



JAMES A. HUSTON

THE 82d AIRBORNE DIVISION

IN SICILY

In a conference at Casablanca in January 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill accepted the recommendation of the United States-British Combined Chiefs of Staff that the next allied objective in the Mediterranean after the North African campaign had been concluded should be Sicily. The target date was "the period of the favorable July moon."

The objective might have been Corsica, or Sardinia, or perhaps Crete in the Eastern Mediterranean. Corsica and Sardinia were more lightly defended and might have been springboards for an invasion of Italy in the vicinity of the Po Valley — with a view to "sawing off" the Italian boot instead of fighting up its entire length — or for an earlier invasion of southern France. But it was none of these. It was Sicily, because the military chiefs and the national

leaders concluded that this would involve less risk to the shipping needed for the assault waves and follow-on support; that the control of Sicily would be an important advantage in the security of sea lines of communication through the Mediterranean; that its airfields would be more useful in the further bombing of Italy; that it would provide a convenient jumping off place for an invasion of the Italian mainland; and that its capture would be decisive in persuading Italy to leave the war.

Four months after the Roosevelt-Churchill conference, the 82d Airborne Division, commanded by Major General Matthew Ridgway, arrived at Casablanca. Within a day or two, leaders of the division knew that they were scheduled to parachute into Sicily on the night of 9 July. After three days in a staging area eight miles outside Casablanca, the division set out by train, truck, and

plane for Oujda and Mahrnia, site of the Fifth Army Airborne Training Center, in the northeast corner of the country near the Algerian border and close to the Mediterranean Sea.

After six weeks of sleeping on the ground in rows of pup tents and facing daily duststorms and blistering heat (and also weakened by that universal malady of army life in strange lands — dysentery), the men of the 82d Airborne were ready to jump into battle anywhere just to escape.

Under the overall command of the British General Sir Harold R.L.G. Alexander and his 15th Army Group Headquarters, General George S. Patton's newly organized U.S. Seventh Army with its single II Corps under Omar Bradley was to make the assault in the Gulf of Gela. At the same time, the British Eighth Army, under General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery, on the right, was to attack at the corner of the island, Cape Passero, and through the Gulf of Noto as far north as the vicinity of Syracuse.

In the U.S. zone the 45th Infantry Division, on the right, would assault a wide stretch of beach on either side of Scoglitti; the 1st Division, in the center, would hit Gela and capture the Ponto Olivo airfield, about five miles inland; and the 3d Division, on the left, would go for the beaches and the airfield around Licata.

Not enough airlift was available for either the 82d or the British 1st Airborne Division to be fully committed on D-Day. On the British side a glider brigade was to lead the way, in the manner of the Germans on Crete in 1941, with an assault on Ponte Grande, just south of Syracuse. For the Americans, the parachute troops would lead. For this mission Ridgway chose the 505th Regimental Combat Team, including the 456th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, and reinforced it with the 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry, all under the command of Colonel James Gavin.

The planners' first thought was to use the paratroopers directly against the beach defenses. Later, this was changed to a mission of seizing key points — primarily in the 1st Division zone — to block the movement of enemy counterattacking or reinforcing units and to clear the way for the seaborne forces to move rapidly inland. Specifically, the paratroopers were to seize the high ground known as Piano Lupo east and northeast of Gela and to assist the 1st Division in the capture of the Ponto Olivo airfield. After a link-up with the 1st Division had been effected, General Bradley planned to attach the 3d Battalion, 504th Infantry, to the 1st Division to help in capturing Niscemi, which was about five miles to the northeast of the Ponto Olivo airfield. The remainder of the 504th Infantry Regimental Combat Team was to assemble near Gela as a 1st Division reserve. The airborne planners hoped for a link-up with the 1st Division within a few hours, but they planned for Colonel Gavin's units to receive an initial resupply by air.

The defenses of Sicily were in the hands of 200,000 men of the Italian Sixth Army — rather poorly trained,

organized, and equipped — and two well-trained and equipped German divisions, the 15th Panzergrenadier Division and the Hermann Goering Division, which arrived in Sicily in June. The 15th Panzergrenadier Division moved to the western part of the island while the Hermann Goering Division concentrated most of its elements at Caltagirone, about 20 miles northeast of Gela and prepared to launch a counterattack against any beach landings in that area.

Thanks to the Ultra system, by which the Allies were privy to the German code and thus could eavesdrop on German radio communications, Alexander, Montgomery, Patton, and their staffs knew of the whereabouts of the two German divisions in Sicily. They also knew that Colonel Gavin's soldiers were likely to encounter the Hermann Goering Division soon after landing. Yet they dared not pass this information on to the 82d, so they thought, because some captured paratrooper might disclose the information, an action that might compromise Ultra itself. (Surely aerial reconnaissance and photography should also have revealed the presence of those divisions, but Allied intelligence summaries, unfortunately, were silent on the matter.)

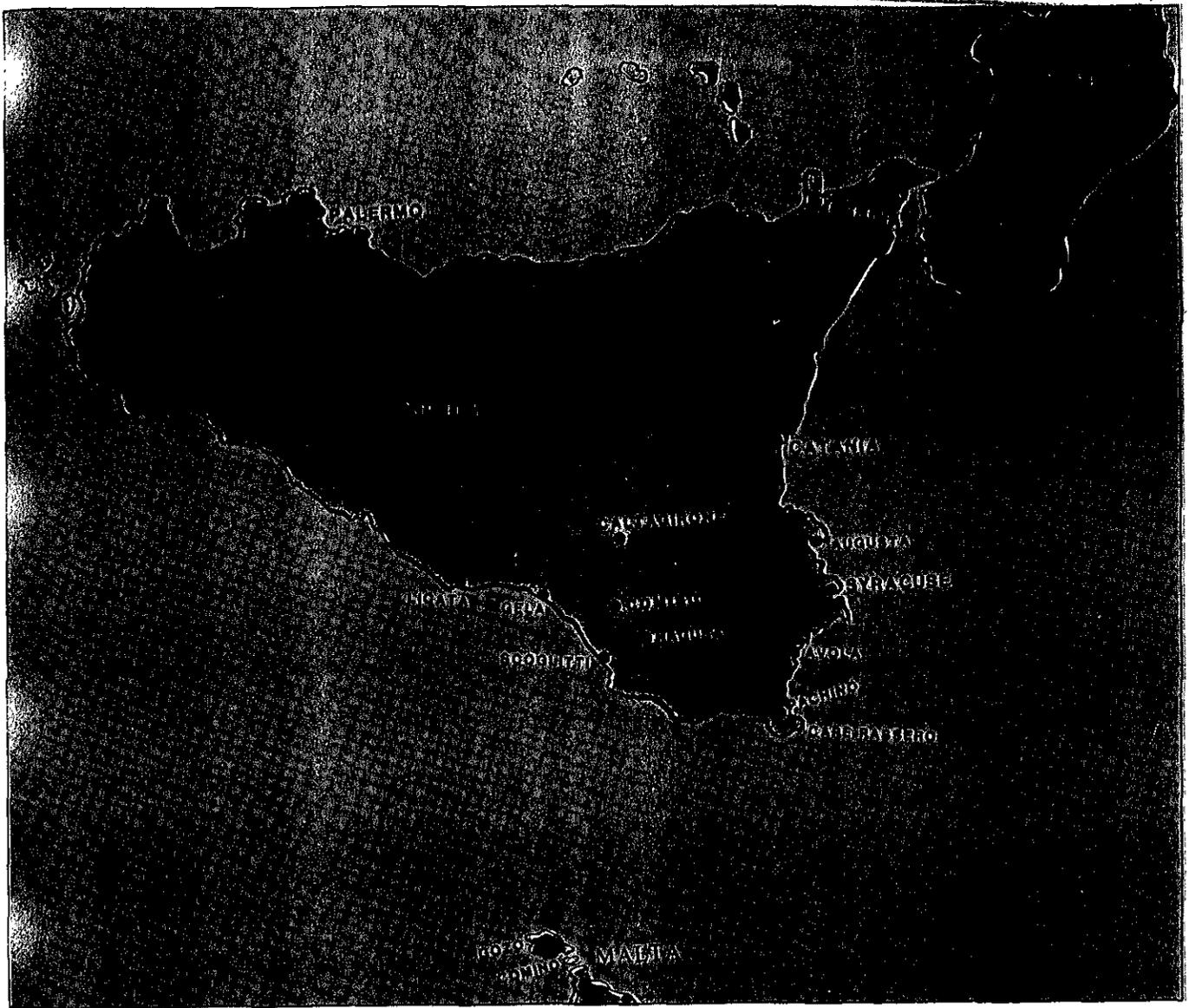
When it came down to the individual airborne infantry battalions, it may not have made any difference anyway. Known enemy dispositions might have influenced the location of their drop zones, but whatever the enemy, the order was to attack.

Meanwhile, the airborne forces continued their training. Small unit leaders studied sand-table models of the Sicilian terrain; battalions rehearsed their ground attacks on replicas of their objectives set up in the training areas; troop carrier and airborne commanders coordinated loading plans and memorized aerial photographs of the objective area.

On a June night just a month before D-Day when conditions were expected to be similar, Gavin and some other airborne leaders were able to make a night aerial reconnaissance over the route they would follow for the attack — east from Kairoun, Tunisia, over the island of Linosa to Malta and from there, after a sharp turn to the north-northwest, to Gela, Sicily. The weather that evening was perfect. Calm and peaceful, the whole Mediterranean lay bare under a bomber's moon. The checkpoints appeared on schedule. As the flight approached Sicily, land first came into sight on the right, just as it was supposed to, and the terrain below matched the aerial photographs they had memorized — and which the pilot also carried in his cockpit. Gavin wished that this were the invasion itself, because everything seemed perfect for it.

Final preparations hastened. Ridgway chafed at the lack of fighter protection to be provided for the troop carrier columns — the fighter planes were to be off on other missions judged to be of higher priority.

Friday, 9 July, dawned calm and clear — as nearly all summer days did in Tunisia — and the airborne soldiers soon were busy checking equipment and loading planes.



High winds were springing up by late afternoon, though, as the men, wearing white bands pinned to their sleeves for identification and carrying heavy packs of equipment and weapons, climbed aboard the planes.

The sun was setting as the planes of the U.S. 52d Troop Carrier Wing began roaring down the runways with the paratroopers of the 505th Combat Team. Only now were the men told their destination, and each was given a slip of paper with a message from Colonel Gavin:

Soldiers of the 505th Combat Team.

Tonight you embark upon a mission for which our people and the free people of the world have been waiting for two years.

You will spearhead the landing of an American Force upon the island of Sicily. Every preparation has been made to eliminate the element of chance. You have been given the means to do the job and you are backed by the largest assemblage of air power in the world's history.

The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of every American go with you.

But both chance and mischance rode with them that night.

Fighting a 35-mile-an-hour wind, the aerial formations soon loosened and the planes scattered. Most of the planes failed to come in sight of even the principal checkpoint, Malta, and the midnight moon was of little help. As their aircraft crossed into Sicily early in the morning of 10 July, the airborne leaders looked in vain for the landmarks they had memorized from photographs, landmarks that had shown up so clearly a month earlier. Unfortunately, pre-invasion bombing had stirred up a ground haze, which made landmark identification still more difficult.

The pilots took evasive action as some anti-aircraft fire came up, and this caused further scattering. Completely lost, two pilots turned around and found their way back to North Africa. Another crashed into the sea. But the orders were to drop every parachutist and every piece of equipment somewhere in Sicily, even if the correct drop zone could not be found. And drop they did.

The careful selection of drop zones and the detailed plans of attack for specific objectives now seemed almost irrelevant. From now on, this would be a battle of improvisation, a free-lance affair.

The paratroopers were scattered all over southeastern Sicily — as far apart as 50 and 60 miles — from Cap Moto to Licata. Thirty-three plane loads landed in front of the British Eighth Army — much to the surprise of everyone; 127 sticks came down inland from the 45th Division beaches between Vittoria and Caltagirone; 53 — less than half — landed in the zone of the 1st Division, around Gela, where they were supposed to, and even these were widely scattered. Only one battalion made it to the ground relatively intact, but it was 25 miles from its designated drop zone.

ACTION

Wherever they were, small groups and individual soldiers began moving about to find each other and to try to find the direction toward their assigned objectives. As they did so, they fell upon Italian and German defenders, supply parties, and communication lines and centers wherever they could find them. All day, paratroopers engaged in isolated, small-unit actions, though a number were involved, along with the 16th Infantry and the 180th Infantry, in stemming enemy counterattacks. The Italian and German commanders were confounded in their efforts to determine the location of the main parachute force.

The amphibious landings began at 0245. Heavy surf, stirred by the high winds of the night, threatened some of the landings. British and Canadian soldiers of the Eighth Army had little trouble getting ashore over the more sheltered beaches around the southeastern corner of the island. For the Americans it was more difficult, but by daylight infantrymen of the 45th, 1st, and 3d Divisions were moving inland everywhere except around Gela in the 1st Division's sector. Here, there was trouble in getting artillery pieces ashore, and nowhere was it possible yet to bring in tanks in any numbers. Enemy counterattacks in this area became stronger and stronger.

Colonel Gavin spent most of the day playing hide and seek — hiding from the enemy and seeking his paratroopers. On landing, he had found himself in the 45th Division zone near Vittoria. He tried to move north-westward, the direction in which he perceived his objective to be. But with only a small party of paratroopers, he had to play the role more of a squad leader on a patrol than of a regimental commander in an assault. After encountering enemy groups here and there, he lay low for the rest of the day and then took advantage of darkness to move up toward the sounds of the German counterattacks.

Arriving on General Patton's command ship at Gela about dawn, General Ridgway borrowed a sergeant from General Terry Allen's 1st Division staff and, with his own

aide, set out on his own game of hide and seek. After a few hours of walking and crawling around out in the unknown beyond the 1st Division's front lines, Ridgway's only contact with a friend was with General Theodore Roosevelt, Allen's assistant division commander, who was wandering around out there in a jeep. Ridgway's only contact with the enemy was with a low-flying Messerschmitt. Presently he came upon a lone paratroop officer sitting under a fig tree, trying to get some relief for his ankle, which had been broken in the jump. Soon he began to encounter a few groups of paratroopers. Then he went back to Allen's 1st Division headquarters to report on what he had found and to establish communication with the 504th, which was waiting in Tunisia for the follow-up flight.

The 504th had been scheduled to come in that night, the night of D-Day, but in view of the threatening counterattacks in the center, Patton postponed the airborne reinforcement, tentatively until the next night, in favor of landing elements of the 2d Armored Division and the 16th Regimental Combat Team from the floating reserve to plug a gap in the 1st Division's center.

By nightfall on 10 July, things had quieted down. Both the U.S. Seventh Army and the British Eighth Army were consolidating their positions. Only in the Seventh Army's center, in the zone of the 1st Division, did the issue remain in doubt. Here, the German and Italian counterattacks finally had been stopped. But they could be expected to resume the next day.

COUNTERATTACK

At 0615 on 11 July, with the support of air attacks on the beaches and against the naval vessels, the enemy struck again. An Italian column swept past the 26th Infantry and was bearing down on Gela when heavy concentrations of artillery stopped it. General Patton himself came ashore about 0930 and went to a rooftop observation point. Watching the approach of enemy tanks, he turned to a naval ensign and shouted, "For God's sake drop some shellfire on that road!" A barrage of six-inch shells was the prompt response.

German tanks struck the paratroopers and the 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry on the Abbio Priolo ridge. With effective support from the 7th Field Artillery Battalion, they were able to hold fast. Under cover of field artillery and naval gunfire, the paratroopers and the infantrymen pulled back slowly, and by 1100 were back at Piano Lupo where they had started from earlier that morning.

On the right, in the zone of the 45th Division, another column of the Hermann Goering Division was rolling westward along Biazzo Ridge from the vicinity of Biscari toward Biscari Station.

In the meantime, Gavin, after gathering paratroopers in the vicinity of Vittoria, was moving toward Biazzo Ridge. He found a platoon of engineers to go with him as infantry and moved on up the ridge, but he and his men

were quickly pinned down by intensive small arms fire.

Farther to the west, tanks of the Hermann Goering Division rolled on toward the 1st Division beaches. The lead tanks came within 2,000 yards of the water's edge and began taking supply dumps and landing craft under fire. The German commander issued a premature report that the Americans were re-embarking. It was premature because a field artillery battalion came ashore just in time to open direct fire on the tanks, the 16th Infantry Cannon Company joined in from the dunes, and four medium tanks came ashore. Engineers joined infantrymen on the firing line. As the German tanks began to pull back, deadly naval gunfire took after them. Sixteen German tanks lay disabled before Gela.

At 1400 Gavin was able to attack the Biazzo Ridge with more strength and purpose. The men moved up the ridge and then, in the face of heavy fire and the threat of tanks, down the other side. The Germans scattered in front of the attack, and before dark Gavin pulled his men back to the top of the ridge to organize a defense line.

Meanwhile, the naval gunfire had in effect destroyed the attacking columns of the Italian Livorno Division north of Gela. The beachhead appeared to be secure. And airborne reinforcements were on the way, for General Patton had ordered the 504th Regimental Combat Team (less the 3d Battalion, which had jumped with the 505th) to come in that night. Accordingly, General Ridgway, who was still on shore was kept busy trying to coordinate its arrival. He was especially worried about the troop-carrying aircraft flying in low over the naval vessels off the coast and then over the battle positions on the beachhead.

He had reason to be worried. During the planning for the Sicily invasion, Ridgway, incredibly, had been unable to receive assurances that his airborne units would not be fired upon by the ships. Virtually at the last minute, after repeated efforts, he finally exacted a promise that the ships would not fire on his airborne soldiers — provided the troop carriers kept close to their designated route and made sure they arrived over Sicily at Sampieri, at the extreme right (east) flank of the Seventh Army Zone, and then flew northwest keeping to an altitude of 1,000 feet through a two-mile wide corridor for the 30 miles to the Gela-Farello landing zones.

Checking on antiaircraft artillery crews in the area of the 1st Division on the afternoon of 11 July, Ridgway found that five out of six had been warned to expect a paratroop jump on the Gela-Farello field that night. He then obtained further assurances from the antiaircraft battalion commander that all crews would be warned before the afternoon ended.

REINFORCEMENTS

Within minutes after his order to have the 504th fly in that night to reinforce the 1st Division's beachhead, Patton at 0845 had sent a priority message to all his principal subordinate commanders directing them to

notify their units that parachutists would drop on the Gela-Farello landing field about 2330 that night.

Unfortunately, enemy aircraft had struck sporadically at the beaches all day. At 1540, about 30 Junker dive bombers attacked. Several bombs fell harmlessly around the cruiser *Boise*, but one hit an ammunition ship, the Liberty ship *Robert Rowan*, which blew up and sank in shallow water where smoke from her exposed bow became a reference point for later waves of enemy bombers.

This night, 144 troop carriers with 2,000 paratroopers of the 504th Combat Team took off from Tunisia into calmer weather than the 505th had had. In a basic V of Vs formation, the aerial column flew essentially the same dog-leg route but this time kept in better formation. A few rounds of antiaircraft fire came up from Allied shipping north of Malta but caused no harm. Some of the troopers gazed down at the calm sea while others dozed in their bucket seats.

INTO THE CALM

An hour ahead of the troop carriers, though, Axis planes returned for a massive strike on the Gela beach area. A rain of bombs damaged numerous ships with near misses. As on other such occasions earlier in the day, the transport ships weighed anchor and dispersed. As the troop carriers with the 504th crossed the coastline at Sampieri and turned to the northwest, the enemy bombers withdrew. The antiaircraft fire fell silent.

Into this calm flew the troop carriers. All remained quiet as the leading flight arrived over the drop zone, and the first paratroopers jumped into the still night. Then, as the second flight approached the final checkpoint and the first flights of the second serial were beginning their turns into the overland aerial corridor, and while the third serial was still over the sea, a lone machinegun broke the silence below. Then all hell broke loose. Within minutes it seemed that every gun in the vicinity, on land and sea, was turned on the low-flying, slow C-47s. The planes' display of amber belly lights as recognition signals made no impression on the nervous gunners. Clinging to enemy beach areas in the black night, edgy from the bombing attacks that had just taken place, the gunners responded to the opening of fire with a contagion that became worse as more flights arrived. Their fire, unhappily, was remarkably more effective against the transport planes than it had been against the German bombers.

Six planes with paratroopers still on board were shot down. Twenty-three planes were shot down altogether, and 37 were badly damaged. Several planes turned back to North Africa before their paratroopers had a chance to jump. Of those who did jump, several came under fire as they floated earthward, and many faced continuing fire on the ground. As pilots took evasive action and lost track of their landmarks, the formations became widely scattered. As had been the case with the 505th, the paratroopers of the 504th were scattered all the way from Gela to the east coast.

Without even meeting the enemy, the 504th Combat Team suffered 229 casualties, including 81 killed. The troop carrier wing reported 7 killed, 30 wounded, and 53 missing.

But the choice of the Gela-Farello landing ground as the drop zone could itself be brought into serious question. It had been generally assumed that the proper use of an airborne force was to land it deep in the enemy rear. The initial landing of the 505th — to the extent that it was where it was supposed to be — was between the enemy and the beach, not in the enemy's rear area. The drop zone of the 504th was even nearer the beach. Clearly this was a stop-gap measure, an effort to shore up the security of the beachhead, rather than a *coup de grace* aimed at breaking the enemy's resistance.

By this time the Seventh Army was ready to move inland to the phase line that would establish victory in the battle for the beachhead, and early on 12 July the 1st Division, in the center, moved out from the Gela area. Soon the beachhead was secure, and during the next several days Allied units consolidated their positions while Alexander, Patton, and Montgomery pondered the next moves.

On 19 July, with the 82d in the vanguard of a provisional corps along the coastal road on the left, Patton's Seventh Army rolled out to the north and northeast to overrun the eastern horn of the island and take the principal city, Palermo, on the northern coast.

In six days units of the 82d Airborne Division moved 150 miles through hostile territory and captured 15,000 prisoners while suffering only 23 casualties. The principal enemies had been the hot Sicilian sun, the choking dust of the roads, and the rough terrain.

While the 45th, 3d, and 9th Divisions turned eastward toward Messina, men of the 82d Airborne remained on what amounted to occupation duty in the rear areas in Trapani and Castellammare. They enjoyed more than three weeks of "R and R," (rest and rehabilitation) caring for and cleaning their equipment, undergoing the inevitable siege of intensive training, and swimming in the now peaceful waters of the Mediterranean.

On 12 August Patton summoned Ridgway and Gavin, together with the commander of the 52d Troop Carrier Wing, to discuss the feasibility of a parachute jump behind the German delaying forces in the coastal corridor. But the airborne leaders dreaded German tanks, while the troop carrier leaders dreaded their own anti-aircraft fire. Everyone agreed that the terrain was too rough (yet this rough terrain, while a hazard to parachute jumping, should have offered protection from the German tanks). In any case, Patton decided to rely on a series of short amphib-

ious end runs instead of on a vertical envelopment to remove the obstacles. This decision allowed the 82d Airborne Division to sit out the remaining days of the campaign.

But in the final dash to Messina, there was not dash enough, for 40,000 German and 62,000 Italian troops managed to escape during the last six days across the Strait of Messina to live and fight another day. Here is where a massive airborne drop — on the Calabrian side of the strait — might indeed have been decisive in sealing off the escape.

Instead, the 82d assembled and flew back to Tunisia, there to prepare to fight under less favorable conditions at Salerno the German forces that had escaped from Sicily and the other German units that would come down from the north to man the defenses of the Italian peninsula.

While the leaders and the men of the 82d Airborne Division could feel a certain pride in sharing in one of the great Allied triumphs of the war in *overrunning Sicily*, they could not avoid the gnawing question as to whether their role in it really had been essential. No one, surely, would claim that without the airborne drop, the amphibious assault would have failed.

Actually, the 82d might have been far more effective in Sicily if it had been committed more boldly and imaginatively. But it was committed piecemeal, one regimental combat team at a time (and with a glider regiment that never did get into action), instead of in mass as a division. Its paratroopers jumped only a short distance beyond the beaches, in front of the enemy forces instead of in their rear. If the division had landed on the tablelands of the central plateau of the island, it might have been able to assemble and attack the enemy's rear areas and higher headquarters with a dispatch that would have put a quick end to the whole Sicilian campaign.

Near the end of the campaign, the division might have reassembled and jumped across the Strait of Messina to block the enemy's withdrawal. In that case it would not have contributed to a speedier conclusion of the campaign, but it might have made a really decisive contribution to the destruction of forces instead of simply in the capture of real estate.

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