

MEDITERRANEAN MISSION

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AT the Casablanca conference in mid-January 1943, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill decided that, on the completion of the African campaign, the "soft under-belly" of Europe should be attacked prior to the opening of a "second front" in France. The first target would be the island of Sicily which, when captured, could be used as a base for operations against the European mainland. The date for launching the Sicilian invasion was set as 10 July 1943. The code name for the operation was "Husky". From a strategic point of view, preparatory bombing of enemy installations began as soon as the Tunisian campaign ended. Field Marshal Alexander later recorded:

"During (this) phase, targets were mainly strategic but a steady program of interference with the enemy ground and air buildup in Sicily was carried out. A particularly heavy scale of attack was directed against the Messina rail ferry. By 1 June, only one of the original five ferry boats was still in operation and the harbour facilities at both ends were heavily damaged. The traffic was continued by lighters and small craft. From about D-7 the air forces went over to a concentrated and powerful attack on the enemy air force; enemy airfields in the island were attacked both by bomber aircraft and, when within range, by fighter sweeps. Radar installations, which would give warning of the approaching invasion fleets, were also successfully attacked. We were thus able to ensure air superiority over the landing beaches and very shortly, when the captured airfields in the southeast came into use, over the whole island."

The Canadian contribution to this operation was, on land, the 1st Canadian Division which served as part of the Eighth Army and, in the air, No. 331 Wing under the command of G/C C.R. Dunlap. * This wing formed part of the North West African Strategic Air Force, commanded by Maj.-Gen. James Doolittle (U.S.A.).

*Now A/M Dunlap, Chief of the Air Staff.

At the time No. 331 Wing was formed, the program of "Canadianisation" of the RCAF units in the United Kingdom was in full swing under the driving hand of A/M Harold Edwards, the AOC-in-C of the RCAF Overseas. In his eyes, No. 331 Wing offered a superb opportunity to achieve the first complete Canadian unit at the wing level. It is not surprising, therefore, that this was firmly stated as one of the objectives to be accomplished. Also, it was made abundantly clear to G/C Dunlap that the operational accomplishments of the wing were to excel all others — to this end, the support of A/M Edwards was magnificent in the organization phase, throughout the process of selecting the key personnel for the wing headquarters, and during all subsequent phases.

The operational element of the wing consisted of three squadrons detached from No. 6 Group: No. 420 (Snowy Owl), commanded by W/C D. McIntosh, DFC; No. 424 (Tiger) led by W/C G. A. Roy, DFC; and No. 425 (Alouette) commanded by W/C J. M. W. St. Pierre.

The *Wellington* aircraft with which the three squadrons were equipped were flown out to Africa at the beginning of June. No. 420 lost two crews to enemy action in the Bay of Biscay, while one crew of

No. 425 had to bale out over Portugal when their aircraft was damaged by the enemy. The aircraft were held at Telergma, an airfield in Algeria near the ancient city of Constantine, throughout the first two weeks of June, pending completion and stocking of the two new airfields in Tunisia.

Ground crew left Liverpool on 16 May on the SS "Samaria" and the SS "Duchess of York", arriving at Algiers on the 27th. After two weeks in the neighbourhood of Algiers, the movement of the men and equipment towards Tunisia began. For the bulk of the ground crew, this was a lengthy and tedious rail journey in the most primitive of cars, each of which bore the inscription "40 men or eight horses". Concurrently, a convoy of motor vehicles comprising petrol tankers, aircraft servicing vans, trucks, staff cars and motorcycles, all driven by Canadians who had never before seen this part of the world, wended its way through the mountains towards the distant objective. That these rail and road convoys, involving 2,000 men and vast quantities of equipment, should have arrived at their new Tunisian bases within hours of the 60 aircraft from Telergma was a remarkable example of co-ordination, regarded by all as a good omen on that first day on the desert, 19 June 1943.

Great was the activity in those opening hours and days. Up from that parched and barren soil sprang tents of all descriptions: tents for cooking and messing, for the operations and intelligence activities, for supplies and equipment, for hospitals and housing, and all the other requirements peculiar to the operation of major airfields. Spirits ran high, and most everyone seemed oblivious to the temperature which averaged about 110° F in the shade. Then all of a sudden discomfort struck, as the wind — the dreaded Sirocco — swept in from the Sahara, bringing temperatures as high as 128°F. This, combined with an initial scarcity of water and the many physical disorders which seem to multiply in the intense heat, threw life in Africa into violent contrast to the standard of living at the former bases in Yorkshire.

The aerodromes selected by G/G Dunlap were prepared by U.S. army engineers. One airfield called Zina was created from a piece of level ground heavily-overgrown with thistles, about 22 kilometres southwest of Kairouan; the second, about 15 kilometres further on, was named Pavillier. Runways, perimeter tracks and dispersals were made by knocking down the brittle thistles and compacting the surface with rubber-tired rollers.

Operational activities of the wing can be considered in three phases. From 26 June to 9 July, they took part in the pre-invasion attacks on Sicily; from 10 July to 17 August, in the actual invasion operations, and thereafter until 2 September in the pre-invasion attacks on Italy.

The first raid, on the night of 26/27 June, was against Sciacca, a town on the southwest coast of Sicily, where the 150th Wing of the Italian Air Force was stationed. No. 420 Sqn. despatched five aircraft, one of which attacked the town, the rest (except for one which had to turn back) dropping their bombs on the aerodrome. No. 425 Sqn. detailed ten crews, but one was unable to take off and another failed to return. A fair amount of accurate heavy flak was encountered over the target and staggered searchlights were co-operating with enemy fighters. Over the coast of Sicily a *JU 88* opened fire on F/L C.M. Blakeney's aircraft. Although the wireless operator was wounded, the rear-gunner got in a burst, and three minutes later something resembling an aircraft was seen burning on the water. One *JU 88* was claimed as destroyed.

The next night Villa San Giovanni was the target. This town, on the mainland of Italy, was the terminus for the train ferry service with the island of Sicily. The defences were weak, consisting of inaccurate, heavy, predicted flak which burst below the aircraft, and light flak "hosepiped"* up the beams of searchlights. A dummy fire, designed to draw our bombers away from the target, burned with a yellowish glow three or four miles southeast of the town. No. 420 Sqn. sent 13 aircraft, one crew failing to return.

No. 424 Sqn., with eight aircraft detailed on its first mission from North Africa, ran into a series of mishaps. During take-off one of the eight dropped its 4,000-pounder but the crew, being unaware of this, went on to the target as if nothing untoward had happened. Another punctured a tire on take-off, dropped its 4,000-pounder and ground-looped near the end of the runway. Fortunately, neither of these bombs exploded. The remaining aircraft took off and reached Villa San Giovanni, six dropping their loads on the target. No. 424 Sqn., however, did not concur in the generally-expressed opinion that the operation was a success.

*Fired from guns whose muzzles moved with the searchlight beams.

Then the attention of the Wing was concentrated on Messina, the chief port of Sicily, and the escape hole through which the enemy would bolt to the mainland should he be swept out of Sicily. Canadian-manned *Wellingtons* on two successive nights attacked Messina, sustaining the loss of four crews — one of which, on ditching five miles off Sfax in Tunisia, was rescued by an American L.G.I.* Photographs taken three days later showed that the main building of the central railway station, previously damaged, had been hit again, six sheds near the freight yards had been badly impaired and some residential blocks in the area had suffered, too. A factory to the south of the yards was in precarious condition and a barrack block had been struck as well. A motor vessel in the harbour, previously on fire, had now sunk. A final attack in June was on Cagliari, in southern Sardinia, where Nos. 420 and 424 Sqns. did extensive damage to docks, railway station, and barracks.

*Landing craft infantry.

In July No. 331 Wing, operating as part of No. 205 Group (RAF), flew on two nights in every three, supplying an average of 27 aircraft a night. They began their attacks on the ports by bombing Reggio and Villa San Giovanni, bases on the mainland through which the Germans shipped supplies to Sicily. When Operation "Husky" had been decided upon, a Western Task Force composed of United States personnel was detailed to invade the northwest side of Sicily and an Eastern Task Force comprising British naval and military forces was to attack the southeast corner of the island. In preparation for the invasion, attacks were made on enemy aerodromes and landing grounds in Sardinia, Sicily, and on the mainland of Italy by the combined Allied Air Forces. Villacidro, an aerodrome in the southwest corner of Sardinia from which the enemy could advantageously attack the invasion fleet and supply convoys, was the target for the Canadian Wing on 4 July. To the west of Catania in Sicily lay Gerbini airfield and its satellites.* The Wing attacked it on the 5th, 8th, and 10th, the last being timed as part of Operation "Snowboots" in which the airborne troops supporting the Western Task Force landed in Sicily.

*From this aerodrome numerous attacks on Malta had been launched.

The occasion was marked by a tragic occurrence at Pavillier. Three of the eight aircraft detailed for operations by No. 424 Sqn. had taken off, but as the fourth was about to become airborne, it blew up, killing all the members of the crew. Crews that reached Gerbini returned to report weak defences, one adding the information that the whole of the east coast of Sicily appeared to be a mass of flame. As a matter of fact photographs on the 9th had shown Gerbini and seven of its eleven satellites to be completely knocked out.

Another pre-invasion target was the aerodrome at Catania which together with its satellites formed one of the most important systems of airfields in Sicily. It was successfully attacked on 7 July.

After the invasion the attention of the Wing was diverted to the mainland aerodromes of Monte Corvino, near Salerno, and Capodichino, near Naples. So poor were the defences at the former that on 11 July, the day on which the Canadian Army made contact with the Americans at Ragusa, it was possible for some of our aircraft to machine-gun enemy aircraft on the ground, and no less than 40 of these were known to have been destroyed either by bullets or bombs. Two subsequent raids were made on Monte Corvino just to make sure it was incapacitated. Capodichino was attacked four times in July by No. 331 Wing aircraft. The defences here were slightly better, consisting of 20 to 30 searchlights, both light and heavy flak, and enemy night fighters equipped with searchlights.

On ten nights in July attacks were made on enemy camps and lines of communication on Sicily, Sardinia and on the mainland. Cagliari in southern Sardinia, first attacked by the Wing on 30 June, had a repeat performance on 1 July. Again weak defences allowed a successful attack to be made. At Olbia in northern Sardinia next day crews thought that they had hit an arsenal, so spectacular were the explosions on the ground. One crew ran out of petrol on the return trip and landed in three feet of water on the beach at Sfax. The seaplane base at Lido di Roma was bombed on 3 July and leaflets were dropped on Rome itself. Trapani, on the west coast of Sicily, was attacked the same night in an operation described by the participating crews as "a good effort".

On the night of the landings in Sicily all three squadrons participated to the full. The Wing despatched 13 aircraft to Catania on the east coast, one of the objectives of the 13th Corps, where freight yards and military installations were the objective; six to attack the aerodrome at Caltagirone to the south-west of Catania, at which the 30th Corps was driving; 14 to bomb railway communications and the seaplane base at Syracuse, south of Catania; and five to patrol off the south coast of Sicily with radio-jamming equipment to confuse the enemy's radio location devices. This was the first time that jamming had been employed in a joint operation; it was intended to mask the scale of effort and in particular to blind the enemy to the impending arrival of the large paratroop formations.

Pilot Officer V. D. Ardis of No. 420 Sqn. dropped his 4,000-pounder in an effort to destroy the barracks and railway station at Syracuse. Photographs showed that he achieved his object. Indeed, the whole attack seems to have been outstandingly successful according to the General Officer Commanding, First Airborne Division, who witnessed the bombing from the sea. The GOC credited the capture of Syracuse the following evening to the success of this operation. Caltagirone fell to Canadian troops on the 16th, Catania being captured by the British early in August.

After attacks on Enna, an objective of the 30th Corps where the Canadian Army was to cut the road to Catania in the centre of Sicily, and Messina, the main port for enemy communications with the

mainland on the east side of the island, on 12 and 13 July respectively, the attentions of the Wing shifted to the mainland. Naples was the target on the 14th, photographic reconnaissance the next day showing very heavy damage to the freight yards and central station, trains, fuel installations, and the industrial areas north and south of the railway. This was not enough. The Wing returned to Naples on the 20th and 30th and achieved a good concentration in the vicinity of the freight yards and docks. They also attacked Salerno on the 22nd.

Disaster struck in the dispersal area on 6 July. The Sirocco had been blowing and the heat was terrific. Suddenly, at 2000 hours, just a short time before the *Wellingtons* were due to be marshalled for take-off, one of them exploded. The explosion scattered flaming debris in all directions, starting many fires. The aircraft in the adjacent dispersal was alight almost instantly and others were threatened. While the dead and injured airmen were being rushed away from the scene of the first explosion, the adjacent aircraft, just 100 yards away and now a fiery mass, let go with an ear-splitting blast as its 5,000 pounds of bombs exploded. This, in turn, scattered more burning debris. By the almost super-human efforts of everybody on the camp, from G/C Dunlap to aircraftmen, the fires were subdued. Many deeds of bravery were recorded, not only in assisting in the removal of the wounded but also in taxiing aircraft to a place of safety.

On 24 July a wind and rain storm caused a good deal of misery. Tents, including the headquarters mess marquee, were blown down and the camp became a sea of mud. Emergency shelter for the night had to be found in aircraft, equipment tents and the camp hospital.

In August No. 331 Wing made 790 sorties and dropped 1,319 tons of bombs and nearly two million pamphlets. For the most part attacks were launched against enemy positions and lines of communication in an effort to hamper the German attempt to make a Dunkirk of the eastern beaches of Sicily as the campaign there drew to its close. Points on the mainland, too, where the enemy might be preparing to organize resistance to any projected invasion of Italy or through which escaping troops might pass, were not neglected. The island capitulated on 17 Aug. '43. In 38 days the Germans had lost 24,000 killed.

Following the successful completion of the Sicilian campaign, the *Wellingtons* were called upon to play a part in the systematic dislocation of Italian communications. They began on 19 August with Foggia, near the Gulf of Manfredonia on the Adriatic coast, site of one of the most important aerodromes in southern Italy. There the Germans had created an extensive satellite system of airfields capable of handling hundreds of planes. The next night they attacked the freight yards at Villa Literno, just north of Naples, and on the 21st did the same at Battipaglia, south of Salerno. Operations against similar targets at Bagnoli, Torre Annunziata, Taranto and Salerno followed — while at the same time some of the Canadian aircraft ranged as far afield as Leghorn, Pisa, Genoa, and Rapallo dropping leaflets in the paper offensive. In all these actions the three squadrons reported successful attacks and had no losses to record.

The impending collapse of the Italians — they surrendered on 8 Sept. — brought a flock of rumours that the Wing would shortly return to England. When the three squadrons departed from the UK for Africa, it was stipulated by the AOC-in-C of Bomber Command, A/C/M Sir Arthur Harris, that they would be spared on loan for three months only. As soon as the three months were up, pressure was exerted to speed their return. A/C/M Sir Arthur Tedder, on the other hand, was equally insistent that

they could not depart from his command until the assault on the mainland of Italy was firmly established. Uncertainty prevailed as to the immediate future — a decision one way or the other was critical as far as the Wing was concerned, for a move from existing airfields could not be delayed many more days due to the approach of the wet season after which their bases would be untenable. By the end of September things were settled in favour of Tedder, and the squadrons moved to Hani East on the Kairouan-Sousse road.

Throughout September the wing was operational on all but nine nights. Ports and bases attacked included Aversa, Battipaglia, Formia and Gaeta. Crews reported virtually no opposition during these raids, but the damage they caused on the targets was extensive.

By 18 Sept. all the German troops had been withdrawn from Sardinia to Corsica but clashes with the population of this island apparently led to a decision to withdraw from there, too. No. 331 was one of five wings instructed to attack Bastia, the only good port on the island of Corsica, on the night of the 21st. Docks, warehouses, the mole,* oil tanks, all received direct hits. There were no casualties among the Canadian crews. The next night the freight yards at Formia were attacked again. On the 24th they attacked the port of Leghorn to which troops escaping from Corsica were apparently heading. A typical report of the raid was that of Sgt. D. R. MacKenzie's crew which ran as follows:

Time up, 1935. Time down, 0135. This aircraft carrying six 500 lb. bombs arrived over the target at 2202 hours. Ships were seen steaming out of the harbour. Bombing was concentrated on this point. Numerous landing craft were seen in the harbour. A power plant was seen to blow up and give out bluish sparks. Some light and heavy inaccurate flak from the harbour. Three searchlights were operating. Good trip.

*Artificial harbour.

On 3 Sept., the day that the Eighth Army in Operation "Bay-town" crossed the Straits of Messina, No. 331 again bombed Capodichino. The attack on this aerodrome, which was near the strong concentration of enemy troops in the Naples area, indicated no decline in the size or determination of the enemy's fighter forces. No. 331 Wing despatched 30 crews with two 4,000-pounders and more than 430 of the 250-lb. variety. That these attacks were of value is indicated by the fact that when the Allied invasion craft were being assembled in east Sicilian harbours the enemy made no attempt to attack them with bombers.

Attacks on aerodromes at Grazzanise, Viterbo, Frosimone, Cerveteri and Cisterna di Littoria followed throughout the next two weeks. The Pisa/San Giusto aerodrome was attacked on 23 Sept. Of the more than 30 *JU 52s* and *ME 323s* that were known to be there, at least ten were destroyed and fires were started that could be seen 90 miles away.

Attacks in September were concentrated on the routes being used by the enemy as he retreated northwards or where he had concentrated troops to contain the Allied landings south of Naples. To assist General Mark Clark's Fifth Army that had begun landing operations in the Gulf of Salerno on the 9th, 49 aircraft (22 of which were supplied by the Wing) dropped 90 tons of bombs on the road junction at Formia. Photographs showed the Rome-Naples line cut, the road blocked, and part of the sea-wall blown away.

But the enemy did not easily give up. He began to concentrate against General Clark the elements of six armoured and motorized divisions and prepared to launch attacks from the south. To offset this, the Canadians dropped 38 tons of bombs on a road junction northwest of Salerno on 12 Sept., and later photographs showed that the four roads leading to Castelnuovo were blocked. Still the enemy forced the pace. On the 13th his armour pierced the Allied position at Battipaglia and on the Sele River. To save the Allied forces from being cut in two, a bombing attack was made on a road five miles east of Pompeii. A five-mile stretch of this road was subjected to a rain of 164 tons of bombs. Fires were started among the enemy vehicles that were drawn up there and one aircraft machine-gunned the road east of Angri from 1,500 feet. Photographs showed railways and roads cut, but the route to Salerno unfortunately remained open.

On 14 Sept. the situation was critical. Units of the 29th Panzer Division and the Herman Goering Division had succeeded in reinforcing the 16th Panzer Grenadier Division. The beaches were under enemy shell fire. A British naval bombardment and a powerful Allied air offensive turned the tide. No. 205 Group, the parent unit of 331 Wing, put over 120 aircraft into the air in an attack on the Battipaglia-Eboli road, southeast of Salerno, which was bombed constantly for two and a half hours. Forty-three Canadian aircraft took part in the operation and dropped 78 tons of bombs on freight yards, roads, and railways. Photographs showed that the enemy communication lines had suffered a severe blow. As a result of all this the Allied forces were reinforced by fresh landings and the enemy counter-attack was held, though not yet broken.

Next day the roads between Torre Annunziata and Pompeii were attacked by 129 bombers (43 of them Canadian). Then Allied ground forces took the initiative. Albanella, Altavilla, and Battipaglia were all recaptured in the next three days as the Allied bombers pounded the enemy airfields. Communications again became the objective on the 19th, the Wing attacking a road bridge across the Galore River north of Benevento. The bridge received a direct hit and the local station and yards were cratered. The last attack in September was on a road in the Naples area. Allied troops were deploying onto the plain to the north of Naples by the 28th and a call went out for aircraft to attack the road junction at Formia. Nos. 231 and 331 Wings dropped 74 tons of bombs on the railway and mole, the main road, and electric installations.

There were only four operations in October, two against Formia, one against Civitavecchia north of Rome and one against Grosseto, halfway between Rome and Leghorn. In addition to all these bombing attacks, RCAF *Wellington* crews dropped millions of leaflets on various targets in Italy and the neighbouring islands of Corsica and Sardinia during Sept. and Oct., the effects of which were more difficult to assess than the bombings.

On the completion of their tour of duty in Africa the Group diarist recorded that the Canadian Wing had made 2,127 sorties and dropped 3,745.5 tons of bombs and at least ten million leaflets. They had materially assisted in making airfields in Sicily and Italy untenable and freight yards unusable. They had dovetailed their operations with those of other Allied Air Forces to win the strategic battle of communications. They had helped to decide the fate of southern Italy before a single Allied soldier had been landed in that unhappy country. German prisoners bore eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of their work in making the enemy's nights sleepless and in undermining their morale. Even the value of their leaflet-dropping was admitted by Gen. George Patton, who had been one of its staunchest opponents.

Analysis of the photographic sequences taken by each aircraft on their bombing approach to the target clearly demonstrated that the determination of the crews and the precision of their attacks was second to none in that theatre of operations. The Wing had more than met the fondest hopes of its commander, G/C Dunlap, to say nothing of the injunctions of A/M Edwards, the AOC-in-C, RCAF Overseas.

On 16 Oct. '43 No. 420 Sqn., and on the 18th Nos. 424 and 425, left Hani East and after sundry mis-adventures, not the least of which was the loss of half a train carrying their rations, they sailed for England from Algiers. The SS "Samaria" docked at Liverpool on 6 Nov., where snow and rain were soon being contrasted with the "almost monotonous nice weather in Africa". Distance soon lent enchantment to the view.