

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

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TRANSLATION NO.VII/94

HIGH LEVEL LUFTWAFFE POLICY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN MAY-JUNE 1943

BY

GENERAL DEICHMANN (LUFTWAFFE)

AIR DEFENCE AGAINST THE ALLIED LANDING IN SICILY

BY

COLONEL CHRIST (LUFTWAFFE)

THE GERMAN EVACUATION OF SICILY

BY

GENERAL FRIES (ARMoured TROOPS)

BEING EXTRACTS FROM ESSAYS WRITTEN FOR  
THE U.S. HISTORICAL DIVISION  
1947 - 1948

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TRANSLATED BY

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"THE CAMPAIGN IN ITALY"

Preface by General Heinrich von Vietinghoff,

C. in C. 10th Army from August 1943,  
and ultimately C. in C. South-West

The purpose of this account is to record the experiences and performances of German troops and their High Command during the Italian campaign.

Having been called in by our Italian ally to assist them, the few German divisions in southern and central Italy were confronted with an apparently hopeless situation on the conclusion of the Italian armistice in September 1943. Contrary to all expectations, the divisions scattered between the Strait of Messina and northwards of Rome were successfully assembled in time and put up such a resistance to the Allied armies, which were superior in every respect, that it was only broken after twenty months of very severe fighting.

During this time the fighting men acquired an unity unachieved on any other front, and gave its special character to the Italian front, which was cut off from the homeland by the Alps.

It was here where the first long, drawn-out battles of the war took place, the Allies using every means of modern warfare, against which the German Army, fighting alone and without these means, supported solely by the faithful anti-aircraft troops, could only offer the highest degree of manly courage and the best possible use of terrain as opposition.

Here the first landing operations were tried out, here the Allied Air Force had its "training ground" where it could prepare itself almost under peacetime conditions for the crucial battle in France.

A good reputation was gained by all who had fought in the Italian campaign; those who had been tried here, stood in the front rank among the fighters on any other front.

But the most outstanding fact was something quite different: both sides fought fairly throughout the campaign, just as in olden times; the Allied front line troops too had to perform unaccustomed tasks in their ever renewed attacks against the strongest defence in most difficult country. That engendered mutual respect.

The War in Italy ended as it had been fought from the start: "fairly".

When the break-through into Germany became known, making the prepared stand in the Alpine defences pointless, the German High Command in Italy decided to take upon itself the responsibility of putting an end to the now useless bloodshed. They were honourably received by the valiant Commander of the Allies. Italy was thus the first theatre of war to cease fire.

Casualties on both sides in this long and bitter struggle were severe and well above average.

This account should therefore above all keep alive the memory of the many brave men who gave their lives and blood in the belief that they were fighting justly for their country.

v. Vietinghoff,

General

Neustadt, 31 December 1947.

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## "THE CAMPAIGN IN ITALY" PART ONE

### HIGH LEVEL POLICY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, MAY-JUNE 1943.

An extract from the account by General Paul Deichmann

("The Campaign in Italy", Part One, Chapter 3, Section B,II.2.)

#### The Axis Defence

##### Operations by the Axis Fighter formations

The first line of defence against the four-engined bomber formations was the task of the fighter units. Here the exceptionally small number of German fighter formations was shown to be an extreme disadvantage. This state of affairs ought to have caused the German and Italian fighter units to be closely concentrated under one command and employed as a whole. Previous German attempts in this direction were advised that it could not be done. Questions of prestige over the command of the units, language difficulties, technical difficulties owing to the shortage of ground to air wireless equipment and especially in the case of the Italian aircraft of air to air wireless equipment for the fighter control service and for control in the air, did not allow this necessary co-operation to materialise. So the German and Italian fighters went into action independently of each other, and the German fighters were therefore employed as if no Italian fighters were there at all.

Only during the air offensive against Malta in May-June 1942 did joint fighter action materialise and besides the technical difficulties this led to so much friction not only between the higher commands but also between the units themselves that there was a reluctance to repeat the attempt. The fact that the Italians thought more of stunt flying than raiding led moreover to personal differences between the individual fighter units.

Another great difficulty with which the command had to contend arose from the size of the area in proportion to the small number of German fighter units. As no special arrangements had been made with the Italians the result was that, alongside Italian formations, the German fighter units took over the protection of Sicily, Sardinia, Southern and Central Italy, since German Air Force units and supply services were there. The small number of the German fighters now demanded that when opposing Allied bomber formations all fighter units be flown in tight formation against the enemy. The exceptionally small radius of action of the German fighters in proportion to the size of the area however made it impossible to concentrate all the fighter formations in time against the raiders. The approach of the four-engined bombers was, it is true, always known in good time since the radio monitoring service succeeded in picking up their take-off and assembly. Furthermore the long distances these formations had to fly to their objectives resulted in the German Command only needing to expect such raids in the midday and early afternoon hours. Owing to the very clever approach of these raiders, who used to change their course at any time on their way in, the German Command were not successful in recognising the target area in time. So the German Command either had to concentrate the German fighters in one area (Sicily, Sardinia, Southern or Central Italy) depending on the situation on the ground and on what was probably to be expected, with the ever-present danger that the enemy by changing his course would fly into an area left without protection so that no meeting between German fighters and American bomber formations took place, or to distribute the fighter units over several defensive areas thus dispersing their effectiveness. Moreover, in the first case the German Command had the deep-founded suspicion that when the German fighters were concentrated in one defensive area on the approach of the Allied raiders this was reported to the Allies by a secret transmitter

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in Italy and frequently led to a change of course and target by bombers which were already on their way in.

A definite plan to cover the whole of the area could have been arranged if the defensive areas had been divided between the Italian and German fighter formations, so that, for example, the German units covered only Sicily and Southern Italy and the Italians Sardinia and Central Italy. This, however, was prevented by a strong German mistrust of the fighting quality of the Italian fighters. Thus the Italians always claimed their greatest successes against four-engined bombers when the engagement had taken place over the sea, that is to say the enemy aircraft shot down could not be confirmed afterwards.

However the most important difficulty confronting the fighter defence was that German fighters were not sufficiently superior to the four-engined bombers in speed margin and armament to be able to shoot down enough enemy aircraft. The armament of the fighter aircraft was inadequate against the four-engined bombers which were only slightly susceptible to gunfire and which were partially protected by armour. Most of the successes were gained by frontal attack. The intercepting fighter only had a split second in which to bring its fire to bear on the enemy aircraft. There were only a few specialists at this game. Since this was a matter of nerves and of quickly "drawing a bead" on the target, this form of attack could not be taught to the majority of fighter pilots even in training.

The fact that the German fighters had insufficient margin of speed over the four-engined bombers made it exceptionally difficult for the interceptor to get into a favourable firing position. And their chances were still more restricted by the strong defensive armament of the four-engined bombers.

When the Allies succeeded in protecting their bomber formations with an escort of long-range fighters, thus preventing the German fighters from getting at them, it became impossible for the fighter units to combat the raids effectively.

#### Operations of the German fighter units

Ten major air battles took place between the German fighters and Allied bomber formations in the period from the 18 to 31 May, five between the 1 and 30 June and six between 1 and 9 July.

The German Supreme Headquarters report for this period claims altogether (including minor clashes) about 442 Allied aircraft shot down. At the same time it was stated that 21 four-engined bombers were shot down and on four days a large number of these bombers were claimed shot down without, however, giving the numbers. From this it can be seen what little success the German fighters had against the four-engined formations. The appearance of four-engined bombers working in conjunction with long-range fighters had completely changed the position in the air.

#### Intervention by Reichmarschall Goering

The Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe, Reichmarschall Goering, however refused to look these facts in the face. This led him to bring unusually strong pressure to bear on the German Air Force headquarters in the Mediterranean and as that did not help, either, personal reproaches and threats were made against individual fighter pilots. Again and again Goering made very violent reproaches over the long-distance telephone, declined to listen to statements about the actual conditions and in insulting words accused the Command of inefficiency. Since, as we knew, all conversations of such a nature were listened in to by the

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Italians, they were also to be highly deprecated on political grounds, since the Italian Government could thereby see that the German High Command in Italy admitted that they could no longer hold out against the four-engined bomber formations and that the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe was not able to help but could only be abusive.

Reichmarschall Goering now appointed a Special Commissioner for fighters in Italy, immediately subordinate to himself. This Commissioner was supposed to advise the Luftflotte Headquarters and O.C. Fighters and was to report by telephone to the Reichmarschall directly after an engagement between German fighters and American four-engined bomber formations. He (Goering) also caused very strong orders to be issued to the units by the German G.O.C. Fighters, the Inspector of Fighters, which practically demanded that fighter pilots sacrificed themselves. Fighter pilots were individually threatened with court martial proceedings if they claimed no successes in air combats and their own planes were not badly damaged by gunfire or they themselves had not been shot down.

The climax was reached with a personal order from Goering, which is at present only available in English from an American record:

"Together with the fighter pilots in France, Norway and Russia, I can only regard you with contempt. I want an immediate improvement and expect that all pilots will show an improvement in fighting spirit. If this improvement is not forthcoming flying personnel from the Commodore downwards must expect to be reduced to the ranks and transferred to the Eastern Front to 'serve on the ground'".

Owing to the refusal of the Supreme Command to realise the real reasons for the meagre success the fighters had against the four-engined bombers and because of the ridiculous measures taken the morale of the fighter units sank to a very low level. It was clear to every sensible person from the facts given that the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe had lost his nerve and was shutting his eyes to the facts.

#### Operations of the night fighter units

Night fighter areas were set up for the operations of the German night fighters in the districts of Sicily and Rome. They were only successful to a limited extent.

#### Anti-aircraft artillery operations

In contrast with the flying units of the Luftwaffe, which succeeded in withdrawing from Tunisia, the two Flak-divisions operating in Tunisia were taken prisoner by the Allies.

So that after the Tunisian campaign the only German anti-aircraft artillery available in Italy were those units which were already stationed there.

These consisted of a number of heavy (8.8) and light (5 & 3.5 cm) anti-aircraft batteries and some searchlight batteries. They were primarily employed to protect the ground installations of the Luftwaffe in Sicily, Sardinia, Southern and Central Italy. Large batteries of up to twelve guns were grouped together at each defended objective, since it had been proved in the previous campaign that batteries of four guns were insufficiently effective as a fighting unit. The greatest disadvantage suffered by the anti-aircraft artillery in Italy was that the most effective range of the 8.8 cm guns available there was an altitude of 6000 metres. Since the four-engined bomber owing to the cloudless sky over Italy usually attacked from an altitude

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of 9000 metres, the defensive power of the heavy anti-aircraft artillery was no longer sufficient. It is true Germany possessed a new modern anti-aircraft gun F, the Flak 41, whose most effective range was at an altitude of 10.000 metres. On Hitler's orders all the Flak 41 produced were sent to Tunisia and were lost there. Production did not permit of quick and adequate fresh deliveries to Italy.

Of other anti-aircraft forces there were a further 100 anti-aircraft batteries in Northern Italy to protect the industrial area there, but owing to the shortage of self-propelled gun mountings in Germany these had meanwhile been bedded down in concrete and were therefore immobile, and their crews had in the meantime mainly been replaced by Italians. A few Germans were left behind merely to supervise the care of the equipment and to look after the predictors. So that these batteries were "written off" as far as mobile operations in the coming campaign were concerned.

When it became known that in May-June 1943 the Italians were developing the fortifications which had been erected against Germany on the Brenner, light German anti-aircraft batteries, under the pretext of defending the railway supply lines for the German troops, were installed there in such a manner that they were able to operate against the Brenner fortifications from an overlooking position.

#### Operations of the air signals units

One of the most important tasks of the air signals units was to connect Luftwaffe headquarters with the various airfields. Owing to the inadequate telephone network in Italy it was a difficult task to fulfil. From Rome to Southern Italy and thence to Sicily there was only one cable, which was used for all military, administrative and industrial purposes and was frequently interrupted by air raids. The German headquarters had no telephone line to Sardinia at all at their disposal. The German air signals personnel established these communications with the help of wireless telegraph circuits. The long-distance circuits to Sicily and through Elba and Corsica to Sardinia served not only the Luftwaffe but all branches of the German Armed Forces and were also frequently used by the Italian High Command.

The German plan to lay a new trunk line with a wire connecting Rome to Southern Italy, and then to utilise this as a multiple circuit by superimposing wireless, failed owing to the attitude of the Italians. The latter stipulated conditions which could not be fulfilled. Thus the blasting for the erection of the masts was only allowed to be undertaken by an Italian civil firm and would have taken months. The timber for the masts was to be delivered from Germany. Interested parties too must have obstructed the growth of any competition to the Rome-Southern Italy cable which was owned by a foreign company. Another important task for the air signals troops was the installation of radar equipment, so that the approach of Allied aircraft could be detected in good time. This task was faultlessly performed. Whilst the fighting was still going on in Tunisia major radar stations with exceptional range were installed on the western edge of Sicily and on the southern tip of Sardinia besides numerous minor stations.

Owing to shortage of equipment it was only possible partially to finish the installations for the fighter control service so that the operations of the fighters could be controlled from the ground. Most of this equipment was lost in Tunisia. The size of the Italian area to be defended made it necessary to establish more operational control areas.

When we succeeded in installing the equipment in the German night fighters the situation began to improve.

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#### Lessons from the air situation in Italy

The German High Command in Italy at this time fully realised that compared to the Western Powers the Luftwaffe had become numerically hopelessly inferior, technically obsolete and therefore ineffective. Only the rapid issue of new and superior fighter and bomber aircraft could have brought about any change in the situation.

Undoubtedly the General Staff of the Luftwaffe was also well aware of these facts. The Chief of the General Staff of the Luftwaffe, General Jeschonnek, stayed several times during this period with C. in C. South and investigated the state of affairs personally.

The conclusions drawn by the German High Command from this were not made known to C. in C. South. No steps of any kind appeared to have been taken in the next few months.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe, Reichsmarschall Goering, persistently refused to acknowledge the turn of events.

#### The Change in the High Command of the Luftwaffe in Italy in June 1943 and its effect

The desperate attempt by the Reichsmarschall to change the air situation in the Mediterranean area led to the splitting of the combined High Command into C. in C. South and Luftflotte 2 Command. Field Marshal Kesselring remained henceforth C. in C. South, and handed over his other command as C. in C. Luftflotte 2 to Field Marshal Baron von Richthofen, who up till then had been in command of Luftflotte 4 in the south of the Eastern Front (Russia).

When the post was being handed over to the new commander of Luftflotte 2 it appeared that he had been personally briefed by the Reichsmarschall on the general situation and came to Italy with an entirely false idea of the actual relative strengths in the air and of the tactical air situation.

Being used in the East to the Luftwaffe still possessing complete supremacy in the air, and on the strength of his briefing by the Reichsmarschall, he thought that faulty leadership and the failure of the troops were to blame for the breakdown of the Luftwaffe in this theatre. He arrived believing that, as he himself expressed it, the business would be cleared up in a few weeks and he would be able to go back to his old Luftflotte in the East.

#### Effects of the change in the High Command

Field Marshal Baron von Richthofen on the occasion of his talk with the Reichsmarschall had been assured that on the authority of the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe he had a completely free hand in the immediate future in air operations against the present heavy raids, so that by tightening up organisation and changing tactics the Allied supremacy in the air could be broken and above all a strong air force would be available in the event of an Allied landing.

The new C. in C. gave orders that, as had been already ordered by the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe, the daily sorties of the German bomber formations were to be confined to special opportunities in order to give units a chance of getting men and material up to full operational strength again. These steps were, however, taken too late for their effects to be felt before the start of the Allied landing.

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In order to remove these units as far as possible from Allied interference from the air, he ordered them to be transferred to airfields in northern Italy. The High Command of the Italian Air Force, contrary to its usual custom, quickly and without argument placed these at the disposal of the new C. in C.

So as to improve operational methods Richthofen secured the services of Major Pelz, who had acquired special experience in the recent raids on England.

A new method was worked out for fighter sorties, so as to conceal the concentration of the fighters on the approach of hostile bomber formations and deceive enemy spies. Orders were given openly over the telephone, but with the difference that if for example Sardinia was ordered, then Sicily was the proper objective. In order to reach the meeting place the fighters had to take off in a false direction over the sea and when they were out of sight of the coast cover the distance to be flown at low-level so as to avoid being picked up by Allied radar.

The Inspector of Fighters, General Galland, was placed at his disposal by the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe as a special expert in fighter operations.

However, owing to the nature of things all these measures were unable to bring about any fundamental change in the situation.

It was clear to all in informed circles that with the arrival of the new C. in C. the question of the subordination of Luftflotte 2 to C. in C. South would be taken up very early. This indeed soon happened and led to Luftflotte 2 being placed once more directly under the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe and being told to co-operate with C. in C. South. Thus the unified high command in this theatre, which had encountered difficulties of all kinds because the heads of the German Armed Forces were not suitably represented (the actual command lay not with the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces but with the individual branches of the Armed Forces), was again abandoned.

Deichmann

Neustadt, January 1948.

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"THE CAMPAIGN IN ITALY" PART ONE

AIR DEFENCE AGAINST THE ALLIED LANDING IN SICILY

An extract from the account by Colonel<sup>e</sup> Christ

("The Campaign in Italy", Part One, Chapter 3, 2nd Part)

Defence Measures taken against the Allied Preparations for a Landing

So as to avoid lowering any further the already poor serviceability of the Long-range bomber formations, it was possible to make only nuisance raids at intervals of several days against the preparations for a landing, taking place in North Africa, which had been located by air reconnaissance.

Occasional raids on convoys in the Western Mediterranean succeeded in interrupting Allied sea communications, and the Italian Torpedo Unit participated to good effect.

Owing to lack of forces, raids on Allied airfields in North Africa identified by air reconnaissance as being occupied could not be made.

The time and place of the landing was to be established as early as possible by means of very full reconnaissance. Furthermore everything depended on all formations being ready for action by the time the landing started.

At the same time endeavours had to be made to build up the technical equipment of the signals service and the ground organisation so that the expected very heavy Allied air raids could not lead to a complete disruption of Luftwaffe operations.

Allied air raids before the Landing and their effects on the German-Italian Air Forces

In the latter weeks of the month of June air raids on strategically important points in Sicily and on airfields in Sicily and on the Italian mainland considerably increased. Shipping in the waters around Sardinia and airfields in Sardinia were also attacked. No conclusions could be drawn as to landing intentions from these raids.

Fighter units stationed in northern Sicily and northern Sardinia fought daily, with comparatively little success, vastly superior forces of Allied raiding bombers and fighters. Serviceability decreased considerably owing to the raids week after week. On top of the losses in the air there was the damage to air bases and their technical installations caused by bomb attacks.

Due to the negative attitude of the Italian authorities and civilian circles it was not possible to get camouflaged landing strips outside the regular aerodromes so that airfields could be dispersed. Every attempt to extend the aerodromes and to utilise the surrounding country for dispersal met with energetic resistance from the property owners who were afraid their land would be spoilt or damaged. So German and Italian aircraft and technical equipment most valuable for the defence had to be parked close together on the airfields, making a badly camouflaged target offered to Allied Air attacks.

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Only a numerically small part of the fighter forces could be employed on the Italian mainland to defend industrial installations in Upper Italy and be held in reserve until the start of the landing, since in view of the perpetual air raids and remembering the Italian mentality the islands could not be deprived of fighter forces.

In the last few weeks before the landing all the aerodromes, operational airfields and landing grounds on Sicily were so destroyed in continuous attacks by massed forces that it was only possible to get this or that airfield in running order again for a short time, mainly by mobilising all available forces, including those of the German and Italian armies. It was natural that German and Italian anti-aircraft artillery in action at the aerodromes, in addition to having to contend with supply difficulties, could not prevent these massed raids in spite of shooting numerous raiders down.

Besides making raids on the industrial area in Upper Italy, where Axis fighters and anti-aircraft artillery in spite of being outnumbered were able for a time to achieve remarkable success in bringing down enemy planes, in the last few days before the landing the Allied air force in addition carried out attacks on defence installations along the south coast of Sicily. Owing to inadequate protection they were able to paralyse the defences of the island to a considerable extent.

These air raids clearly showed that the Allies had selected Sicily for the landing.

The Landing in Sicily and how it was opposed by the Luftwaffe.

A reconnaissance aircraft of Luftflotte 2 located the landing fleet in the sea area around Malta in the early afternoon of 9 July. During the night 9/10 July extensive air raids followed on airfields in Sicily and coastal objectives, besides which an attack was made on the battle headquarters of OC Close Support Sicily (II Fliegerkorps) which put the staff partially out of action. OC Fighters in Sicily took over his duties. The landing on the southern coast of Sicily began at dawn on 10 July.

Heavy bomber formations of Luftflotte 2 which included the Italian Torpedo Unit had already gone into continuous action, on the strength of the reconnaissance report mentioned above, against the landing craft with good results to begin with. To avoid excessive casualties attacks on Allied naval forces, transports and landing craft could subsequently, however, only be carried out at dawn and dusk. Besides this the heavy bomber formations during the battle for Sicily were attacking Allied transport in Sicilian waters, cargo ships in the sea area between Malta and Sicily and Valetta harbour on Malta.

Fighter-bomber formations (twin-engined fighters) and close support formations (ground attack aircraft) intervened as far as the air situation and the small numbers serviceable permitted in the ground fighting and attacked troops as they disembarked and came ashore on the Sicilian south coast. Fighters took part in these defence operations as far as they could and together with the anti-aircraft artillery protected transport over the Strait of Messina.

Sardinia was deprived of its flying formations since all forces had to be sent into action on the Sicilian front.

Growing inferiority of the German-Italian Air Force during the Sicilian campaign.

The reinforcements from other fronts promised by the Supreme Command of the Luftwaffe, as had been expected, either did not arrive or were

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immaterial. Its increasing inferiority therefore made it clear to the Luftflotte that if their formations were to take further part in the fighting it could only be a matter of nuisance raids on the Allied plans and in no way a decisive defence. They were ordered to restrain operations so as not to destroy their small forces entirely, since no replacements at all were to be expected.

The ground organisation in Sicily was so broken up by the continual massed raids that as the fighting went on the fighter and close support formations were no longer able to give decisive protection or support to the army formations. On top of this came the uncertain behaviour of the few Italian formations who, - with the exception of the Torpedo Unit and a few fighters - proved to be more and more of a burden.

The negative attitude and dilatory behaviour of many of the Italian authorities prevented the establishment and completion of a ground organisation on the Italian mainland capable of dealing with the enemy superiority in the air. Thus in the last phase of the campaign the rest of the close support formations which had been moved from the Sicilian front to the mainland could not be effectively sent into action to support the Army elements which were evacuating the island.

The heavy bomber formations in spite of inferior numbers during the evacuation of the island made raids to relieve the Army in evening and night attacks on harbours and shipping on the sea, in Avola, Augusta, Palermo and Syracuse harbours as well as on shipping concentrations in the sea area around Sicily. Besides these they made isolated raids on newly set up airfields on Sicily occupied by the Allies.

Torpedo formations, taking off from southern France, caused casualties among convoys coming into the Mediterranean from Gibraltar.

#### Protection of the Ferry Service across the Straits of Messina

Although because of lack of forces it had so far not been able to give effective cover to the hard-pressed Army formations against Allied air raids, Luftflotte 2 was able through having taken anticipatory steps of organisation to set up an extremely effective anti-aircraft defence at least over the Straits of Messina.

By concentrating all anti-aircraft forces that were in any way suitable from the whole of Italy, thereby recklessly depriving airfields and industrial installations, a cover of some 400 guns was set up over the Straits of Messina, which beat off every raid by the Allied air force. Thus under this cover and the effective defensive fire of the Luftwaffe it was possible, in spite of a great inferiority in numbers, to evacuate nearly all the personnel and valuable material from Sicily.

#### Performances by the Troops

The vast inferiority of the Luftwaffe on the Italian front is demonstrated most significantly in a pure comparison in numbers of aircraft, as is pointed out in the chapter on "Ratio of Forces." The other kinds of weapons used by the Luftwaffe, Anti-Aircraft Artillery and Air Signals troops conformed to this ratio of forces.

In spite of this colossal inferiority the Luftwaffe fought at all times on the Sicilian front to the limit of their capacity. The airmen raided the targets ordered for them in the face of very strong fighter and ground defences so long as they were still able to take off from their bases. The anti-aircraft artillery protected and supported the ground troops regardless of the

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fact that their weapons were not meant for ground warfare and nearly always to the last round. The air signals personnel, in spite of massed air raids and repeated destruction, always kept communications open to the headquarters in critical situations, and generally for all three branches of the Armed Forces.

If the Luftwaffe was unable to guarantee sufficient protection and support to the Army and the Navy during the fighting for Sicily, the reason for this is not to be found in the truly devoted performances by its personnel, but rather in the numerical and technical inferiority of all its equipment.

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## "THE BATTLE FOR SICILY"

Extracts from the account by General Walter Fries

### The Evacuation of the Island (IV Phase, 11/12 - 17.8.43)

#### A. Orders and Organisation

Colonel von Bonin in his account has described in more detail that GHQ. had already at the beginning of August decided to make preparations for evacuation and that Hitler's consent to Field Marshal Kesselring's proposal was received a few days later.

The Chief of Staff of C. in C. South at the time, General Westphal, commented on this as follows:

" The C. in C. was certain that in consequence of the breakdown of the Italians it was not possible to hold on to the island for any length of time, when the Chief of Staff of the XIV Armoured Corps, Colonel von Bonin, appeared on behalf of his commanding general (Hube) asking for permission to prepare for gradual evacuation. The C. in C. agreed at once, but requested prior notification of the date of the first night of evacuation. The C. in C. above all saw that sufficient small shipping and anti-aircraft protection was made available in readiness for the withdrawal of all the troops across the Straits of Messina. This led to friction between C. in C. South and the Commander of Luftflotte 2. The latter was afraid he would lose a large part of his but scantily mobile anti-aircraft artillery. Field Marshal Kesselring turned this objection down flatly; it was the duty of the Anti-Aircraft Artillery to make this withdrawal possible, even if large parts of them had to be sacrificed in so doing. It was left at that.

OKW was not informed of the evacuation plan. When the evacuation began, the Operations Staff asked on whose order and with whose permission it was executed. The Chief of Staff C. in C. South answered that Field Marshal Kesselring had given the order and accepted all responsibility for it. Thereupon there were no further queries or interference from OKW, so that it can be assumed that Hitler had agreed to the evacuation. "

Corps had set itself the task of bringing back to the mainland at least the German troops with any portable weapons, as well as doing everything possible to rescue heavy weapons, vehicles and equipment. To ferry the troops across - according to Bonin's statement about 50,000 men - five nights were needed with the means at their disposal (ferryboats). GHQ worked out plans for the evacuation on this minimum.

On 7 or 8 August the Commanding General ordered the commanders of the three German divisions, General Stahel, Commanding the anti-aircraft units in Sicily, the senior Naval officer, who was in charge of the ferry service in the Straits of Messina and also General Heidrich, commander of the 1st Paratroop Division responsible for coastal defence in southern Calabria, to a conference at Battle Headquarters close to the north side of Etna. General von Senger, "German Liaison Staff at GHQ. 6th Italian Army" was also present.

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At this conference General Hube gave verbal orders for carrying out the evacuation of the island from a yet to be determined X-Day in five nights. (Note: during the evacuation an additional night was ordered.) In order that, besides soldiers and light weapons, as many vehicles, heavy weapons, etc. as possible could be brought to the mainland, a start was to be made at once to ferry across everything that was not absolutely essential (men, vehicles, etc.). Furthermore, provided the air situation permitted, daylight hours should also be made use of during the actual evacuation period. Details, such as distribution of ferrying points among the divisions, allocation of fixed nights for individual units, assembly areas before and after the crossing, roads to be used to and from ferrying points, were laid down in a written order which followed later, which was in addition explained verbally to the General Staff Officers of the divisions, etc. at time of issue.

General Heidrich was commissioned to organise the reception of the troops on the mainland. (H. had, as already mentioned, previously had the task of organising the coastal defence of southern Calabria with odd units, supply troops, etc., whilst Colonel Baade as Commandant of the Messina Straits had the task of organising the immediate defence - A.R.P., artillery and anti-tank commitments - of the Straits of Messina).

During the evacuation period resistance was to be made along five defence lines gradually closing in on Messina, the Commanding General determining when these were to be occupied.

Further measures within the framework of the general plan laid down were left to the Divisions in their areas. At all important points (assembly areas, roads in and out, ferry points) especially capable senior officers with sweeping powers were commissioned to carry out the evacuation. Some of the divisional pioneer troops were transferred to assist at the ferrying points and held ready to remedy any damage caused by bomb attacks.

The Italian troops were to use their own ferrying equipment to cross to the mainland.

#### B. Execution of the Evacuation

Preparations had been made by all headquarters for evacuation procedure and everything was removed to the mainland which was not absolutely essential.

Enemy pressure was on the increase, the American 3rd Division pressing especially energetically on the northern wing. On top of this came the already mentioned enemy landings in the rear of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division on 8 August at S. Agata di Militello and on 11 August at Brolo. Further steps by the enemy, perhaps even more unpleasant, had to be taken into consideration. The situation west of Etna remained critical. The difficult supply position has already been pointed out.

GHQ. therefore considered the time had come to proceed with the evacuation and ordered 11 August as X-Day.

(Bonin mentions the 10th as X-Day. That does not agree: if the night of the 10th - 11th August had been the first night, the night of the 16th - 17th - which was definitely the last - would have been the seventh evacuation night. But since there were only six, the first night must have been that of the 11th-12th. However it is not improbable that GHQ. had on the 10th already ordered the 11th as X-Day and had allowed some formations which were available to cross during the night of the

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10th-11th August so as to give himself breathing space. Bonin's error might have arisen thus).

So that meant that the first units were to cross to the mainland in the night of the 11th-12th and from that moment proceed as planned. Any risk to the smooth running of the plan which lay in the possibilities that the enemy had in hand was lightened by the terrain, the shape of the island which tapers off to a point at the Straits of Messina thereby making the front line increasingly shorter as the units withdrew. In this way the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division was able, in the middle of the evacuation period, to be taken right out of the front line and ferried across. During the last days only weak elements of the 29th Panzer Grenadier and Hermann Goering Armoured Divisions were still engaged on the right and left sections of the front respectively.

Enemy pressure on the northern coast had noticeably increased but the enemy did not take any decisive action to prevent the evacuation, although the evacuation movement had not escaped his attention (compare American 7th Army's report). Even the air raids on the Straits of Messina and the ferry service were scarcely heavier than before.

The fighting followed a set pattern. The troops generally retreated in the evening to the next defence line, and on one occasion made a stand between the lines, when they had to give way to heavy enemy pressure earlier than expected.

On the whole the campaign went entirely according to plan, and the last weak units were able to reach the mainland unmolested in the night of the 16th-17th and in the early morning of 17 August, together with the Commanding General who was among the last.

The battle of Sicily was over. It was fought by three German divisions opposed to the eleven divisions of the Allies and faced by a considerable numerical and material superiority on land, sea and in the air. Therefore the troops were, in spite of the retreat, proud of their performance and rightly considered the completely successful evacuation an achievement.

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### Final Conclusions

#### Our Own Side

1. When considering the battle for Sicily in retrospect one must ask oneself the question whether the island could have been held, and whether its loss could have been avoided, by a more effective disposition of forces or other measures. In the author's view, the possibility certainly existed that the landing could have been repulsed with the forces available if the Italian coastal defences had really fought stubbornly. The enemy would certainly have found it possible to secure a foothold here and there; but if the reserves on the spot had counter-attacked immediately, it would certainly have been possible in places to claim a complete success or if not this the success that the smaller beachheads at least had been sealed off, thus leaving the enemy no possibility of extending them further. Then the Army reserves, the two German and the four Italian divisions could have been used to eliminate these blocked beachheads.

Since however the Italian troops in fact did not fight, it is idle to start a discussion as to whether the reserves were effectively disposed or were split up too much, or whether in particular it was correct to move the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to the western part of the island. In the

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author's opinion all that could have had no vital effect on the way things went, since the two German divisions were anyway insufficient for the job. Thus the outcome of the battle for the island had already been decided on 10 July.

The division of the Hermann Goering Panzer Division into two parts, as the situation turned out, proved favourable because in so doing we succeeded from the start in getting a firmer hold on the northern edge of the Plain of Catania to form a corner-stone of the defence front to be set up from the east to the north coast. One must consider the possibility that the British, since no other - Italian - resistance was offered them on the east coast, would otherwise have been able to frustrate this movement. They might have been able perhaps to seize Messina quickly by a reckless thrust along the coastal road.

2. The decision to go over to the defensive from a more favourable position with the left wing on the northern edge of the Plain of Catania was evidently made by the troops (Hermann Goering Division) before such an order had been issued by a senior headquarters. This decision was indubitably correct and decisive. The position from the point of view of terrain was so strong that it was most suitable as the corner-stone and pivot of the front being established from the north to the east coast. But even this position could not be held indefinitely in view of the manifold superiority of the enemy. The mountainous country offered many difficulties to the attacker and many an advantage to the defender. But at the same time it must not be forgotten that, given the same number of troops, it is easier to hold a position in rather open country than a position in the mountains. More troops are necessary to defend - for any length of time - a mountain position than in any other terrain; but there was a shortage of these in Sicily. It was therefore always only possible to hold such a position for a very short time even if strong in relation to the opposing forces (on land, sea and in the air).

Therefore the conduct of the campaign as ordered by GHQ. in Sicily was the only solution considering the position as a whole.

3. In spite of many difficulties this task and especially the last phase, the evacuation of the island, was excellently carried out. The evacuation was in fact a "glorious retreat", thanks to the faultless behaviour of the soldiers, the clear and purposeful leadership and exceptional organisation on the part of GHQ., XIV Armoured Corps.

#### The Allied Side

A few comments may be allowed on the conduct of the campaign by the Allies.

1. There is no doubt at all that preparations for the landing, the training of the soldiers and the execution of the landing itself were very well and carefully carried out. But if the Allies indeed wanted to land on Sicily and not only on the south-eastern part of the island, why did they not land near Catania instead of at the extreme south-eastern corner? Since the British Army was to advance on Messina with the right flank on the coast, then they ought to have left everything else in order to capture at once the Plain of Catania and Etna, the two key-points. They were exactly informed through their Intelligence Service about the German and Italian forces and therefore knew that Schmalz' Brigade was at that time numerically weak, and also knew of the extremely low fighting value of the Italian coastal defences. They had a chance of making a main landing there - near Catania - backed up by strong air and naval forces. At the

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same time the Air Force and Fleet could have defended the east flank. The Allies would then have given the German Command no chance to build a defence line there, or perhaps even to establish one anywhere at all. There were no German troops north and north-east of this area. The retreat across the Straits of Messina of the bulk of the troops in Sicily would thus have been prevented.

The Allies were content instead with a frontal attack from the south which doubtless cost more in time and lives than would have been the case in the solution just outlined.

2. Yet a further observation on the little pressure put on the flanks and rear of the German front line. The German commanders responsible were puzzled at the time as to why stronger pressure was not forthcoming. The Allies would have been able to put the German forces in a most critical situation merely by the slightest action against the exposed flanks; they were however contented to make two minor tactical landings in the rear of 29th Panzer Grenadier Division on the north coast, which brought only local success. An attempt to block the Straits of Messina, or at least to interrupt more effectively the obvious evacuation by bomb attacks, was likewise not made. It can safely be assumed that the very strong German anti-aircraft defences in the Straits of Messina played a large part in that.

Just as the preparations for the landing and the execution itself were an excellent performance of organisation on the part of the Allies, so was the evacuation of the island on the part of the German soldiers. The Allied troops were justly proud of this first success in Europe. The German soldiers were proud that they ended the battle against a brave enemy vastly superior in men and materials - in spite of the breakdown of their ally - with the completely successful evacuation of the island.

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