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THE INVASION OF PANTELLERIA, 11 JUNE 1943  
(SICILIAN CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Company Executive Officer,  
Company A, 907th Air Base Security Battalion)

Type of operation described: AERIAL BOMBARDMENT AND AMPHIBIOUS  
LANDING ON A HEAVILY FORTIFIED ISLAND

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the Invasion of Pantelleria, 11 June 1943, in the Sicilian Campaign. It is a personal experience only to the extent of observations during the operation, extensive discussions with other personnel making the landing and a study of the island defenses during a 104 day period of occupation.

To orient the reader as to the time and location of this operation a brief discussion of the events leading up to it follows.

The U. S. invasion of North Africa on 8 November 1942 soon overcame the scattered resistance put up by the French Forces there. As the war progressed in Africa, spring found the British Eighth Army fighting Rommel's Forces in the south and east. The American and French Forces along with the British First Army in the north and west headed toward Tunis and Bizerte.

22 April 1943 was the beginning of the final push in Africa. At this time we find the Allied Forces forming a semi-circle around Bizerte, Tunis and Cape Bon, approximately 25-30 miles away. (See Map A)

Inside this semi-circle we find the famous German Afrika Corp and five Italian divisions fighting a bitter defensive battle.

In the Allied lines we find the French Foreign Legion

along the coast in the north, next to them on the south was the American II Corps under General Bradley and further south in the British First Army under Anderson. On their right was the French XIX Corps and along the coast by Enfiavilles was the British Eighth Army under Montgomery.

The offensive moved forward all along the lines. On 7 May 1943 Bizerte fell to the French, Tunis to the British First. The American II Corps reached the coast on 9 May. 10 May found the German and Italian Forces bottled up in their final effort on Cape Bon.

Von Arnim, the German Commander was captured on 12 May and on 13 May 1943 the final surrender came in North Africa. During the final phase the Air Force and the Navy prevented the evacuation by the enemy of personnel and equipment.

The African Campaign cost the Axis approximately 620,000 men of which one-third were German. (1)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

For months before the complete capture of Africa plans were being made for the continuation of the attack. With the fall of the Axis Forces in Africa we with a strong Allied Air Force who had at last gained air superiority, Naval Forces with sea superiority and Ground Forces consisting of the American II Corps with 4 battle tested divisions. The British First and Eighth Armies and the French Foreign Legion plus the French XIX Corps. All of these units had been battle tested and in addition had worked together as a team.

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(1) Personal knowledge; A-3, p. 40-52.

The mainland of Italy was chosen for the Invasion of the Continent. Between North Africa and Italy, which was approximately 300 miles away were many islands which were fortified, well garrisoned and were also bases for both Air and Naval activity. (See Map B)

Three large islands stood in the way. To the north was Sardinia and Corsica, both large and heavily defended but the capture of which would put the Allies less than 50 miles from the mainland at the nearest point. East and slightly north was Sicily approximately 75 miles from Africa but only 2 miles from the mainland across the Messina Straits. (2)

Sicily was chosen as the Target. This campaign was called "Operation Husky" and final plans for the invasion began to take shape. However, between Africa and Sicily lay the Italian Islands of Pantelleria, Lenosa and Lampedusa. All were known to be garrisoned and fortified. Pantelleria was known to be the strongest and also it was the one directly in the anticipated path of the invasion forces.

#### LOCAL SITUATION

Pantelleria was a small island only 8 miles by 5 at its extreme widths. It laid directly on the line between Cape Bon, Tunis, and Bizerte in Africa and the southeastern area of Sicily, which was the chosen invasion area of Sicily. (See Map B)

Available information regarding the island was not too complete. It was greatly publicized by the Italians and

praised by the Germans as being the "Gibraltar of the Mediterranean". It was considered by many as being unassailable.

In 1926 the area around Pantelleria had been declared a forbidden military zone. Thus no flying over by planes nor approach by naval vessels. (3)

The following information was known or believed to be true by Intelligence. Pantelleria was a volcanic island of approximately 32 square miles, with a population of 9,050 as of 1921, of which 6,870 lived in the one town of Pantelleria. The island is composed of volcanic ash and lava formations. The surface was rough, rocky and mountainous. The highest peak being Montagna Grande over 2,700 feet high. The island was laced with high thick stone walls forming terraced fields up the mountain sides. The coastline was rough, jagged stone forming steep cliffs ranging from 10 to 200 feet in height. There was not a single small beach. The only possible place for troop landings would be through the mouth of one small harbor. On the island was known to be an air strip 5,000 feet long and an underground hanger capable of taking 4 engine bombers. The air field and hanger were on a hill back of the harbor and were over 800 feet above sea level. (4) (See Map C)

The island was known to have been powerfully fortified since 1937. Around the rugged coastline was one small harbor at Porta de Pantelleria, which would take small boats only and a submarine refueling point at Scouri, another of the 3 small villages on the island. A hospital was located at the third

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(3) A-5, p. 28

(4) A-2, p. 164-165; A-5, p. 27-28

small village. Photographs showed over 100 coastal defense heavy gun positions, ranging up to 15 inch guns. Intelligence estimated approximately 10,000 men in the garrison, made up mainly or entirely of Italian personnel. The island was honey-combed with caves, tunnels and cellars from the coastline to the top of the mountains. (5)

The decision to attack Pantelleria, as it was attacked, before Operation Husky, was one of the toughest decisions General Eisenhower ever had to make. General Eisenhower stood alone in his decision. Many experienced staff officers and commanders advised against the invasion because of their knowledge of the resistance that could be met on this operation. They felt that "Operation Husky" was of such importance that a set back or even a delayed victory over Pantelleria might raise Italian and German morale to such a point that their resistance to "Husky" might be stronger. A typical expression of the general opinion is expressed in the words of Field Marshal Alexander, as quoted by Colonel Joseph I. Green in his article "Operation Corkscrew", "We must not have a failure", he kept telling Eisenhower, "We must not have a failure just before Sicily". (6)

Despite the possibility of a tough fight for the island, the possibility foreseen from the knowledge of the strength of the island position and contrary to the popular opinion of General Eisenhower's staff, he decided Pantelleria would be taken.

The popular opinion at this time was that the Italians,

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(5) A-5, p. 27-28

(6) A-6, p. 20-21

never too good fighters, might be on the verge of throwing in the sponge. (American and British opinion).

General Eisenhower could see the necessity for taking the island, not only because of the trouble its' Naval and Air units could give the invasion of Sicily but we needed the island ourselves. The fields in Africa were too far away for Allied fighters to cover "Operation Husky", we did have planes close enough from Malta, but needed more. Pantelleria was in fighter range from Africa and Sicily was in fighter range from Pantelleria, thus with the use of the field on Pantelleria we would have complete fighter cover from Africa to Sicily.

#### NARRATION

##### PREPARATIONS

Having decided that Pantelleria and the other two small islands of Lenosa and Lampedusa were to be taken before the major invasion of Sicily, plans were put into effect to bring about their capture. General Eisenhower, considering that since Pantelleria was a small isolated area many miles from the home base of Sicily and Italy, believed the Air Force and Navy could play a major role in its capture. He believed that the Navy could be used to put a tight blockade around the island, thus cutting off supplies and reinforcements from Italy, and in addition bring heavy naval fire on the island itself. The Air Corps could be used to pound the island night and day for a period of several days before the landings. Knowing that Italian morale was low at this time he believed that there was a possibility of the garrison even

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surrendering without the necessity of a ground assault. It was also believed that if Pantelleria fell that the other two islands of Linosa and Lampedusa would also surrender with not too much of the same treatment. (7)

With this plan in mind the following preparations were made. General Spaatz who commanded the Northwest African Air Force was charged with the aerial assault. Rear Admiral R. R. McGregor, of the Royal Navy, was charged with the naval participation in the operation.

The British 1st Infantry Division, commanded by Major General W. E. Clutterbuck, with supporting American service and communication units were picked for the landing on the island. The British 1st Infantry Division had received extensive amphibious training in England and was not slated for participation in the landings on Sicily. It was also a battle tested division, having seen action in the African Campaign. (8)

Foreseeing the necessity for the first occupation duties with the capture of Pantelleria the 2690th Air Base Command was activated on 25 May 1943. This unit was commanded by Brigadier General Auby C. Strickland, Air Corps. This unit was to service and administrate the occupation of the island. The invasion, coded "Operation Corkscrew" was set for 11 June 1943, but the commanders of the air, sea and land forces were permitted to postpone the assault to allow for further bombardment if they saw fit. (9)

#### AIR PREPARATION

Air preparation for this operation, which was activity in preparation for an invasion of the first piece of Axis soil,

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(7) A-2, p. 164-165

(8) A-1, p. 423

(9) A-1, p. 423; Personal knowledge

found the Northwestern African Air Force with approximately 1000 available operational aircraft, both tactical and strategic. The Axis Forces had, according to latest Intelligence figures, 1276 serviceable planes in the Mediterranean area to oppose our air operations, of these 1276 planes in the area approximately 900 operational planes were in the range of or on Pantelleria.

Occasional air raids had been pulled on Pantelleria during the final stages of the North African Campaign. The real "Air and Sea" blockade began on 14 May 1943 with intermittent harassing raids. The main offensive began on 18 May, which called for 50 medium bomber and 50 fighter-bomber sorties per day through 6 June 1943 (D-5). The principal targets for these raids were the harbor at Porta de Pantelleria and the Marghana Airdrome. The reason for this being to prevent the enemy from building up supplies or landing replacements. Reconnaissance photographs showed that between 29 May and 4 June only three small vessels arrived at Porta de Pantelleria and heavy damage had been caused to the port and surrounding facilities and buildings. On the airfield itself barracks and administrative buildings had been destroyed, supply dumps fired and the field itself cratered. A number of aircraft had been destroyed on the ground. Enemy air resistance during these operations had been slight. This is believed due to the heavy raids on Pantelleria itself and in addition heavy raids on Sicily, Sardinia and the toe of Italy against enemy fields and air installations. (10)

On 1 June 1943 B-17's entered the assault on Pantelleria

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(10) A-1, p. 426; Conversation with pilots

and their prime targets were coastal batteries and gun emplacements. On 1 June, heavies, P-38's and P-40's dropped 141 tons of bombs. On 4 June, B-17's, B-25's, B-26's, P-38's, P-40's and British Wellington's (Night Bombers) dropped 200 tons of bombs. A-20's joined the attack on 3 June. Between 18 May and 6 June 1943 Northwest African Airforce had flown 1,700 sorties and had dropped 900 tons on the harbor and airfields and another 400 tons on gun emplacements. (11)

On 6 June 1943, General Arnold, Air Force Commanding General, in a speech in the United States made the statement that, "Bombing will end the war and end it soon". (12)

The primary targets of the Air Force on the island at this time were gun emplacements and fire control apparatus. Of prime importance to the landing forces would be the shore batteries against the assault boats and automatic small caliber (.30 cal. and 20 mm) weapons against personnel. Thus the Air Force was attempting to knock out the guns themselves or neutralize their effectiveness by destroying fire control centers and fire control apparatus. Also of prime importance was the effect on the morale of the garrison by the constant night and day bombings. (13)

The second phase of the attack started on 6 June when an around the clock bombing schedule was initiated. Heavy attacks were made on 6 June and on 7 June 600 tons of bombs were dropped and this was increased to 800 tons by 8 June. On 10 June the island received the all out effort of the Allied Air Forces. Planes over the target were so thick that at times flights coming in had to circle overhead while planes which arrived

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(11) A-1, p. 426  
(12) A-6, p. 21  
(13) A-1, p. 426

first dropped their bomb loads and cleared the target area. A total of 1571 tons of bombs were dropped on the island on 10 June, which raised the total to 4844 tons of bombs dropped on the island during the period 1 through 10 June 1943. During the past 13 days more bombs had been dropped on the 32 square mile island than had been dropped on Tunisia, Sicily, Sardinia and Italy during the period 1 through 30 April. (14)

Prior to 6 June enemy resistance in the air was very weak and scattered but as Allied raids increased in intensity enemy activity also became more active, but dwindled again after approximately three days only to pick up to their greatest strength as the Allied raids reached their climax on 10 June. During this period the Allied losses were extremely light.

#### NAVY PREPARATIONS

During the period 11 May through 10 June 1943, the navy had kept up a constant and increasingly tight blockade of the island and the surrounding waters. The naval blockade started with a torpedo boat patrol of the island on the night 11-12 May. During 13 May the shore batteries of the island were bombarded by H.M.S. Orion and two destroyers, the Isis and the Patard. (15)

Between 31 May and 5 June five other naval bombardments took place. The main targets of their attacks were the harbor and harbor installations of Porto de Pantelleria and surrounding gun emplacements. On all occasions resistance from shore batteries was weak and inaccurate.

So strong was the opinion against Eisenhower's decision

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(14) A-1, p. 426; Conversation with pilots

(15) A-5, p. 27-28

to take Pantelleria that the General decided to make a personal reconnaissance. On the night 7-8 June 1943 at Bizerte, North Africa he boarded the British cruiser Aurora along with British Admiral Cunningham and headed for Pantelleria. On the morning of 8 May they rendezvoused with four cruisers and eight destroyers of the British Navy and approached the shores of Pantelleria. For fifty minutes they stood off shore and bombarded shore installations. Coastal defense guns opened up and fired weakly throughout the raid but scored no hits on the bombarding ships. A heavy aerial attack was being carried out by the Allied planes simultaneously. (16)

Three messages were dropped to the island garrison asking for its' surrender and at the same time thousands of leaflets were showered down, telling the inhabitants how futile their situation was and advising surrender. A six hour period of no bombing was granted for them to make up their minds. After the six hours with no reply the bombing commenced again with renewed intensity. Again on 10 June they were requested to surrender, but again no answer. Receiving no reply to the final ultimatum, preparations for the ground assault to commence the next day were completed. (17)

#### GROUND PREPARATIONS

Upon receiving alert orders for "Operation Corkscrew" preparations for its execution were put into effect. The British 1st Infantry Division who were to debark from Sousse and Sfax used these two areas for final preparations. All units involved, both for the assault, the support and the oc-

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(16) A-2, p. 166; A-5, p. 29

(17) Personal knowledge; A-1, p. 427

cupation forces that were to follow were first given final touches such as personnel, equipment, etc. for final preparations. The ports of Sousses, Sfax, Tunis, Bizerte and Bone were used for loading and preinvasion docking. Heavy equipment was crated and loaded on heavier ships to follow after the assault landings. Lighter equipment was to go in the assault convoy.

Training during this period was intensified. Models were available, in limited numbers, of the terrain of Pantelleria so were studied minutely and all anticipated actions planned, practiced and ready for execution. The assault wave was to consist of 3 convoys, 2 fast (sea to shore) and 1 slow (shore to shore) convoy. Bombardment of the landing area was to cease at 1145 hours and the assault wave was to hit the shore at 1200 hours.

The plan of assault was as follows: The Ground troops were to be lowered in assault boats and head for shore through the entrance of the harbor of Porta de Pantelleria and on each side. (See Map D) The landing was to take place under a heavy bombardment from the Air Force and a naval barrage from the ships off shore. A breach was to be made through the rubble of the town and head inland. The first objectives were the Marghana Airdrome and Mount Gelkhamar to the south. The movement inland was to follow a rolling bombardment from both the Navy and Air Force. (18)

On the night 10-11 June 1943 all was loaded and ready for the Ground Forces part of "Operation Corkscrew".

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(18) Personal knowledge; A-1, p. 427

THE LANDING:

During the night 10-11 June the Allied Air Forces continued their all out assaults on the island. Formations of bombers and fighter escorts appeared over the island on an average of every 15 minutes.

During the night the two convoys from Sousse, which were to be employed as ship-to-shore assault troops, and the one from Sfax (shore to shore assault) headed for Pantelleria. By dawn they were 20 miles off the coast of Pantelleria. At this time they were met by a Naval Squadron from Malta for additional protection. At 1030 hours the convoy was approximately 8 miles off shore. They lowered their assault craft preparatory to moving ashore. Up until this time only weak hit and run enemy air attacks had been met. Just as the landing craft headed for shore the enemy made a larger scale attack. A large formation, approximately 50 F. W. - 190's followed by 5 ME 109's, attacked the ships and landing craft. The dive bombers failed to score a hit and the ME's were driven off by P-40's which were covering the landing and waiting for just such an attack. (19)

At 1100 hours the ships opened with their shore barrage plastering the landing area. Only minutes before the assault craft reached the shore large formations of heavy bombers showered tons of explosives on the beaches. As the assault boats landed they were met by only very light amounts of M.G. and anti-aircraft fire. Three - five coastal batteries opened fire but were silenced immediately when they were engaged by fire from the ships guns. As the landing craft touched shore

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(19) Personal knowledge; A-1, p. 428

the naval guns were shifted to targets higher up behind the town. The assault took place with perfect timing at exactly 1200 hours. They were met by fire from a few snipers hidden in the rubble of the destroyed town. They soon were silenced and the troops moved on through the town. By 1220 hours the Infantry had passed through the town and held a large area as a beach head. More troops were pouring ashore by the minute.

Unknown to the assaulting troops and also to the sporadic resistance probably due to destroyed communications on the latter part, at approximately 1145 one destroyer and several aircraft spotted and reported a white flag flying from Semaphore Hill and also white flags on the airfield. At about the same time the following message was relayed by Malta from Admiral Pavesi, "Beg Surrender through lack of water". (20)

Air attacks continued for nearly two hours after the surrender, on other parts of the Island due to poor ground-air communications during the landing. At approximately 1330 General Clutterbuck and his staff went ashore and established the Shore Command Post in the underground hanger, at H / 2 a squadron of tanks landed but were never needed. By 1400 hours the first 8000 prisoners were herded together and more were pouring in all the time. At approximately 1730 that evening Vice Admiral Giño Pavesi, Military Governor of the Island signed a formal surrender ending "Operation Corkscrew". He also divulged that the night before a message was sent to Rome to the effect that "The Allied Bombings no longer could be endured". Whereupon Mussolini personally ordered the surrender of the Island. (21)

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(20) Conversations with assault troops; A-7, p. 21

(21) A-1, p. 429

"Operation Corkscrew" had cost the Allied forces heavily in materials. The entire Allied Airforce in the theater had been monopolized. Gasoline, oils and ammunition both small caliber and heavy bombardment had been expended freely but in actuality the cost had been nil, the operation had been, as shown as the history of the war unfolded, very unimportant. The actual cost other than supplies had been 4 planes destroyed, 10 missing and 16 planes damaged over the Island. Casualties had been 40 airmen lost, 2 men wounded and one man bit by a Jack-ass during the landing operation. These losses were very far above the most optimistic expectations. (22)

The cost to the enemy had been far out of proportion to those suffered by the Allies. His actual casualties had been very light only 200 during the entire operation despite the terrific bombardment. The air force dropped on the battery positions of the Island, the equivalent of 1000 tons of bombs per square mile. They lost a heavily fortified Island which was an outpost in their defenses. With the Island outpost was lost terrific amounts of ammunition, weapons and equipment. The Garrison consisted of 1 Infantry Regiment, several coastal and anti-aircraft units and a large number of Fascist Militia and Naval Reserves. Also captured with the Island was approximately 40-60 Germans who showed open contempt for their Axis Partners. The total number of prisoners numbered between 15 and 16 thousand men, (23) all of whom were evacuated to North Africa.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

With the fall of Pantelleria the air force leaders claim-

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(22) Personal knowledge; All references

(23) Personal knowledge; A-8, p. 339

ed it to be a total victory brought about entirely by air force action. They even suggested that perhaps Germany also could be forced into surrender by the same means.

The surrender of Pantelleria was viewed with slightly different ideas from other services. They granted that the main effort had been predominantly air force action but could not picture an attempt of the same type against Germany. They pointed out that Pantelleria was a Laboratory Test Case. It presented an ideal situation for air power, in that it was a small isolated Island. It was nearly 50 miles from Sicily, the nearest source of supply and reenforcement. It was for all practicable purposes isolated completely by the Navy and cut off from all sources of supply. It was garrisoned by troops of low caliber, low morale and had had no battle experience. The fact that all but approximately 60 of 600 German troops on the Island had been withdrawn a short time before was evidence that the enemy may have considered the Island lost even before the action started. One other important factor was that the entire effort of the Air Power of the theater was brought to bear against a small area of only 32 square miles and not against the theater as a whole.

1. SUPPLY, REENFORCEMENTS AND EVACUATION:

The problems of Supply, Reenforcements and evacuation are problems that we can only imagine as the operation ended as it began. However when considering that had the operation proven to be a costly one or a lengthy one all three of the above mentioned could have been serious, as the supply route

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would have been over approximately 50 miles of water which may have been harrassed by both U-boats and surface craft as well as aircraft. It is true at this time the Allies in this area held Air and Naval superiority but it would have been possible for the Axis to strengthen their forces and created a serious threat to the success of "Operation Corkscrew" or at least make more difficult or hamper "Operation Husky" which was coming up soon.

## 2. THE OBJECTIVE - IT'S DEFENSE

Pantelleria as brought out several times before was a small Island isolated so to speak by water and mainly by Allied Naval superiority but as evidenced by the concern it caused it could have been a hard nut to crack. It compared favorably with Corregador in the Pacific and Malta in the Mediterranean. It was surrounded by a jagged rock coast line. It was rough, mountainous terrain. The land consisted of lava rock and volcanic ash. There was no beaches to land on. Inland there was no ground suitable for airborne landings. It was known to be a well prepared heavily fortified area with a landing field and an underground hanger which our heaviest bombs did not damage. The Island itself was known to have many caves, corridors and caravans. Photos showed over a hundred coastal batteries ranging up to 15 inch guns.

This was the picture facing the attacking forces. The big question in everyones mind was will they fight or can they be bombarded into submission. Shifting of the full force of the Air Force and a close blockade by the Navy was well planned and well executed. However when considering only 200 casualties

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among the enemy personnel and over 75% of the large caliber guns still in firing condition it appears the enemy put up a poor resistance. When the prisoners were gathered up it was found they had made no effort at sabotage or destruction. Coastal Batteries, Anti-Aircraft Batteries, machine guns etc. were still in firing position, still loaded and ammunition supplies still intact. Each gun emplacement was found with crew quarters, ammunition and food supplies underground alongside the guns. The Hanger which was 1100 feet long, underground and had not been harmed by the bombings was found to be fully charged with destruction demolition but had not been blown up. The electrical system, water system and all aircraft repair and spare parts rooms were found intact and in operating condition. However practically all of the Fire Control centers were destroyed and all communications other than radio were destroyed by the bombings. (24)

Thus it must be assumed that the surrender was not brought about by destructive power, as over 15,000 prisoners were taken and sufficient guns for a strong defense remained, but by the morale effect such bombings had on the personnel. The Italian Garrison commander claimed lack of water when in fact water was there. However, the distribution of the water to the using units was practically impossible because of the constant bombardment.

### 3. COORDINATION OF ATTACK:

The attack from the viewpoint of land, sea and air was perfectly coordinated as for timing. The planes cleared the

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(24) Personal knowledge

landing zone just as the landing force grounded. Also naval fire was raised and shifted at the planned time. However communication deficiencies were in evidence as demonstrated by the aerial bombardment nearly two hours after the surrender of the Island.

### LESSONS

1. Aerial Bombardment in order to destroy given positions must score direct or very near hits on the Installations. However communications, Fire Control apparatus and movement between areas can be destroyed or neutralized very effectively.

2. Constant, heavy bombardment even in heavily fortified areas, with sufficient cover to make casualties negligible has a very strong effect on morale.

3. Improved methods of communication was needed especially in an operation in which the Ground, Air and Naval Units must coordinate so closely.

4. Airforce should have used more instantaneous fuse bombs for surface bursts for the destruction of gun emplacements and personnel, bombs used were slow fused thus allowing penetration before <sup>detonation</sup> but this greatly decreased radius of burst.

5. Models of the Terrain of Pantelleria used in pre-invasion training were not in sufficient detail nor did they show the extreme elevation changes as was true on the ground. Better models <sup>of terrain</sup> should be made available.