the division were lost on the three ships that were sunk whilst en route to Sicily, the successful delivery of this ammunition must be seen as nothing short of miraculous.³⁰

The barrage once again outpaced the infantry, but despite this, the manoeuvre elements were able to secure the final ridgeline just short of Agira with the intent of pushing on to the final objective. The third fire plan called for nothing short than the complete destruction of Agira by indirect fire. Minutes before the shelling was to commence, an errant FOO supporting the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light

Infantry accidentally wandered into Agira only to find it deserted of enemy. Fortunately for the town's inhabitants, Agira was spared its destruction.³¹

Regalbuto and the Salso

The final chapter in the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery's Sicilian story centers on the assault of the town of Regalbuto, lying seven miles east of Agira. With the 231st (Malta) Brigade (UK) under command, the 1st Canadian Division seized the ridgeline south of the objective with a two-brigade attack conducted by the 231st and 1st Canadian Brigades, supported by an immense barrage of the three Canadian field regiments augmented by the 165th Field Regiment, RA as well as the 7th, 64th and 70th Medium Regiments, RA.³² Once the ridgeline south of Regalbuto was secured as a line of departure, the Division teed up for a deliberate assault into the town behind another large barrage. Fortunately, as in the case with Agira, forward patrols found the town deserted of enemy and the fire plan was not required.

After securing Regalbuto, the Division continued north along the Salso valley protecting XXX Corps' left flank. Divisional combat continued for almost another three weeks, but with the narrowing front created by the massive Mount Etna, the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery was not called upon to fire any large concentrations for the remainder of the campaign.

Conclusion

This essay was only a brief overview of the efforts of the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery during the Sicilian Campaign. It serves only to demonstrate that there is a greater story that needs to be told. Of the very worthy histories that exist concerning the Sicilian Campaign, an in-depth investigation into the artillery's role in the 1st Canadian Division's fight through Sicily is lacking.

This essay has demonstrated that the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery was thrust into a combat role with no combat experience, having just come through a watershed change in artillery organization and tactics. The divisional artillery conducted a torturous amphibious approach to the area of operations, suffering a severe loss of equipment and personnel to enemy action on the high seas. Once the division came into contact with a motivated, highly trained enemy making the best use of the natural defences of Sicily, the artillery's role became paramount. The infantry no longer ranged beyond the guns because

their advance became bogged down by the withering machine gun, mortar and artillery fire of the Germans. As the division ran into more and more obstinate defences, the amount of artillery used to dislodge the enemy grew exponentially.

There was still much learning to do. Despite the impressive amount of shelling conducted in the assault on Agira, the fire plan has been criticized, correctly, for its lack of flexibility. Likewise, a vast majority of the rounds fired during the creeping barrages did not land anywhere near the enemy and had no neutralizing effect whatsoever. The evolution of fire support was a work in progress. Sicily was the embryo for what was to become a very effective artillery-based doctrine. Terry Copp observed that:

The artillery based doctrine... has been widely criticized by historians for its rigidity... but it also suggests that the doctrine evolved out of the unique situation confronting the Allies in 1943-44: the necessity of attacking strong defensive positions with inferior armour and infantry weapons.³³

The gunners that fought their way through Sicily have a story that needs to be told. They faced a number of hardships throughout the campaign, but persevered regardless. In the end, they provided the war winning formula that would allow the Canadian Army to fight its way through Italy and North-West Europe.

Notes

¹ Mark Zhulke, *Operation Husky: The Canadian Invasion of Sicily, July 10-August 7, 1943* (Vancouver: Douglas and Macintyre, 2008), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery, Volume II 1919-1967* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), 49-50.

⁴ John Mosier, *The Blitzkrieg Myth*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 10.

⁵ Terry Copp, *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade in WWII* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2007), 32.

⁶ Major-General (Retired) J.B.A. Bailey, *Field Artillery and Firepower* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 297.

⁷ Copp, *The Brigade...* 32.

⁸ Bailey, *Field Artillery and Firepower*, 306.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: ...*, 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹² *Ibid.*, 135.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

¹⁴ Major G.D. Mitchell, Lieutenant-Colonel B.A. Reid, Lieutenant-Colonel W. Simcock, *RCHA – Right of the Line: An Anecdotal History of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery from 1871* (Ottawa: RCHA History Committee, 1986), 95.

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- ¹⁵ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 139.
¹⁶ *Ibid*, 140.
¹⁷ Zhulke, *Operation Husky...*, 152.
¹⁸ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 140.
¹⁹ *Ibid*, 145.
²⁰ *Ibid*, 145-146.
²¹ *Ibid*, 146-147.
²² Zhulke, *Operation Husky...*, 230.
²³ General Bernard Montgomery quoted by C.P. Stacey in *The Canadian Army 1939-1945: An Official Historical Summary* (Ottawa: Ministry of National Defence, 1948), 104.
²⁴ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 148.
²⁵ Zhulke, *Operation Husky...*, 271.
²⁶ *Ibid*, 271.
²⁷ *Ibid*, 299.
²⁸ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 150.
²⁹ *Ibid*, 150.
³⁰ Zhulke, *Operation Husky...*, 327.
³¹ Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 151.
³² *Ibid*, 152.
³³ Copp, *The Brigade...*, xi.