Sicily wargame

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Introduction

This is an after action report of a war game about Operation Husky, the Allied campaign in Sicily in 1943. The point was to make the players feel more like commanding than playing a game, so while there were some clear rules, usually you could do whatever you wanted.

I was the umpire and we had 9 players, 6 Allied and 3 Axis, with two high command players, Patton and Montgomery (see Illustration 1; the dashed boxes are NPCs. One player was moved from Rossi to Conrath during the campaign because the Italian units were getting fewer; additionally the Wehrmacht player changed identity from von Senger und Etterlin to Hube during the game).
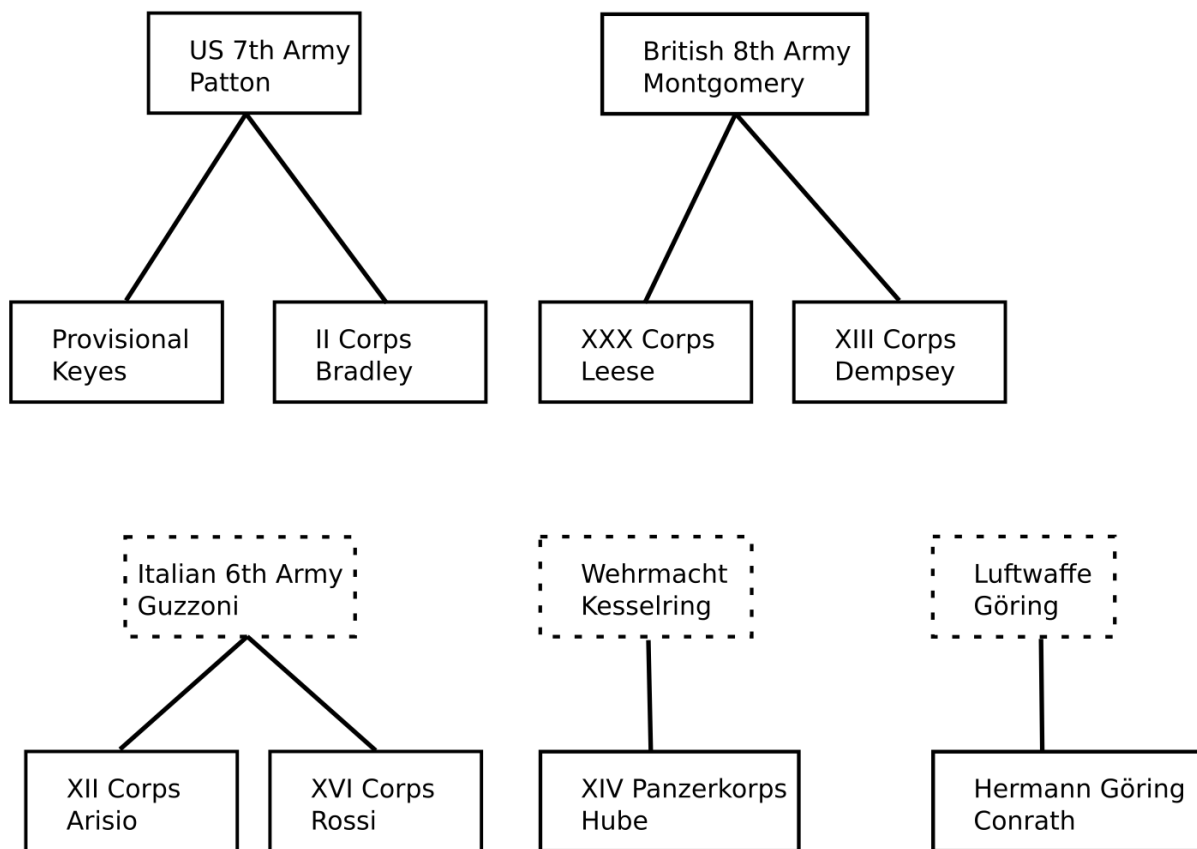
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        US 7th Army                    British 8th Army
          Patton                         Montgomery
         /       \                       /        \
Provisional    II Corps            XXX Corps      XIII Corps
  Keyes        Bradley               Leese         Dempsey


   Italian 6th Army          Wehrmacht              Luftwaffe
      Guzzoni                Kesselring              Göring
      /      \                  |                       |
 XII Corps   XVI Corps    XIV Panzerkorps       Hermann Göring
  Arisio      Rossi            Hube                 Conrath
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Illustration 1: Organization

The game was based on turns lasting one day of in-game time, of which we played 2-3 per real time week. The players produced orders for their units each turn, after which the umpire simulated the turn and sent text and map report to each player. Depending on the situation of their HQs, the players were

allowed to discuss more or less freely. There was always a danger of the enemy listening to limit how freely the players can discuss.

The game simulated the war on a regimental level, meaning each player had about 10-20 units to command, which was found to be a good number. A board game map based on hexes was used because a good enough actual historical map was found only after the campaign had already begun. This was good for clarity but sometimes made the actual feel more like a game, and some problems were generated by the abstractions on the map conflicting with reality. Some players used more detailed maps and even Google Earth to find good positions, but most played at the given abstraction level. The umpire always tried to take into account whatever requests the players had, kind of similar to a tabletop role-playing game.

For communication we used a dedicated Discord server, which was found to be a perfect solution with its flexible channels and roles. For example, when a commander went to the frontlines with their troops or lost connection due to enemy activity, their role could be changed so that they could not participate in the discussions with their army.

Players received their reports on maps similar to Illustration 8 below. These were done using Inkscape, which also fulfilled its role nicely after learning to use it efficiently.

The landings (July 10 – 12)

The Axis thought the historical landings in the southeast are the most probable and put most of the Italian XVI corps there. Majority of the Germans were also located in the east, but inland so they can

Illustration 2: Initial positions

quickly respond to the landings, wherever they might happen. The Italian XII corps concentrated its defenses in the Palermo area. The numerous but low quality coastal guard units were split rather evenly along the invadable coast areas.

The Allies indeed went with almost exactly the historical plan as shown in Illustration 2. US 7th Army also committed some paratroopers for the initial landings north of Gela. The landings were mostly opposed by some coastal guards, which only caused minor losses. The US paratroopers ended up too north and had a rough landing, and were then almost completely overran by German 15th division.

During the first couple of days the Axis tried to push the Allies back to the sea. The Italian XVI corps attacked against the Canadians in Pozzallo, which was relatively easily stopped with naval gunfire support. The two British corps quickly made contact with each other and proceeded forward.

At the same time the main force of the German 15th division made a strong counterattack toward Gela along both sides of the river. The eastern part drove the scattered 45th division away and reached the coastal road, but the 2nd armored division in the west side was a tougher nut to crack. The attack ended up with the eastern task force of the Germans surrounded and destroyed.

Meanwhile the Italian XII decided that the Allies had committed their main force and started marching their units toward Licata and Caltanissetta, only leaving a skeleton defence to the Palermo area to fend off any minor invasions.
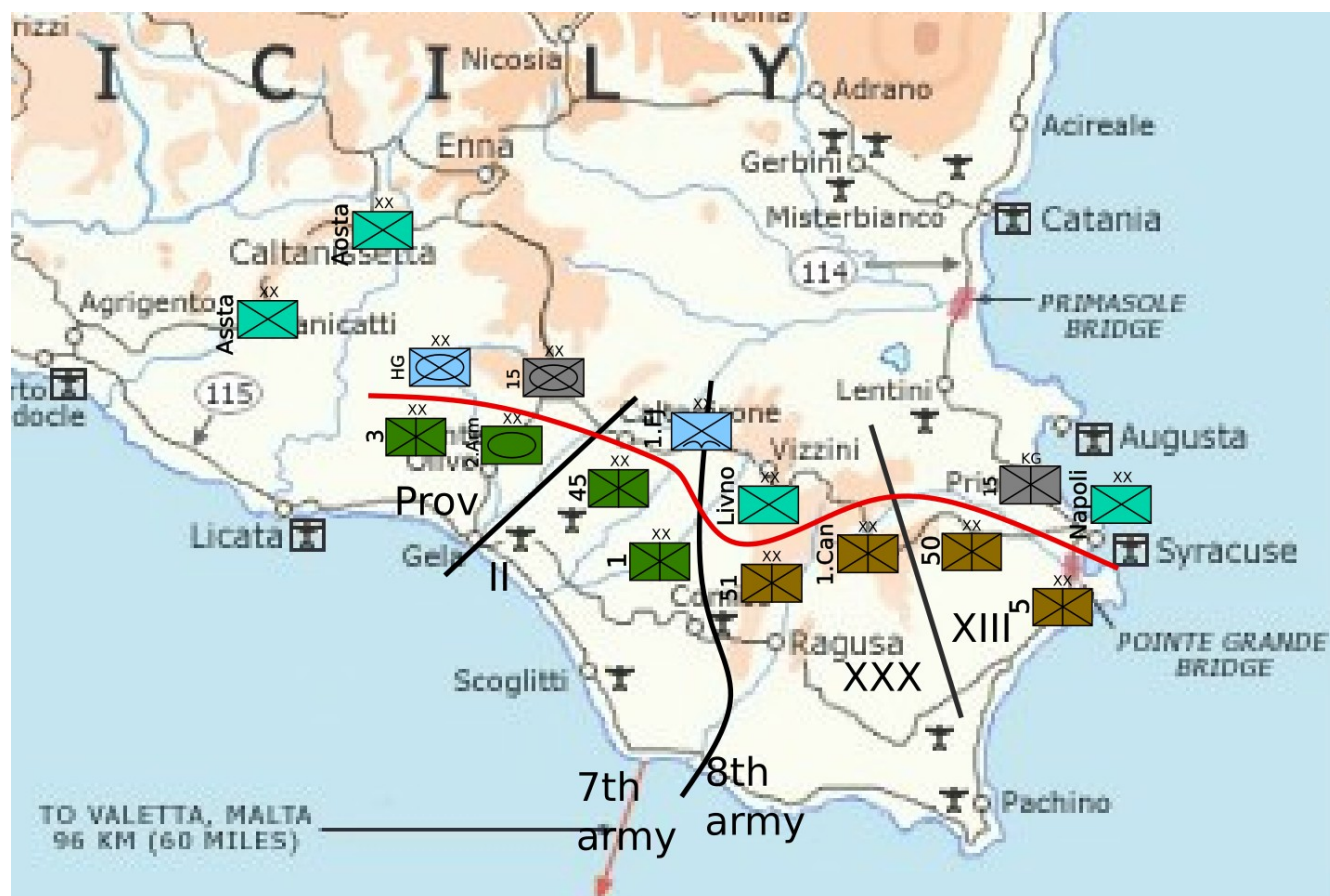

Illustration 3: July 13

Consolidation (July 13 – 16):

By July 13 both Allied armies had completely secured their landing areas, but had not yet made contact with each other as neither side seemed to be interested in that.

The Brits took over Modica and Ragusa after heavy fights, but could not penetrate into Syracuse, which was well fortified and defended by the German 115th regiment and Italian Napoli division. The Americans secured the coastal plains around Gela, but the Germans formed a strong defense line on the hills north of the coast.

The Americans almost managed to push through the German lines, but on the last possible moment, the German 1st paratrooper division was dropped in the Catanian plains and these elite soldiers helped reform the line.

On July 17 both sides realized the importance of a small bridge over the small Salso river north of Licata and send units rushing to capture it. The Italians made it a couple of hours before the Americans, and managed to defend the crossing.

Meanwhile the XXX corps and the US 1st division slaughtered and captured most of the Italian Livorno division on their way to Vizzini, but the terrain was slowing them down. For a moment it almost seemed like the frontlines were about to stabilize (Illustration 3).

The Brits started to get frustrated at Syracusan defences and planned to send an expedition force from the 50th division to cut the city from behind as they found a completely undefended route to the plains of Catania. This was to be joined with finally dropping their 1st Airborne division at Lentini.

Breakthroughs (July 17 – 21)

The Brits were the first to break the stalemate. XXX broke through at Vizzini, capturing the road north toward the plains with nothing in front of them. At the same time the 50th division maneuver and the airborne landing were successful and Syracuse was cut off on July 17. The Axis started evacuating the city by sea in the cover of their coastal guns, but lost most of the Italian Napoli division.
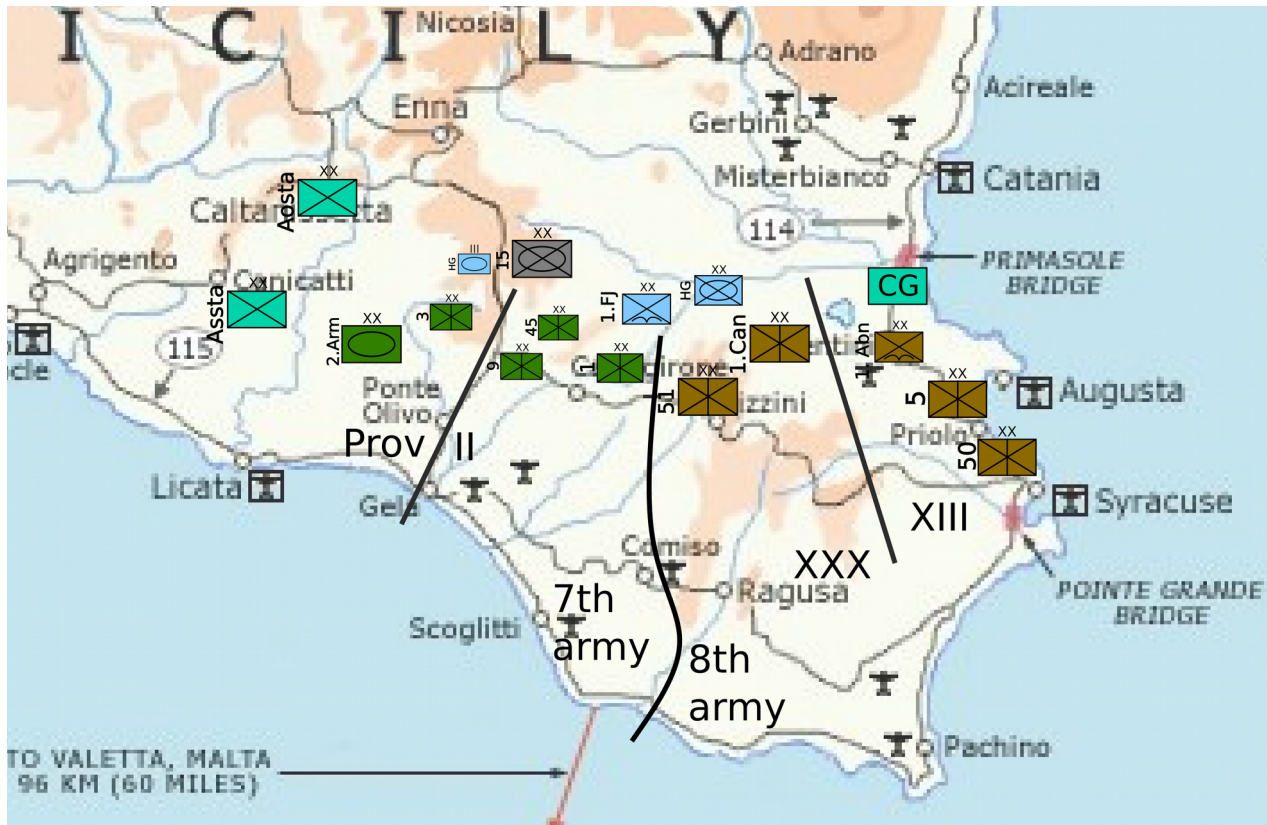

Illustration 4: July 19

Around the same time, the Germans left their positions around Riesi and retreated northeast, forming a new position at Piazza Armerina and east of there. The Salso river was left for the Italian XII corps to defend, but Licata was still not attacked by the Americans.

The Axis barely managed to stop the British breakthrough at the rivers on the Catanian plain with some reserve coastal guard units they had been railing from the western part of the island, and some Hermann Göring division tanks rushing to secure a key bridge over Gornalunga to help the fleeing defenders evacuate from Vizzini. (Illustration 4).

On July 19 the Americans executed their plan. They decided to surround Licata by attacking over the Salso by crossing it everywhere north of the city, building a temporary bridge to help their supply, and dropping the rest of their paratroopers around Naro. They were unaware that all of these positions were already almost abandoned by the Italians, and the attack was thus somewhat overkill. Naturally they easily crossed the river and quickly conquered the abandoned Licata. However, some unmotorized Italians were still defending Canicatti and got surrounded by the 2nd Armored division due to this sudden change of tempo.

At this point the Germans noticed that the eastern part of the island was in trouble, and left Piazza Armerina to Italian hands and started moving eastward. The Brits advanced against the weak Italian defences and by July 21 they were at the gates of Catania, where the Germans finally arrived to stop their advance. But the Brits already had their next plan prepared: 50th division was in Syracuse, getting loaded to amphibious landing ships. The Allies also heard that a new German division, the 29th Panzergrenadiere, was arriving on the island.

The Americans reckoned that Piazza Armerina was too hard to take and started moving the entire II corps over Salso to attack northward along the west side of it, freeing their armor to advance to the western part of the island. They were unaware that there was absolutely no defence in the west as the Italians did not find value defending anything besides the Etna line.

Palermo and Catania (July 22 – 28)

July 22 saw the Brits pull the trigger on their invasion to Acireale, just north of Catania. The invasion was practically unopposed and caught the already stretched Axis off guard. This would have been game over, but luckily the excellent German 29th division had just arrived in Messina and had partly already reinforced Catania. The Germans attacked the beachhead from both directions with Italian support, and after several days of heavy fighting managed to break through and escape north, while the Brits successfully evacuated a sizable part of their invasion force. By 27 July the whole invasion had been eliminated.

The British invasion also included some special forces that climbed the Etna to harrass Italian artillery behind the lines. While the invasion could be seen as less than successful, it allowed the Allies to capture Catania and much of the south side of Etna without a fight and caused a lot of casualties for the Germans.

West of the landing the Germans retreated in good order over the plains, chased by the XXX corps. They made a stand at the almost impenetrable mountain fortress of Centuripe, which XXX flanked from both directions, but most of the German paratroopers managed to escape, if only barely (Illustration 5).
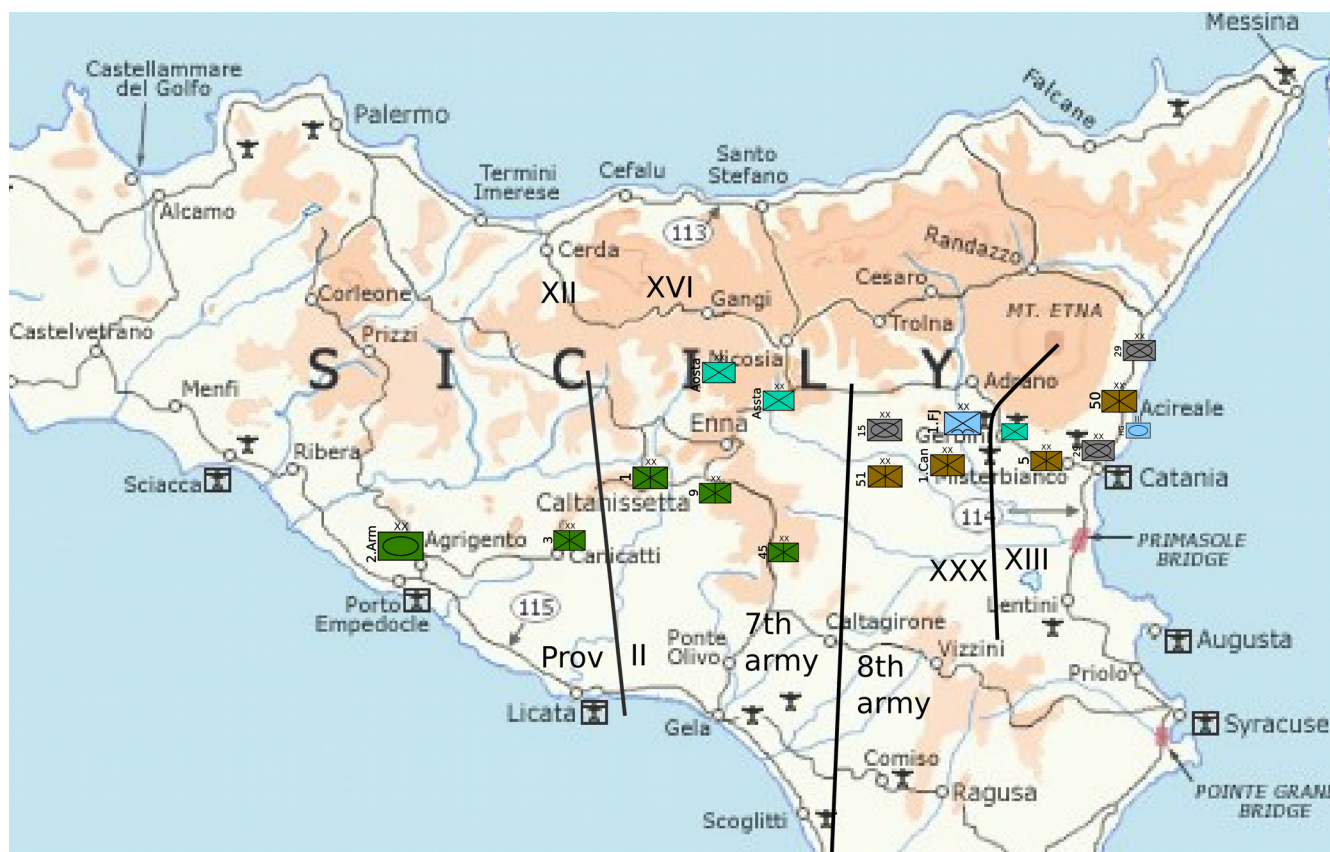
Illustration 5: July 24

Meanwhile the Italians abandonded Piazza Armerina and it was empty for a while, before the Americans dared to enter it. Most of the Americans were busy crossing the Salso over a poor bridge, which took the army several days. The bridge earned the nickname "Brooklyn bridge" from Patton due to all the traffic jams. The US II corps had to wait for enough strength to cross the river to attack Caltanisetta, which the Italians meanwhile abandoned.

Provisional corps started their run toward Palermo. This was practically unopposed, and as they started driving from Licata, the Italians were already evacuating the last units from the capital. Palermo fell on July 27, with only a single Italian machine gun regiment left to defend the airfield.

Around this time XXX made a major attack to cross Simeto and captured Adrano, but lost a lot of forces in doing so. This cut off a sizable group of Italians south of Etna, but luckily for them, Wehrmacht sent some fresh units to counterattack and create a path out. By this time the Brits were rather worn out after continuous battles and had to regroup for a while, but managed to hold onto their bridgehead at Adrano.

Illustration 6: July 28

US 1st division reached the north coast right after Palermo had fallen. The coast was only defended by a single coastal regiment, but Patton did not know that (Illustration 6). The Italians sent some supporting tanks, which delayed the Americans at Acquedolci for long enough. The Luftwaffe units just relieved from the Adrano and Acireale fronts were grouped together under Oberst Conrath and managed to dig into their positions around Capo d'Orlando before the Americans got past the Italians.

The Etna line (July 29 – August 2)

After fleeing for a week the Italian XII Corps, at this point less than a division strong, finally found terrain they liked and decided to make a stand at Troina. The Americans had some coordination and supply problems in the mountainous area at the Army border, and took some time before they could bring their artillery to range and set up a proper attack, which, in their usual style, started with an insane artillery barrage that turned the town into rubble. The Italians saw the attack coming and left the town without trying to fight back, creating a new position at Cesaro.

However, the Americans had sent their 4th Rangers over the mountains and caught Italian artillery by surprise and cut connections to the units defending the coast. As the Germans were retreating on the west side of Etna, Cesaro was in danger of having both of its retreat routes getting cut.

Meanwhile the Germans decided that the Brits are not very dangerous on the east coast and moved the bulk of 29th division to Bronte. But they were unaware that Alexander had just authorized releasing the 78th division, the British strategic reserve, to reinforce the eastern coast, replacing the loss of most of 50th division in the invasion. This would prove to be a decisive factor later.

On July 31 the Americans finally reached the HG positions at Capo d'Orlando. Now they were facing an obstacle they could not pass, as the terrain on the coast was getting very advantageous for the defender and the defenders were the elite German paratroopers that would cause nightmares for the American soldiers for decades to come. The Americans had been planning an invasion to Barcellona for a while to bypass exactly this kind of problems, but were limited by the amphibious transports being either repaired after the British invasion, or already moved to be prepared for the next campaign to Italy proper. Another problem was that their airfields were very far behind and they found it hard to cover their invasion fleet against Luftwaffe, which they solved by building a new airfield near Termini Imerese. It took until August 4 before everything was ready for the invasion.
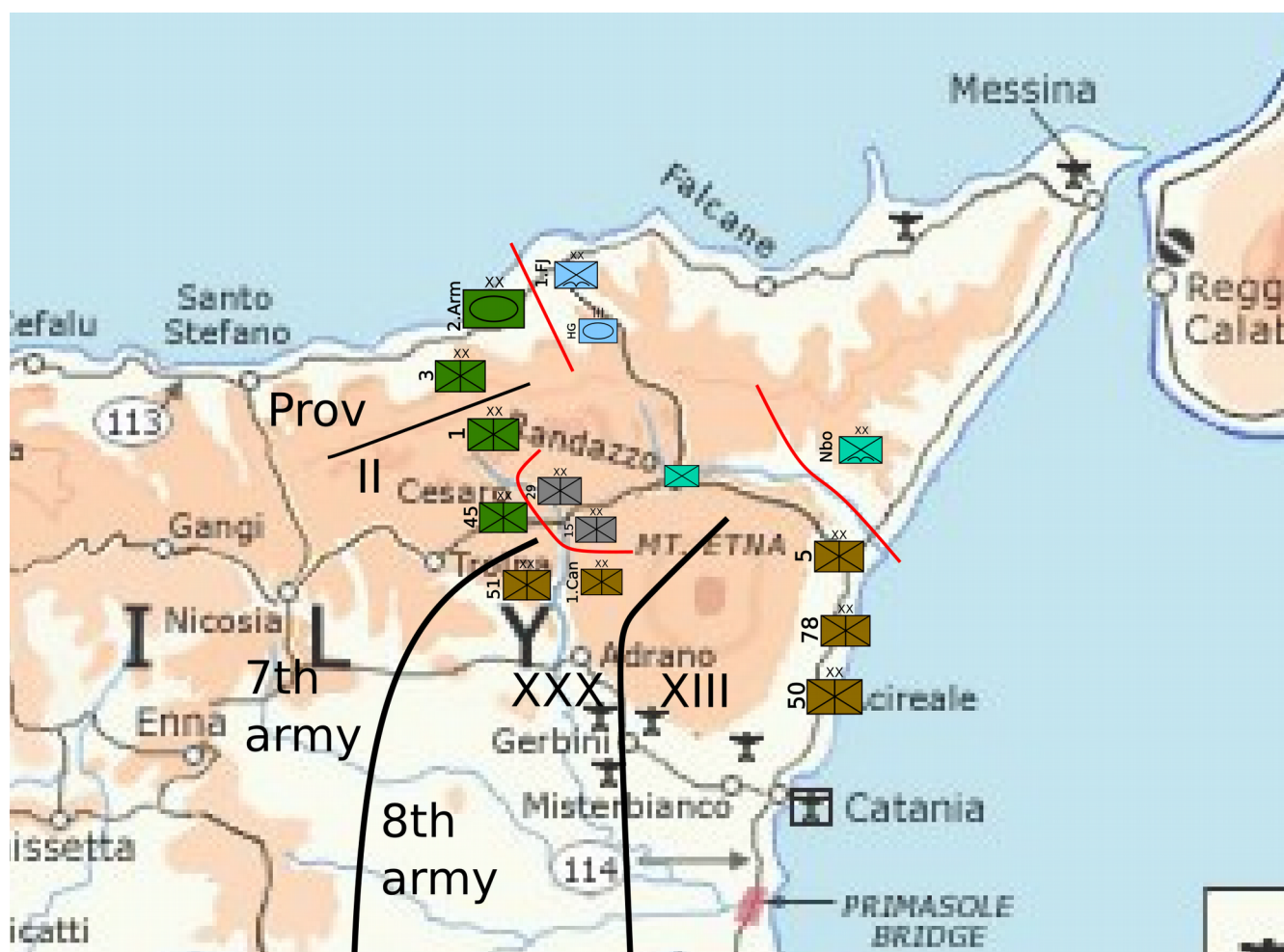

Illustration 7: August 3

When the US reached Cesaro, the Germans released from the eastern coast had just taken over the defences from the worn out Italians, so taking the city became much more complicated for the Americans. The Italian plan was to leave the main road toward Randazzo for the Germans and retreat

northeast over the mountain paths, but the US 1st division managed to break through their defenses on the coast and cut the escape route. The Italians made an all or nothing type attack where about half of their men managed to pass the Americans and flee east.

The British 5th division had finally rested enough and attacked the now weakened Axis positions on the east coast with air and naval support and broke through. And the fresh 78th division was now in reserve behind them. Luckily the Italian elite Nembo paratrooper division had just arrived on the island and was in position to stop the Brits at Taormina. But this meant that the main road north of Etna was open for the Brits, which left the Wehrmacht main force at Bronte in danger of being surrounded. They realized this and started their retreat, but were heavily harassed by the Allied air forces and hadn't had time to maintain their vehicles, so the progress was slow (Illustration 7).

Messina (August 3 – August 12)

The time was now right for the US invasion to Barcellona. Even though the Axis were expecting this one, by this point they had very little reserves to send to defend the area, and the invasion was again unopposed. Only some mixed Italian forces had been gathering in the area, but they were not strong enough for a proper counterattack. But the main problem for the Axis was that together with the British advances in the east, their whole army was not trapped. And to make things worse, they had almost no supplies inside, so they had to break out now or never. As Hube's XIV Panzerkorps HQ had already been evacuated to the continent, Conrath from Luftwaffe had to take control of the units in the pocket, which did not help the already collapsing German organization.

Meanwhile the British left 78th to attack on the coast and the 5th division advanced from east toward the important crossroads at Randazzo, but the Axis defence managed to keep it open and let the escaping Wehrmacht forces got through on the last possible moment. After the Germans had passed, Randazzo was in British hands and the circle road around Etna was complete, uniting the two British corps again. XXX continued north on the mountains while XIII was free to send its full force to the coast.

The Americans decided to send about half of their invading force full speed west to attack Luftwaffe from behind. At the same time Luftwaffe started to drive full speed east to not get trapped. The Luftwaffe HQ was driving first as they did not know the Americans are already attacking toward them and believed the Italians on the coastal road can hold their positions. The US tanks drove right trought the Italians, hit the Luftwaffe HQ convoy and captured several officers and Axis plans. The Luftwaffe commander, Oberst Conrath managed to escape and reformed a makeshift HQ from Wehrmacht men.

Luckily for the Germans, most of the Wehrmacht main force again made it in time before the Americans cut the road to the coast, and were now counterattacking against this US push from south and west, trapping them. Meanwhile the Americans were reinforcing their beachhead, but it was not the Axis air and navy attacks that caused a series of catastrophes, but just a fire on one of the ships. The nightly events culminated into the Allied landing craft driving to some rocks on the wrong beach, which sent their last amphibious ships to repairs. The beachhead was now on its own, with supplies

being landed to the captured airfield. The Axis air force was also dropping fuel and ammunition during the nights for a final, desperate attempt to open the coastal road (Illustration 8).
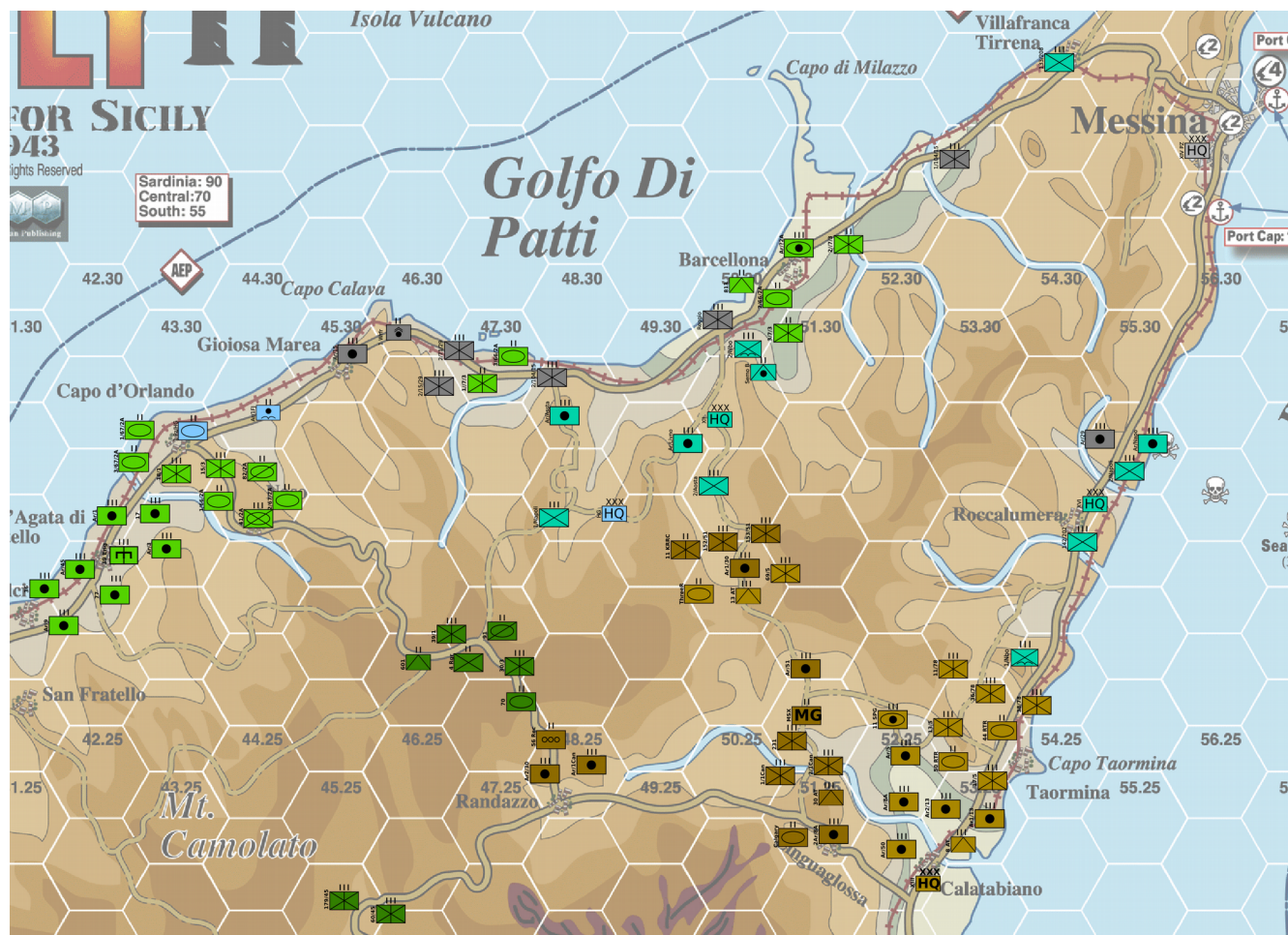

Illustration 8: August 6

Against improbable odds, the Germans attacking from the east managed to surprise the defenders and the road was opened. Everybody started rushing east through the opening while the American main force approached from the west. There was also some confusion with responsibilities as the Brits also attacked to the coastal road at the same time and blocked some of the chasing Americans. The Axis organization broke down as units run away using whatever route they can, and only single efficient German companies could be organized for delaying on the road.

On the east coast the Italians pulled their Nembo regiment to rest and gave responsibility to their regular troops, who had been digging positions at Roccalumera for days. The Brits had sent some forces over the mountains to harass the Italians and now switched responsibility back to the rested 5th division. Under the heavy artillery, air and naval pressure the Italian morale collapsed, and they surrendered en masse. Suddenly the resting paratroopers found themselves surrounded and could not hold the road against overwhelming enemy numbers. By nightfall, all that remained between the Brits and Messina was some artillery.

Very soon the Axis found themselves in fights inside Messina, with the Germans starting to get organized again in the north against the Americans and only some reserve coastal guards facing the whole of British XIII Corps (Illustration 9). For the last couple of days ships and ferries had been busy taking over the Italian headquarters and what remained of the Axis artillery.

Finally, after August 12, despite Germans fighting bitterly and using coastal artillery and even a rare
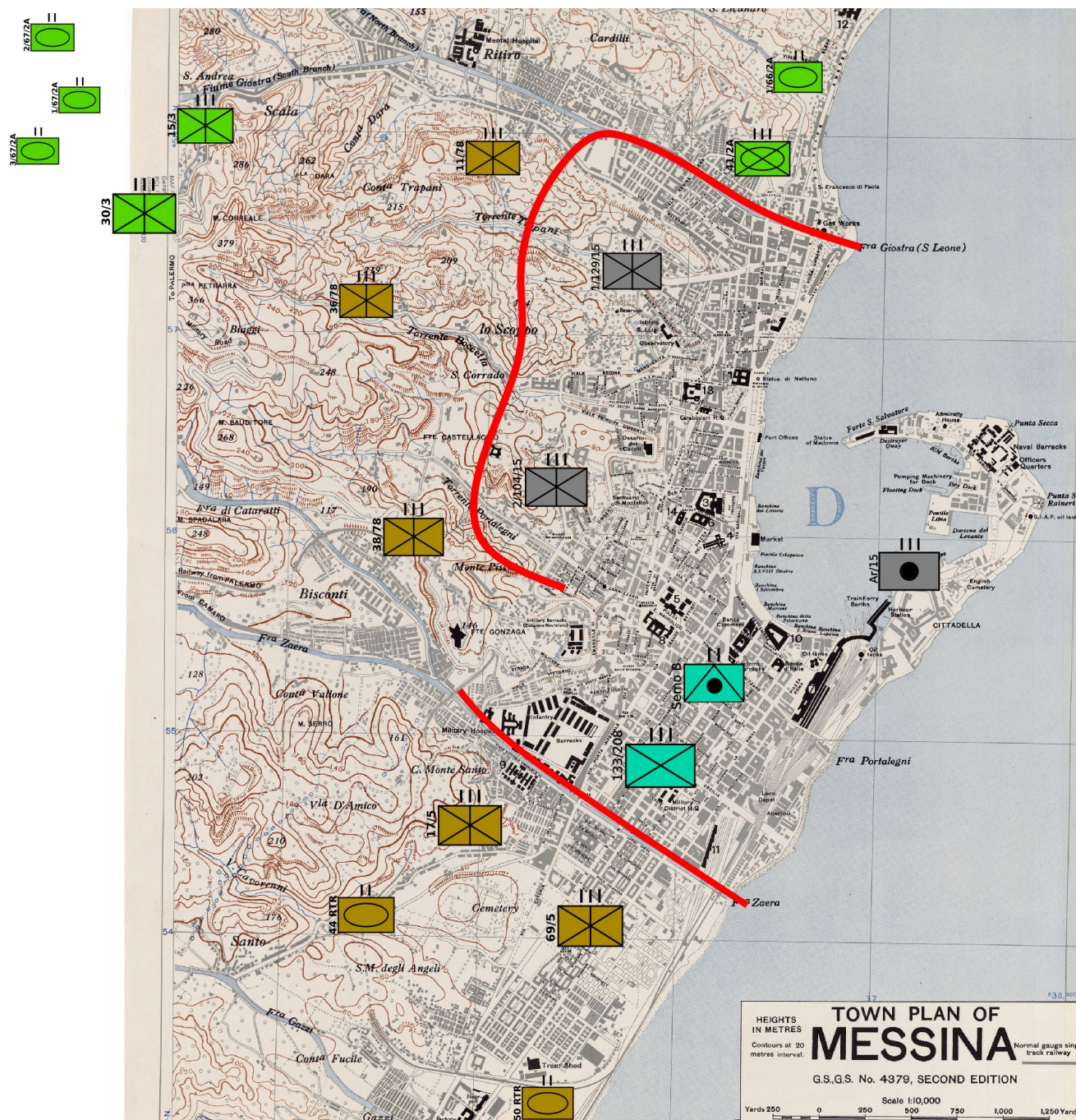

Illustration 9: Battle for Messina

Lufwaffe run, the Brits broke through the Italians and captured the port of Messina. Meanwhile the US forces captured the northern part of the city, and the Axis had lost control of the island.

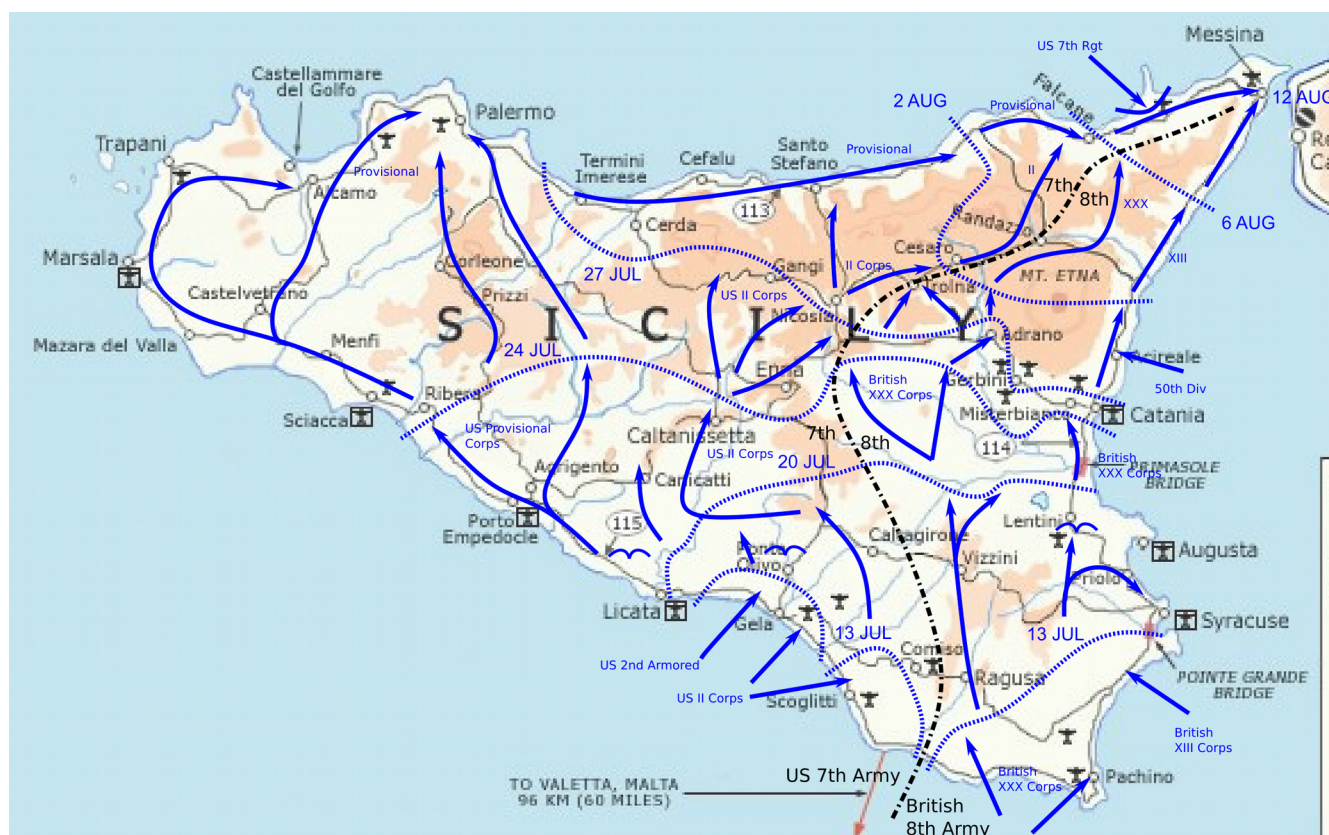Illustration 10 shows how the whole campaign progressed.

Illustration 10: The whole campaign

Conclusion

The campaign was over about 5 days faster than in history. The Axis collapse in the end was much worse and happened faster than in history. Losses on both sides were much more severe than in the real deal, which naturally affected Axis much worse. The Axis was left very far from the historical number of evacuated personnel and equipment, succeeding to only rescue maybe 20 % of that. This would result in a significantly easier Italian campaign for the Allies, possibly necessitating even more cannibalization of the German defences in Russia and France to hold the lines in Italy.

The game turned out to be an exciting experience. Player feedback from the campaign has been overwhelmingly positive and everyone who has answered the feedback questionnaire so far said they would play the game again. I also personally enjoyed running the game immensely and am planning the next one. The main problem for running a game like this is the extreme time requirements – I basically had to abandon my other hobbies to make space for the game.

I have no plans to make any big changes to how the system works, because it seems to work well as is. Some minor improvements will be done especially in the supply and communication, both between players and from umpire to players.

Supplies were tracked for artillery and fuel separately, which was not worth it. Despite the significancy of the issue, players mostly were not very interested in precise management of supply, such as adding numbers for road capacities. They were barely interested in where their main supply dumps were (which was due to the dumps not being marked on the map). Thus my plan is to keep supply in the simulation, but automate it even more for them, only pointing out any potential problems.

For player communication the most common opinion was that it was too easy when they were on the same Discord channel and players preferred the beginning part with more indirect messaging. I will make the risk of enemy interception clearer per channel depending on what mode of communication it represents, and in general have players be less on the same channels.

It is important to have ALL information on the same map (we had airfields on a separate map and supply reports only in text). It is also time consuming but necessary to pay attention to report all significant information for the players. On the other hand, it can be seen as a feature that when the umpire makes a mistake, someone in their complex military organization made a mistake, but this can still be very frustrating to the players. I also did not provide enough information about the units for the players in the beginning, so they did not properly understand their capabilities.

The maps were created using a separate inkscape file from the actual simulation. This added some work, and I have started implementing Inkscape extension programming to easily keep track of unit simulation status and hiding/showing them for the players in the same file. This should save some time in creating the maps, but the most time consuming part is storifying the simulation results for the players. These detailed reports were loved by the players, and there is no automation to explain the results in a believable way

I am currently planning to run another campaign about the Allied landings in France in 1944 with a pre-campaign where the Germans plan their defences and Allies decide the landing area.