

Airborne Al Dente

Highway 114 runs the length of Sicily's eastern coast, connecting Cape Passero with Messina. Some six miles south of Catania, the highway spans the Simeto River with a two-lane box girder bridge called "Primosole" (Sunrise). During July 1943, this nondescript bridge became the strategic lynch pin for the Allied conquest of Sicily.

The Allied invasion of Sicily; code named Operation HUSKY, commenced on July 10, 1943. The British Eighth Army, commanded by Gen. Bernard Montgomery, landed on Sicily's southeastern shores below Syracuse while the American Seventh Army, led by Gen. George Patton, landed on the southwestern shores by Gela. The British landings were a piece of cake. Sicilian conscripts manning beach defenses promptly surrendered while the Italian 54th Napoli Infantry Division, Syracuse main Axis reserve, dissolved under heavy naval and air bombardment

The Americans on the other hand were counterattacked by the German Hermann Goring Panzer Division, commanded by Gen. Paul Conrath. Conrath lacked command experience on the divisional scale but his panzers none the less rolled to within a few hundred yards of the beach before the GIs rallied and stopped them. The chance to destroy the

invader at water's edge was now lost but Conrath didn't realize it. He drew in his flanks and launched another assault. This attack, coupled with Napoli's collapse in the east, opened the Axis front directly in front of Eighth Army.

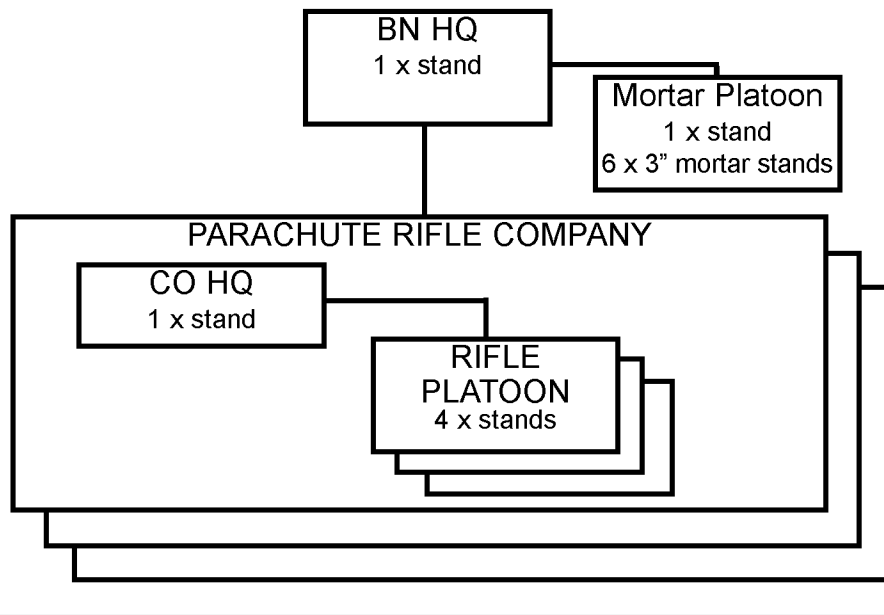
Montgomery saw the opening as a historic opportunity. Heady with easy victory over the Italians, Monty shed his pre-invasion conservatism and concocted a masterstroke. He peeled off Lt. Gen. Oliver Leese's XXXth Corps to roll up Hermann Goring's open left flank and pin them against the Americans. With the Germans thus trapped, Lt. Gen. Miles' Dempsey's XIII Corps would race up coastal Highway 114 and slam shut the escape route to Messina. Without hope of evacuation the entire 350,000-man Axis Sixth Army had no choice but surrender.

Monty's battleplan hinged on speed. Its objectives had to be realized before the Germans redeployed into the defender-friendly Sicilian terrain before Leese and Dempsey. Securing Dempsey's main axis of advance



required the capture of the Primosole Bridge located deep behind enemy lines. The job was given to Brigadier Gerald Lathbury's "Red Devils" of 1st Parachute Brigade. The particulars of the operation, code named FUSTIAN, were left to Lathbury. With just hours to prepare he kept his battleplan simple: A. Lt. Col. Alistair "Jock" Pearson's 1st Battalion, under the cover of darkness would drop directly on the Primosole and seize it by coup de main. B. Lt. Col. John Frost's 2nd Battalion would occupy three hills; code named Johnny I, II, and III some 2,000 yards south of the bridge. This high ground controlled Highway 114 and the bridge's southern approaches

British Parachute Battalion - 1942-1943



C.Lt. Col. E. C. Yeldham's 3rd Battalion would land 1,000 yards north of the bridge to counter any sortie from Catania D. Two hours after the initial drop, the ten 6-pdrs of the brigade's anti tank unit would land on secured zones near the bridge to reinforce Pearson.

E. The brigade would then hunker in and hold until relieved by XIII Corps, scheduled to arrive at dawn. Monty ordered FUSTIAN implemented on the night of July 13/14. Later he wrote, 'I intended to make a great effort to reach Catania by nightfall on 14 July; given some luck I fell it could be done; but I must have the luck.'

BRITISH PARATROOP ATTACK

HUSKY was marred by several "friendly-fire" tragedies as airborne formations crossed over the invasion fleet. To avoid a repeat, 1st Parachute Brigade's flight path was routed well clear of Allied shipping. Despite precautions the Red Devils crossed paths with a solitary supply convoy. Raw gun crews, the targets of nightly Luftwaffe harassment, lit up

the darkness with a gauntlet of tracer fire. Four C-47 Dakotas splashed and another fifteen aborted the mission, returning to their bases in Tunis.

With the target still an hour's flying time away, Lathbury had lost 200 men.

The remaining aircraft took violent evasive action and the formation scattered into a giant arc tipped by Messina to the north and Malta to the south. This was another catastrophe. Inexperienced air crews, dependent on pathfinders for navigation, milled about in the darkness attempting to locate the target by dead reckoning. Many Red Devils, given the green light while still miles offshore, jumped to watery graves. Others landed on the slopes of Mt. Etna, twenty miles to the north.

At 10:00 PM, an hour behind schedule, the first parachutes began to blossom above the Primosole. Axis defenders, expecting airborne reinforcements from Italy, cheered descending canopies until the alarm sounded, "British paratroops overhead!" Searchlights cut the darkness and a murderous crossfire downed three gliders and four Dakotas.

Only 50 of Jock Pearson's 530-man 1st Battalion, with no radios or heavy weapons, hit their drop zone. Luckily the Primsole's security unit stampeded after a glider smashed directly into the bridge and the objective was seized without battle. After stripping away the demolition charges 1st Bn, formed a perimeter defense anchored by abandoned pillboxes on the bridge's southern face. Stragglers continually filtered in and by dawn the bridge force numbered 120-strong.

Pearson's misfortunes were shared by the entire brigade. The jump left Yeldham's 3rd Battalion thoroughly scattered. The colonel noted in the war diary at 2:30 AM his force consisted of: "CO and batman, RSM and batman, intell sgt and one pte." Third Battalion never regained command cohesion and was lost for the battle.

John Frost's headquarters unit and a portion of his 2nd Battalion's A Company landed with great precision, but the rest of the battalion landed elsewhere and all heavy weapons were lost. Frost badly injured his knee on landing but he fashioned a makeshift cane and hobbled about until he had gathered some 140 men. Although his force numbered no more than an under-strength company, and he faced an entrenched battalion, Frost ordered attack. Luckily the Italian defense was half-hearted and defeated with minimal loss. As 2nd Battalion hunkered in, Lathbury emerged from the darkness heading a forty-man detail. Frost and Lathbury briefly counseled. All surviving radios had malfunctioned; British airborne operations were plagued by faulty radios throughout the war, and the fate of 1st and 3rd Battalions was unknown. Lathbury assumed the worst and continued on to the bridge.

Without functioning radios Frost couldn't call in his assigned naval support and Lathbury couldn't warn off the brigades' anti tank unit as it started its scheduled run at 11:00 PM. Expecting a secure landing zone the gliders carrying the gunners were instead pin-pointed by searchlights and blistered by a murderous MG crossfire. Five were shot down while a sixth overshot the landing zone and cartwheeled into the Simeto River, half the unit was thus lost with only three of the surviving 6-pdr's making the bridge force.

SUMMARY OF THE AIR-DROP

Of FUSTIAN's 135 Dakotas and eleven Abermarles; fourteen were lost, forty nine were severely damaged, with a further forty seven receiving some battle damage. Thirty aircraft dropped their sticks on the correct drop zones, nine were close, but seventy four either aborted the mission or missed the mark. As the full extent of the fiasco became known Allied airborne operations were ordered suspended pending a board of inquiry. Of 1st Parachute Brigade's 1,856-man roll; only five anti tank guns, twelve officers, and 283 enlisted men made the bridge area, just 1696 of the brigade's total strength. An immediate and concerted counterattack would have annihilated the Red Devils, but fortunately the majority of Axis defenders in the bridge's immediate area were Italians eager to surrender.

GERMAN COUNTERATTACK

At 6:30 AM on July 14, Frost's 2nd Battalion was hit by a withering deluge of mortar and indirect machine gun fire. Before the shock subsided, a wave of infantry hurling smoke and fragmentation grenades slammed into Frost's right and

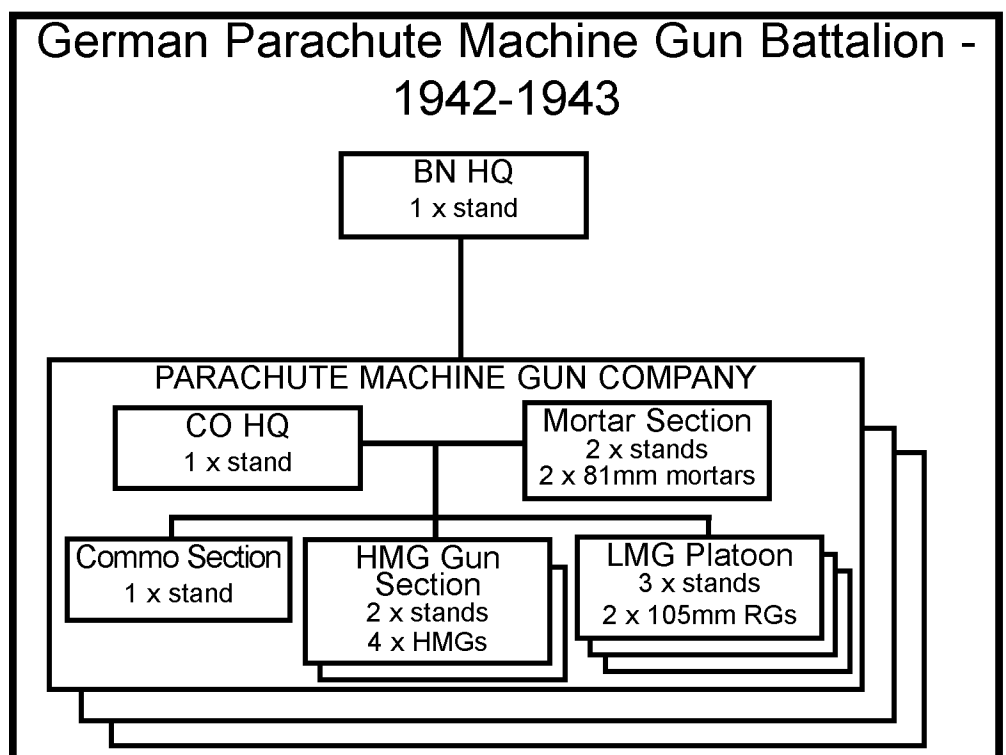
hurled the Red Devils off Johnny III. The British quickly counterattacked but were repulsed.

The attackers were fallschirmjager from First Machine Gun Battalion of the 1st Parachute Division, commanded by Major Werner Schmidt. Schmidt's battalion, air-lifted into Sicily from the Italian mainland on the morning of July 13, was ordered to maintain lines of communication from Lentini to Catania. To avoid Allied aerial reconnaissance, the fallschirmjager positioned themselves in an almond grove 2,000 yards southwest of the Primosole Bridge; directly in 1st Brigade's flight path. These elite troops, of whose presence the British were completely ignorant, were responsible for the murderous AA fire over the bridge area. After beating back Frost's counterattack the Germans consolidated their position on Johnny III and delivered fresh barrage of mortar and machine gun fire igniting swirling grass fire on Johnny II. With the British blinded by choking smoke the Germans, with the support of three armored

cats, poised to deliver the coup de grace. At the critical moment the heretofore dead radio of Frost's naval liaison crackled to life.

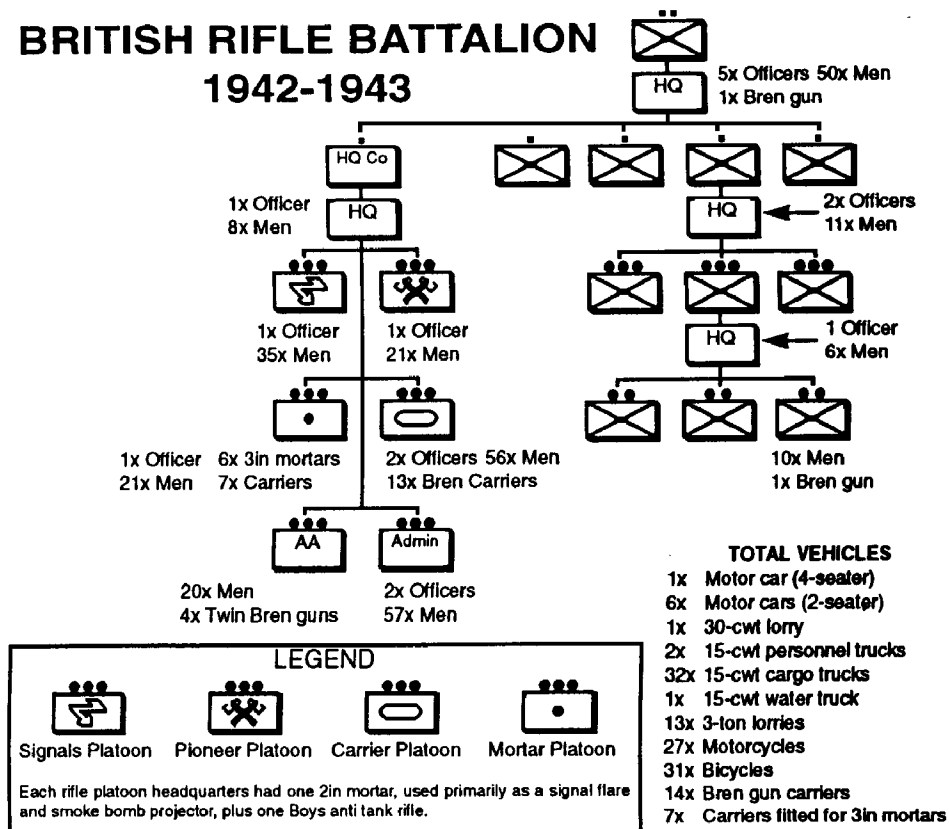
Communication was established offshore with HMS Newfoundland and within minutes the fallschirmjager were pounded into retreat by six-inch naval artillery. Though the crisis had passed, Schmidt's attack left Frost in a dilemma. The battleplan called for Frost to cover the brigade's southern flank against attack from Axis forces retreating in the face of XIII Corps. Instead, he was struck from an area supposedly secured by 1st and 3rd Battalions. Since Lathbury left for the bridge Frost had had no other contact with the brigade. Left with the options of moving towards the bridge, staying put, or retreating to XIII Corps: Frost decided to stay put come hell or high water.

While Frost hung by his fingernails, Pearson experienced a quiet morning. The immediate threat, a battalion of the 213th Italian Coastal Defense Division, had been routed during the night by aggressive patrolling,



BRITISH RIFLE BATTALION

1942-1943



Several convoy) were also ambushed but German truckers proved bette fighters than Italian regulars. A grenade hurled from a true peppered Lathbury with fragments and the drivers eve managed a meager counterattack. Led by Captain Fran Stangenberg, a fallschirmjager staff officer, a twenty-man detail attacked the bridge's northern face. Tattooed by small-arms fire, they retired to Catania for reinforcements.

At 9:30 AM, Pearson's radio briefly sputtered to life ane Lathbury had his only conversation with XIII Corps during the battle. The news was not good. Despite a three-da: forced march, Dempsey's bone-weary troops were beaten te the punch. Small mobile bands of Germans had delayed XIII Corps some three hours and there was no hope o immediate relief. Lathbury counseled with Pearson Unaware of Frost's difficulties, they moved the majority of Ist Battalion across the river to cover the vulnerable north-

ern flank against the inevitable sortie from Catania.

The redeployment proved wise. After directly telephoning Kome, Captain Stangenberg received permission to strip Catania of German military personnel. He hastily press-ganged a 150-man radio company commanded by Capt. Erich Fassl, approximately 250 administrative troops, and a L forward observer from the two-gun 88mm Flak battery covering Catania airfield. Motor pools and repair shops were also gleaned, yielding an assortment of vehicles, including one self-propelled and several towed AT guns.

At 1:00 PM, Stangenberg raced down the highway, striking Pearson with a series of sharp attacks. Although these attacks were vigorously pressed, forcing Pearson to contract his perimeter, they were merely a diversion covering Fassl's signals company as they forded the river some 400 yards downstream. When Fassl made the far bank, Stangenberg withdrew and directed a

brief but intense barrage across the river shattering the thinly manned British defenses. When Fassl attacked he rolled forward, taking a number of dazed prisoners, advancing to the bridge's southern face where he was pinned by automatic fire from the two pillboxes. Temporarily checked the Germans none the less maintained a relentless pressure, forcing Pearson to abandon the northern bank at 5:30 PM. The retreating Red Devils raced directly across the Primosole, dodging ricochets through the girders.

Although the situation was now stabilized, Lathbury took no solace, The protracted combat exhausted his mortar and antitank ammunition; without heavy weapons there was no way to interdict the northern bank. As British fire slackened, Stangenberg moved his self-propelled gun to the water's edge where, with two rapid shots at point blank range, it obliterated both pillboxes with direct hits. With the bulwark of his defense eliminated and relief now twelve hours overdue, Lathbury ordered retreat.

It was a bitter defeat. Just an hour later, at 7:30 PM, Sherman tanks from Brigadier R. H. Senior's Durham Light Infantry Brigade, the vanguard of XIII Corps, emerged from the olive groves south of Johnny I. Despite Col. Frost urging, the British armor, lacking proper infantry support, refused further advance.

Operation FUSTIAN, and Monty's hope for quick victory, was over. It was going to be a long slog to Messina.

by Edward Morris