

# **The End of the Amphibious Option? The Cancellation of Operation *Chopper*, Sicily July 1943**

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*Le fait que les capacités amphibies auraient dû permettre aux Alliés de déborder et d'envelopper les forces de l'axe, explique en partie leur déception lors de la campagne de Sicile des mois de juillet et août 1943. Les commandants supérieurs de l'armée et de la Marine royale ont généralement été blâmés de ce manque d'action. Cet article se penche sur les raisons qui ont porté à annuler l'opération de débordement amphibie la plus prometteuse, l'Opération Chopper, et conclut que malgré des relations de travail généralement bonnes, l'armée et la Marine royale ne partageaient pas le même point de vue en ce qui concerne les conditions de réussite de la conduite d'opérations amphibies.*

Operation *Chopper* is a very little remembered episode in the Allied conquest of Sicily during July and August 1943. It was intended as an attack from the sea during the night of 16-17 July to outflank strong German defensive positions in front on Catania. These defences blocked the road north from Augusta through Catania to Messina. If the Allies could turn this defensive position, open the road to Catania and dash on to capture Messina, the whole Axis army on Sicily would be cut off from the Italian mainland. It was a bold and in some ways obvious plan, but just before it was due to commence on the evening of 16 July, it was postponed and eventually cancelled. This decision may have condemned the Allies to another four weeks fighting and saved the bulk of the Axis forces from capture.

Asking the reason for the cancellation of *Chopper* is, therefore, an interesting question, but not one that is easy to answer. The Allied conquest of Sicily in July and August 1943 has an unmistakable air of disappointment over its history. The titles of some of the books on the subject present this as the very first impression to the potential reader. Martin Blumenson's *Sicily: Whose Victory?* and Carlo D'Este's *Bitter Victory* capture this feeling very well. It was the largest amphibious operation in history at this point, the first step back on to European soil. After a landing on 10 July 1943 (Operation *Husky*), the island was not completely in allied hands until 17 August. There were many sometimes unexpected successes ranging from the effectiveness of naval bombardment and the rapid suppression of the Axis air forces to over-the-beach supply using the new Landing Craft Tank (LCT) and

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DUKWs and the rapid turnaround of shipping. Yet, at the time and subsequently, it was the failings that dominated analyses of the operation.

The Allies had assembled a huge armada of over 3200 vessels ranging from aircraft carriers to the smallest support craft. The US 7<sup>th</sup> Army under General Patton numbered 200,000, and Montgomery's 8<sup>th</sup> Army had 250,000. Together they had over 160,000 combat troops, 600 tanks, 14,000 vehicles, 2,000 guns, supported by more than 1600 aircraft. On the other side, during the five week campaign, the Germans deployed a total 60,000 troops and the Italians about 200,000 and many of the latter were poor quality coastal divisions. Instead of overwhelming the Axis forces, the campaign developed into a tough battle of attrition as the Allies slowly pushed them back to Messina. The greatest feat of the campaign was the Axis evacuation of the island under the command of Fregatten Kapitaen Gustav von Liebenstein and Colonel Baade, the "Commandant of the Messina Strait." Over 40,000 Germans, 60,000 Italians, 50 tanks, 10,000 vehicles, 94 guns and 17,000 tons of stores were evacuated before Messina fell.

Even whilst *Husky* was taking place criticisms were becoming apparent to the public. Two days after the landing, on 12 July, Captain Basil Liddell Hart's column in the *Daily Mail* was entitled "Speed is now the vital factor." Air and sea power had to be used to make deep threats to the Axis lines of communication to Messina. As the days passed, however, it became apparent that air and sea power were not being used to that end. In later articles Liddell Hart shifted his emphasis and thus muted the level of criticism by making comparisons with the lack of progress at Gallipoli in 1915 rather than expectations raised by current air and sea superiority.

Nevertheless, the point that the Allies failed to make the best use of their superiority struck home and has bedevilled the history of the campaign ever since. One of the earliest histories of the campaign, by Hugh Pond in 1962, placed most of the blame for this on the Royal Navy, whose memories of Gallipoli, he claimed, made them fear the straits of Messina. To Pond, the RAF was little better in being unwilling to attack this critical point. For Pond, a landing close to Messina could have been decisive.<sup>2</sup> The US naval historian, Samuel Elliot Morison largely followed the same line. Fear of enemy air power dissuaded the allies from making a landing at the straits and the later use of amphibious leaps were too little and too late.<sup>3</sup>

This sense of lost opportunity is apparent in the post-war publication of reports and memoirs. In 1946, the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, Admiral Cunningham's report to Eisenhower of 1 January 1944 was considered for publication. It became subject to a great deal of scrutiny which delayed its eventual publication in the *Gazette* until 25 April 1950. Standard inter-ministerial agreements not to cause other ministries offence meant that the document had to go before the War Office, the Air Ministry and, by extension, the American allies. As Eisenhower's report was already in the public domain, the Americans did not raise

<sup>1</sup> C. D'Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily 1943*, New York, 1988, 314.

<sup>2</sup> H. Pond, *Sicily*, London, 1962, 211-214.

<sup>3</sup> S.E. Morison, *Sicily-Salerno-Anzio: January 1943-June 1944*, Boston, 1954, 204-219.

any difficulties over publication. The same was not true of the British services. Cunningham noted that from the capture of Augusta on 13 July:

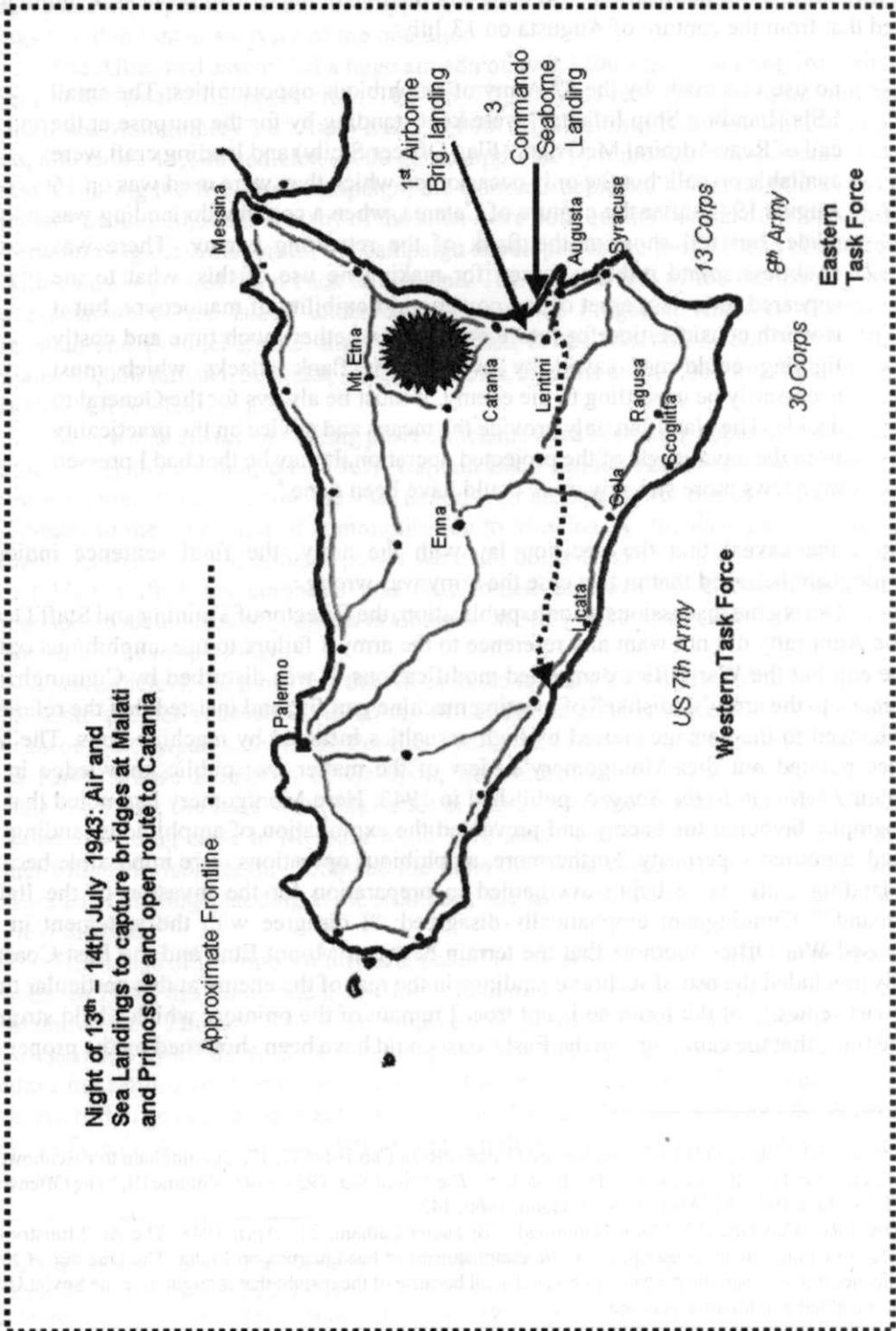
no use was made by the 8 Army of amphibious opportunities. The small LSIs [Landing Ship Infantry] were kept standing by for the purpose at the call of Rear Admiral McGrigor (Flag Officer Sicily) and landing craft were available on call: but the only occasion on which they were used was on 16 August 1943, after the capture of Catania, when a commando landing was made, but fell short of the flank of the retreating enemy. There was doubtless sound military reason for making no use of this, what to me appeared, priceless asset of sea power and flexibility of manoeuvre, but it is worth consideration for future occasions whether much time and costly fighting could not saved by even minor flank attacks which must necessarily be unsettling to the enemy. It must be always for the General to decide. The Navy can only provide the means and advice on the practicality from the naval angle of the projected operation. It may be that had I pressed my views more strongly more could have been done.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the caveat that the decision lay with the army, the final sentence indicates Cunningham believed that in this case the army was wrong.

During the discussions prior to publication, the Director of Training and Staff Duties at the Admiralty did not want any reference to the army's failure to use amphibious option to be cut, but the War Office demanded modifications. It was disturbed by Cunningham's reference to the army's "dislike" of meeting machine gun fire and insisted that the reference be changed to the damage caused by high casualties inflicted by machine guns. The War Office pointed out that Montgomery's view of the matter was public knowledge in his memoir *El Alamein to the Sangro*, published in 1948. Here Montgomery had noted that the topography favoured the enemy and prevented the exploitation of amphibious landings by Allied armoured superiority. Furthermore, amphibious operations were impossible because the landing craft "were being overhauled in preparation for the invasion of the Italian mainland."<sup>5</sup> Cunningham emphatically disagreed; "I disagree with the statement in the proposed War Office footnote that the terrain between Mount Etna and the East Coast of Sicily precluded the use of seaborne landings in the rear of the enemy at this particular time. The last sentence of the footnote is not true. I remain of the opinion, which I held strongly at the time, that the campaign on the East Coast could have been shortened by the proper use

<sup>4</sup> The National Archive (TNA), Public Record Office (PRO), Cab 106/637, 17, Cunningham to Eisenhower, 1 Jan. 1944, paras 41 -2. It is a view noted by Roskill, *S., The War at Sea, 1939-1945*, Volume III, "The Offensive," Part 1, "1" June 1943, 31" May 1944," London, 1960, 142.

<sup>5</sup> TNA, PRO, Cab 106/637, Major Hammond - Brigadier Latham, 21" April 1948. The Air Ministry also objected to Cunningham's description of the establishment of headquarters on Malta. The Director of Naval Intelligence did not want the despatch published at all because of the insight that it might give the Soviet Union regarding allied amphibious technique.



of sea power."<sup>6</sup>

By the 1960s, after the publication of so many memoirs, the inter-service disagreements during the planning of Operation *Husky* were well known and the impact that this was having on the history of the campaign was becoming clear. Lord Tedder the Air Officer Commanding during *Husky*, wrote to Liddell Hart on 7 March 1963 "I wonder if it has struck you there is a remarkable likeness between Monty and Winston in their respective attitudes to history. In other words, each of them determined so far as it lay within his own power, to make sure that 'his story' should record his own version of events rather than history. It was quite early days in the Desert War - even before Monty arrived - that one saw this process of adjustment in motion and it was early days when I was forced to the conclusion that the chances of true history being recorded of that campaign were slight indeed. Nothing that has happened since has made me less pessimistic on that subject. Indeed, while it is evident that Winston's story will in due course be disentangled, on the other hand, as regards Monty the record was so skilfully adjusted at the time that I see little, if any prospect of the truth being disentangled from the story."

While Liddell Hart certainly struggled to get the most accurate picture he could of events for his history of the war, his views were as trenchant on matters of command as those of the participants themselves and some of his judgements were sweeping rather than balanced. When Tedder's own memoir, *With Prejudice*, appeared in 1966, Liddell Hart noted in a private review that Tedder "fought a number of battles in the Middle East against which the one against the Germans pales into insignificance. Shortage of men and aeroplanes, appalling inefficiency and ignorance (the only word), of the Army after O'Connor's departure, the proddings of Churchill, who tended to relate everything directly to the battle fleets or projections on the world wall map in the War Room, and above all the major and minor intrigues of the Navy, gallantly led by the blimpish figure of Admiral Andrew Cunningham, the Old Man of the Sea. This last would have been hilarious were it not so tragic. For example the Admiral would not leave his flagship when it was sitting on the bottom of Alexandria harbour."

Tedder's discontent with the army and the Royal Navy had deep roots. He believed that neither service understood or was willing to acknowledge the critical role of air power in the forthcoming amphibious campaign. He complained to the Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Charles Portal, about the "fantastic idea of soldiers controlling aircraft" and of Cunningham's "dogmatising regarding the employment of the air striking force." Attempts by Cunningham to have the air arm put under the Flag Officer Gibraltar were fiercely resisted. Tedder believed that this exposed the admiral's fundamental misunderstanding of the new role of air power; "The one outstanding lesson of the last eighteen months' operations is that control of sea communications in the Mediterranean has passed to the air.

<sup>6</sup> TNA, PRO, Adm 1/2009, Cunningham to the Secretary to the Board of Admiralty, 15 November 1947.

<sup>7</sup> King's College, London (KCL), Liddell Hart Military Archive (LHMA), LHMA 679, Tedder to Liddell Hart, 7 March 1963.

<sup>8</sup> KCL, LHMA 679, Confidential, *With Prejudice* by Tedder 26 April 1966.

<sup>9</sup> A. Tedder, *With Prejudice*, 1966, 398, 404.

The victory at Matapan was the last dying flicker of naval supremacy in the Mediterranean and since May 1941 surface ships have only been able to move precariously at sea at the mercy of hostile air forces and by grace of what fighter cover the available aerodromes make possible. Reasonable security for ships, whether naval or merchant, can only be attained by coast crawling." Still Cunningham insisted to Tedder that "I am the managing director, you are the junior partner."<sup>10</sup>

This atmosphere of distrust and recrimination set the scene for accounts of the campaign and fed into historical orthodoxy. A particularly contentious issue was the exploitation of amphibious power. One of the key moments of the campaign centred on Operation *Chopper*. On 10 July, General Dempsey's XIII Corps (5<sup>th</sup> Division and 50<sup>th</sup> Division) had landed between Cape Pachino and Cassibile on the south-eastern corner of the island. The corps formed the right of 8<sup>th</sup> Army. Dempsey was to capture Syracuse, as the main supply depot and drive on to secure the port of Augusta. Then it was to push on to take Catania. From here 8<sup>th</sup> Army could push up the narrow coastal strip and seize Messina, cutting off the entire Axis forces in Sicily from support on the mainland.

Syracuse fell on the 10<sup>th</sup> and British troops entered Augusta on the 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>11</sup> However, between 8<sup>th</sup> Army and Catania there were two important river crossings, the Lentini at Malati and to the north, the Primosole Bridge over the Simeto. However as 50<sup>th</sup> Division pushed forward in great heat, with little transport, the resistance from German troops began to stiffen. On the early morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> paratroops from the 1<sup>st</sup> Fallschirmjäger Division landed on the plain of Catania and deployed in strong defensive positions along the Simeto and towards the town of Lentini.

Montgomery's and Dempsey's plan was to use the Allies's sea and air superiority to turn the two river positions. No.3 Commando was to capture Matali bridge by a seaborne landing on the night of 13 - 14 July. The same night the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Brigade was to drop close to the Primosole Bridge and capture it by morning. Early on the 14<sup>th</sup> the 50<sup>th</sup> Division, reinforced by the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade was to drive across the Matali and Primosole bridges and open the way to Catania. The commandos managed to capture Matali bridge before being driven off by a fierce counter attack. However, during the day the 50<sup>th</sup> Division reached the bridge and captured it intact. The 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Brigade was scattered by friendly fire before landing, but groups did manage to concentrate at both ends of the Primosole Bridge where they managed to hold out until about 1730 before being driven away. The 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade got within about a mile of the bridge before nightfall, but it was too late. The offensive was bogged down and a frontal assault by infantry on the 15 July was stopped with heavy casualties.<sup>12</sup>

While not a complete success, the Matali bridge had fallen and the Primosole bridge had come close to being taken. This experience of combined air and sea and land action on

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 363, 407.

<sup>11</sup> Although the defence of Augusta had practically collapsed 8<sup>th</sup> Army could not secure it until after the 14<sup>th</sup>. TNA, PRO, Cab 121/589, Alexander to CIGS 14 July 1943.

<sup>12</sup> A good account of these actions can be found in D'Este, *Bitter Victory*.

13-14 July possibly encouraged plans laid for a further operation - Operation *Chopper*.<sup>13</sup> The new plan was to breach the Catania line by a seaborne assault in the rear of the defences. It was scheduled for night of 16 -17 July. 40 and 41 Royal Marine Commandos were to land five miles north of Catania and secure a beachhead. The Special Raiding Squadron was to pass through them and move down to secure the docks at Catania, followed by one of the Marine Commando, which was to secure the town. With the town in British hands, 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry brigade would be landed at the Catania Mole.<sup>14</sup>

From the beginning of *Husky* a coastal drive to Messina was the acknowledged strategy and Cunningham was fully aware of the possibility of a series of coastal leaps. On 11 July, the day after the initial landings, he contacted the Flag Officer Gibraltar to try to get No. 2 Commando released for "pinching out on the east coast."<sup>15</sup> By the 16<sup>th</sup> Cunningham had Augusta harbour in operation and collected the monitors, *Erebus* and *Roberts*, gunboats, small craft and LSIs under the Flag Officer Sicily, Rear Admiral McGrigor, to support 8<sup>th</sup> Army operations.<sup>16</sup> When Cunningham was informed of *Chopper* he signalled Flag Officer Force H, to provide naval bombardment at 1900 and air support from HMS *Formidable*.<sup>17</sup> Air cover was to be co-ordinated with land based fighters. At Syracuse, Brigadier G. W. B. Tarleton of 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade received his orders at 1830 on the 15<sup>th</sup>. On the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> he went to Augusta to co-ordinate movements of the brigade with the navy. At midday the warning order to move any time after 1700 arrived.<sup>18</sup> According to one memoir, the officers of the SRS were uneasy about the operation. They had little intelligence of German positions and could not believe that they would be able to move the five miles south to Catania before meeting stiff opposition.<sup>19</sup> Suddenly, at 1630 an order postponing *Chopper* for 24 hours reached 17<sup>th</sup> brigade HQ. Early on the 17<sup>th</sup> Tarleton was called to a conference at divisional HQ and at 0800 the order cancelling *Chopper* arrived.

While *Chopper* did not feature strongly in official reports or the memoirs of the senior officers, it was representative of the failure to use sea and air superiority, and given the subsequent disappointing history of the campaign, could not be entirely ignored by participants or historians. Cunningham was evidently surprised by the decision and in his autobiography of 1951 he repeated the points made in his report of January 1944. Only when it was too late did 8<sup>th</sup> Army mount another amphibious leap towards Messina.<sup>20</sup> The US 7<sup>th</sup> Army used amphibious flanking movements along the northern coast in August, but with less success than hoped. The Army Group Commander, General Sir Harold Alexander made no

<sup>13</sup> The fact Operation *Market Garden* in September 1944 bears a striking resemblance to the 13 - 14 July operation suggests that Montgomery continued to have faith in undermining enemy positions by attack from the rear and relying on a narrow drive through the frontline.

<sup>14</sup> D.I. Harrison, *These Men are Dangerous : The SAS at War*, London, 1957, (1999 reprint), 52.

<sup>15</sup> TNA, PRO, Cab 121/589, C-in-C Mediterranean to Flag Officer Gibraltar, 11 July 1943.

<sup>16</sup> TNA, PRO, Cab 121/589, C-in-C Mediterranean to Admiralty, 16 July 1943.

<sup>17</sup> TNA, PRO, Cab 121/589, C-in-C Mediterranean to Flag Office H. 16 July 1943, 1419.

<sup>18</sup> TNA, PRO, WO 169/8893 War Diary 17\* Infantry Brigade 15 and 16 July 1943.

<sup>19</sup> D.I. Harrison, *These Men are Dangerous*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> A. Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, London, 1951, 554.

mention of it in his memoirs. Likewise, Eisenhower ignored the matter in his despatch.<sup>21</sup> In his 1948 book, *El Alamein to the River Sangro*, Montgomery made no mention of *Chopper* directly, but made a general point regarding amphibious assaults, to which Cunningham objected so much; "The topography of north-east Sicily greatly favoured the enemy. It was possible for him to organize a series of very strong delaying positions all the way to Messina and there was no opportunity of exploiting in mass our superiority in armoured forces. In the weeks ahead we were daily planning to land forces from the sea behind the enemy and indeed, success was achieved, but beaches were scarce and generally unsuitable for the deployment of any but minor forces. Moreover the availability of landing craft was greatly restricted, since they were being overhauled in preparation for the invasion of the Italian mainland."<sup>22</sup> In his 1958 *Memoirs* Montgomery took a broader overview of the campaign and was highly critical of many aspects of the operation, including the failure of the services to work closely together. He stated that Admiral Morison agreed with him that there could have been closer co-operation between the services. In this Montgomery appears to present himself as the champion of such co-operation, while giving no hint that he was directly responsible for the cancellation of one of the most promising inter-service operations of the campaign.<sup>23</sup> Dempsey, who seems to have prepared the plan for *Chopper* left no explanation in his papers. The cancellation intrigued the *Daily Telegraph* war correspondent, Christopher Buckley, whose enquires likewise yielded the information that German troops had occupied the area and it was considered that British troops were too inexperienced in street fighting to fight their way into Catania.<sup>24</sup> The troops waiting for the order to go were surprised, but they were told that intelligence indicated the Germans had moved troops up to the landing area.<sup>25</sup> Carlo D'Este cited Montgomery's "inexplicable decision" to abandon *Chopper* as the major factor that doomed the Catania offensive.<sup>26</sup> He considered that this was a symptom of an uncharacteristic indecisiveness. Montgomery failed to concentrate his forces, opened up divergent offensives along small fronts, employing brigade or battalion offensives. Too cautious, too slow and too dispersed, this was Montgomery at his worse. While not subscribing completely to D'Este's judgement, even Montgomery's biographer, Nigel Hamilton, conceded that Montgomery let his army down.<sup>27</sup>

The significance of the cancellation of *Chopper* is that, in retrospect, it signalled a definitive turn away from the coastal drive with its opportunities for an amphibious advance which was a major planning assumption of the campaign. As such it justifies a closer look to see if there are any clues to the decision. As we have seen, Cunningham denied that there was any lack of landing craft. The files in the National Archives (class HW) do not reveal any specific signals intelligence to confirm the movement of German forces north of Catania.

<sup>21</sup> TNA, PRO, Cab 121/579.C-in-C's Despatch, Sicilian Campaign 1943.

<sup>22</sup> B. Montgomery, *El Alamein to the River Sangro*, London, 1948, (1973 paperback edition) 134-135.

<sup>23</sup> B. Montgomery, *Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery*, London, 1958 (1960 paperback edition), 193.

<sup>24</sup> C. Buckley, *The Road to Rome*, London, 1945, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Harrison, *These Men are Dangerous*, 53.

<sup>26</sup> D'Este, *Bitter Victory*, 396.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 556; Hamilton, N., *Monty: Master of the Battlefield, 1942-1944*, London, 1983, 312-318.

Indeed, the 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group progress report of 16 July, states that there was no new picture of enemy dispositions. A report on the operation, 14-21 July, by a Major Jones, did not identify major troop movements, although photographic reconnaissance showed that the majority of the defenders were held back from the main front as a mobile reserve. During the whole period, intelligence estimated that the total enemy forces opposing XIII Corps probably did not exceed a division in strength. On the 16<sup>th</sup> it was noted that Kesselring had specifically ordered that despite holding a strong mobile reserve, there was, at this stage, to be no withdrawal to the main defensive lines.<sup>28</sup> This is not to suggest that there were no German movements to the north of Catania, but that they did not register either through signals intelligence or at the higher operational HQ.

The operation was deferred on the 16<sup>th</sup> and cancelled on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Was there anything that was happening at this time that sheds light on these decisions? An examination of other events does not reveal any clear linear relationship between the unfolding of the campaign in general and the cancellation of *Chopper*.

The most obvious shift in focus occurred on 13 July, when Montgomery decided on a "left hook" by Sir Oliver Leese's X X X Corps, to drive inland to Enna in order to swing around the north side of Etna. On his own initiative he ordered Leese to push on up the Vizzini-Caltagirone highway, which had been allotted for the use of US 7<sup>th</sup> Army. Much to the disgust of the Americans, Alexander subsequently approved Montgomery's action which left 7<sup>th</sup> Army with a purely defensive role.<sup>29</sup> While this certainly shifted the weight of Montgomery's operations it did not imply abandoning the coastal or amphibious drive. Leese's advance continued during the Malati-Primosole operation and Montgomery urged him to get to Paterno quickly to be ready to swing east to attack Catania in support of operations on the coastal plain during the 16 - 17 July.<sup>30</sup> Rather than abandoning the Catania operation, Montgomery ordered that it continue during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, after *Chopper* had been cancelled. There was no intrinsic reason, therefore, in the "left hook" plan for the amphibious attack to be abandoned. De Guingand, Montgomery's chief of staff, later claimed that the operation was abandoned because of the exhaustion of 50<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>31</sup> However, 50<sup>th</sup> Division remained on the offensive until the 19<sup>th</sup>, when Montgomery called off the whole offensive, two days after the cancellation of the amphibious operation on the 17<sup>th</sup>.

The American reaction to being relegated to a fairly static flank guard does not provide any clues to the decision. While Patton took the news fairly calmly at first, his corps commander, General Bradley, was infuriated. It was another lost opportunity to drive

<sup>28</sup> TNA, PRO, Cab 106/841, The Primosole Bridgehead, 14 - 21 July 1943. F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its influence on Strategy and Operations*, volume III, pt 1, London, 1984, 92-93. Ultra played little part in the campaign after the initial landing as the German local commanders responded on their own initiative to the situation using land lines. See F.W. Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret: The Inside Story of Operation Ultra, Bletchley Park and Enigma*, London, 1974, 105 ; R. Lewin, *Ultra Goes to War: The Secret Story*, London, 1978 (2001 edition), 278-281.

<sup>29</sup> D'Este, *Bitter Victory*, 326-346.

<sup>30</sup> N. Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield, 1942-1944*, London, 1983, 315.

<sup>31</sup> F. De Guingand, *Operation Victory*, London, 1947, 296.

northwards and swing around Etna before the Germans strengthened the Etna line.<sup>32</sup> It did not take long for Patton to be straining to push on, but with less strategic vision than Bradley, Patton wanted to push west and north, into largely empty space. Alexander had agreed to Patton's drive on the 17<sup>th</sup>, after the cancellation of *Chopper*, but before Montgomery effectively closed down the battle for Catania on 19 July. On the 20<sup>th</sup> a new strategy of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Armies wheeling around to the north of Etna had been approved, based partly on the logistic facilities at Palermo. However, it was not until early August that Patton was in position to fight the final battle and drive on Messina from the west. During this time amphibious operations on the east coast might have relieved pressure on X X X Corps making its hard slog around the western and northern edges of Etna.

If the timing of other decisions does not provide clear reason of the cancellation of *Chopper*, perhaps Montgomery himself gives the best hint of his thinking. Montgomery had a manner of expressing himself which exasperated others. His explanation of events as if the results were always what he intended and his reduction of complex matters to a few points of action or fact led to sweeping generalisations that ignored the reality of situations as perceived by others. Tedder and Cunningham were perplexed by this during the planning of *Husky*. Alexander was unable to contain it during the operation and had to manage the resultant difficulties with Generals Patton and Bradley. It was a feature of his memoirs that left many uncomfortable with his interpretation of events.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, despite Montgomery's habit of condensing information and firming it up, it is still probable that he recorded what were important factors for him in making decisions, albeit, giving precision and shape to what were almost certainly far more ambiguous feelings or suspicions. For example, his claim that landing craft were "greatly restricted" did not mean that they were unavailable for amphibious operations in mid-July. Cunningham had set up a support flotilla under McGrigor for this purpose. They had not been withdrawn for overhaul prior to an invasion of Italy, but what Cunningham thought was adequate was not the same as Montgomery's view. However, given the inexperience of 8<sup>th</sup> Army in working with the Royal Navy on large scale improvised amphibious operations, the adequacy of the landing craft might have been a reasonable concern. The landing by No. 3 Commando on the night of 13 -14 July to attack the bridge at Malati had to be carried out in two lifts because of the shortage of landing craft with a consequent lack of momentum in the advance.<sup>34</sup> *Chopper* was a much larger operation. Subsequent landings by the Americans in August on the north shore were restricted to battalion size landings because of a lack of landing craft and the final amphibious assault, by 40 RM Commando at Scaletta on the night of 15 - 16 August was also relatively small compared to *Chopper*.

It might be that in mid-July the vessels available to McGrigor were not as plentiful,

<sup>32</sup> O. Bradley, (and C. Blair), *A General's Life: An Autobiography by General of the Army Omar N. Bradley*, New York, 1983, 187-188.

<sup>33</sup> For example, see, Bradley, *A General's Life*, 190. One of the most famous or infamous situations was Montgomery's account of the battle of the Falaise Gap in August 1944. See KCL, LHMA, 677, Liddell Hart to Tedder, 1 May 1952.

<sup>34</sup> H. Pond, *Sicily*, 125.

nor as prepared, as Cunningham believed, or, more importantly, as the army expected. The Eastern Task Force Commander, Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay's report confirmed that there was some confusion within the naval command at Syracuse during 15 July, which was preventing McGrigor from exercising his role as Flag Officer Sicily.<sup>35</sup> Mountbatten's memorandum, dated 21 July 1943 on the lessons of the campaign to that date, indicated that the commando forces for amphibious operations "are being collected under Rear Admiral MacGregor, ready to be sent instantly as required."<sup>36</sup> This might suggest that by this point McGrigor's flotilla was not ready for action by the third week of July. As late as mid-August, McGrigor required forty-eight hours notice of intended operations.<sup>37</sup>

Montgomery's claim that the landing craft had been withdrawn for servicing prior to a landing in Italy was not entirely correct, but he might have been reflecting a feeling that, given the other demands upon the landing craft, the number available was inadequate for his needs. He conflated this with the knowledge that there would be a landing in Italy. On the 16<sup>th</sup> the Joint Chiefs of Staff had noted their interest in an invasion of Italy and on 18 July Eisenhower, on the advice of Tedder, Cunningham and Alexander, recommended an invasion of Italy as the next step.<sup>38</sup> The coincidence of events rather than precise quantitative analysis underpinned his description of events. Furthermore, *Chopper* was a complex operation, to be carried out at short notice with little prior intelligence gathering or opportunity to work out details of naval support. Simpler operations had gone awry. During the landing by No. 3 Commando on the night of the 13 -14 July, the landing craft had taken off the wounded, who had to be transferred to the *Prince Albert*, before they could return to the beach with the second lift.<sup>39</sup> It had run into unexpectedly heavy resistance on the beach. The intelligence situation on the 15 - 17 July did not help matters. The precise situation of 50<sup>th</sup> Division at Primosole was confused. Until early afternoon on the 15<sup>th</sup> it was unclear if the bridge had been blown up or not. By evening, an hour or more after the deferral of *Chopper*, it was confirmed that 50<sup>th</sup> Division had captured the bridge intact, a bridgehead had been established and the leading troops were being counter-attacked.<sup>40</sup> Interrogation of prisoners suggested that there might be an imminent landing by German paratroopers behind British lines.<sup>41</sup> The hopes of 13 July that "the enemy were Italian [and] shells might frighten them away."<sup>42</sup> had been shattered by the heavy fighting since then against German

<sup>35</sup> The Gazette, 28 April 1950, 2085, Report of Vice Admiral B. Ramsay to C.-in-C Mediterranean, 1 October 1942, para. 22.

<sup>36</sup> TNA, PRO, Cab 121/579, Memorandum by Chief of Combined Operations, 21 July 1943, para 33.

<sup>37</sup> R. Ryder, *Oliver Leese*, London, 1987, 143.

<sup>38</sup> M. Howard, *Grand Strategy*, volume iv, August 1942-September 1943, London, 1972, 503; Tedder, *With Prejudice*, London, 1966. That there was a general shortage of landing craft to carry out all the roles required of them in supplying Sicily is reflected in Captain Butcher's diary. See H. Butcher, *Three Years with Eisenhower, The Personal Diary of Captain Harry C. Butcher, USNR, Naval Aide to General Eisenhower, 1942-1945*, London, 1946, 316.

<sup>39</sup> TNA: PRO, WO 218/51 (No.3 Commando War Diary), 13- 14 July 1943.

<sup>40</sup> TNA : PRO, WO 169/8614 (XIII Corps War Diary), 15 July 1943.

<sup>41</sup> TNA : PRO, WO 169/8494(8<sup>th</sup> Army War Diary, Main HQ), 15 July 1943.

<sup>42</sup> TNA : PRO, WO 169/8778 (50<sup>th</sup> Div. War Diary), 13 July 1943

paratroopers. Heavy resistance and news, however poorly quantified, that the Germans had reinforced the area to the north of Catania, may have been a significant factor in the final abandonment of the plan, which, in the light of experience and inexperience, seemed so fraught with danger.

Montgomery's other claim that the terrain north of Catania was unsuited for exploitation by armoured forces is less understandable, but illustrates how he conflated matters to build a case. While the statement is clearly true, the purpose of the landing was to cut the enemy line of supply, unhinge the defensive position and drive into the rear of the enemy defences at Catania. Montgomery's biographer, Nigel Hamilton noted that this sounded attractive, particularly to naval historians, infected with a "romanticism" for the power of naval artillery.<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to see why there should be so much concern for armoured forces. *Chopper* was envisaged as a substantial infantry operation with a clear goal within five miles of the beachhead, combined with a large scale push from the south by 50<sup>th</sup> Division with 5<sup>th</sup> Division in support. Once through Catania, it was not tank country. They would find it hard going along the narrow coastal strip, but this was always known. Certainly, the tanks would be more effectively employed on the Catania-Gerbini plain, but this does not invalidate the possibility of continued amphibious outflanking movements supported by what was then becoming increasingly appreciated as effective naval bombardment. It remains difficult to understand what Montgomery meant by this justification of his decision.

The final point in Montgomery's explanation is reasonably clear; that the topography favoured the enemy and that landing beaches were scarce and unsuitable. North of Taormina beaches from which to deploy large scale forces were very scarce. Whether Montgomery was daily planning amphibious landings during the tough fighting west and north of Etna, as he claimed, is uncertain, but they were likely to be the smaller single commando operations which McGrigor's flotilla could support, rather than a resurrection of *Chopper*. They would be blocking forces rather than a pincer to fall on the rear of the enemy defences. This would have made the beach less critical and once ashore the invaders became the defenders so the topography might favour them. Nevertheless, the question would then become, could XIII Corps breakthrough to meet this small blocking force? The experience at Malati-Primosole and the American experience at Brolo on the north coast cast some doubt upon this proposition.

It seems that in his autobiographical justifications Montgomery obscured rather than clarified the reasoning behind the abandonment of the amphibious option. He was misleading, overly dogmatic and he embellished, but it was his usual style and in the final analysis he did point to concerns that underpinned his decision to cancel *Chopper*. It was an ambitious plan, which might have decisively crushed resistance at Catania and opened the way to Messina. There was just enough success in the Malati-Primosole operation to hope for a break-through, even after the experience of heavy losses and near disaster. But *Chopper* was also ambitious in the sense that it was much larger and was to be mounted by an army

N. Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, 326-7.

that had little experience of improvised large-scale landings, with naval forces that might not have been ready for the task. It was to take place in the face of skilful enemy forces whose dogged resistance to frontal assaults was amply proven and whose precise positions and mobile capability were unknown. Naval officers like Cunningham and Morison saw it as a lost opportunity. Most army officers, both senior and junior only had partial explanations for the cancellation, but from what they knew they found little to criticise. Montgomery was a cautious general. He may not have been right in his judgement, but he had nothing at the time to prove that he was wrong - to a cautious man this was an important distinction. When Dempsey and Montgomery planned the operation on the 15<sup>th</sup> there was some hope that with the Primrose bridge captured in tact, 50<sup>th</sup> Division could drive on to Catania. They knew they faced a formidable enemy and when they reviewed the situation on the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> the narrow drive north by 50<sup>th</sup> Division and German counter-attacks, suggested that it would take two leaps rather than one to break the defences. *Chopper* was deferred until the decisive push the following night. In the meantime the question of whether there were adequate landing craft or the navy was ready remained ambiguous. The risks involved even in lightly opposed amphibious operations had been made very clear to No. 3 Commando on 13 July. The lesson had been learned by other officers. In August 1943, Lieutenant Colonel J. Manners, CO of 40 Commando was relieved that similar risks had not been taken again; "I am impressed with their [army divisional command] policy of using the Royal Marine Cmdos to their fullest advantage and not wasting them on any operation that does not have 100% support from the forward troops and a certain probability of proving highly successful. The Commander of the last division to which I was attached told me himself that he would in no circumstances employ us unless there was a 95% certainty of success."<sup>44</sup> The results of the attack on night of 16<sup>th</sup> -! 7<sup>th</sup> were examined early the next morning and although one more push would be made, *Chopper* was abandoned. Montgomery was taking no chances of defeat.

In two months 8<sup>th</sup> Army had not become an amphibious army, nor the Mediterranean fleet an amphibious fleet. It took time and operational opportunity to build confidence and capability.<sup>45</sup> Very different views still existed within the army and navy regarding the requirements of effective amphibious operations and the landing craft situation may have been symptomatic of this difference. Vice Admiral Ramsay, a sailor who had substantial experience of and a sympathetic approach to working with the army, reflected on his experience at the end of 1943. Eventually, his thoughts were firmed up in paper for distribution. He noted that,

When planning with Army officers I am always disturbed by the blind trust which they have that the Navy will be able to do for them exactly what has been planned. It is noticeable, for example, that they will try to tie down naval officers to give definite assurances on timing of movements. On

<sup>44</sup> TNA; PRO, Adm 202/87 (40 Commando War Diary), Manners to an unidentified general, 16 August 1943.

<sup>45</sup> See Barbey, D., *MacArthur's Amphibious Navy: Seventh Amphibious Force Operations, 1943-1945*, Annapolis, 1969.

landing at the exact spot on the coast in the dark etc., etc., in complete disregard of the uncertain character of the elements and of marine internal combustion engines. I am convinced this arises from the Army habit of making a firm and fixed plan which prior to an attack is buttoned up to the last button and only subsequently becomes fluid. The Navy are accustomed to plan on a more elastic basis and we are prepared to amend our plan and to improvise at any time to accord with prevailing conditions and circumstances. It is most important in combined operations that the Army should not receive the definite assurances that they will demand if only to ensure that they are mentally prepared, when the operation takes place to amend their plans and to improvise.<sup>46</sup>

It was a difficult situation. Ramsay acknowledged that all combined operations rest on the battle the army must fight when it is ashore, but, from his perspective, the army demanded unrealistic precision and wanted to "overinsure" from the sea. The navy would do what it could with the resources it had. The army needed the assurance that the phase at sea would be completely secure for its battle on land to proceed as planned. Until the army and the navy got to understand each other better, problems would arise. "War experience is now bringing us to the time when the Army will know and understand our problem and when we shall fully appreciate theirs; the sooner the stage is reached, the better will it be for all."<sup>47</sup>

Although Ramsay may have been right in the light of Operations *Neptune* and *Overlord* (Normandy 6 June 1944), a retrospective acknowledgement of how the differing viewpoints influenced events in July 1943 on Sicily was never made by the senior commanders of the army or the navy, thus leaving the cancellation of *Chopper* inadequately explained to most who participated. When Montgomery sent 8<sup>th</sup> Army across to Calabria on 3 September (Operation *Baytown*) it was with the most ferocious bombardment possible - most of which fell into empty countryside. It was over-insurance, but in some respects he was justified. Operations *Avalanche* (Salerno, 9 September 1943 ) and *Shingle* (Anzio, 22 January 1944) showed that the Allies had much more to learn about amphibious operations against a determined enemy.

<sup>46</sup> University of Cambridge, Churchill College Archive (CCA), Ramsay Papers, RMSY 8/30 Lecture on Combined Operations, p.21 (first page of the lecture). Earlier versions of this paper, dating from September 1943 and correspondence relating to it can be found in RMSY 8/22. I am grateful to an anonymous referee who alerted me to this paper and to both referees who made several useful suggestions for the improvement of this paper.

<sup>47</sup> CCA, RMSY 8/22, Lecture on Combined Operations, 1943, 'The Assault Plan' and 'Conclusion'. In this lecture Ramsay was discussing logistics and the administrative plan when he used the word, overinsure, but the same word could be employed to describe the desire to have everything at sea go well so it did not interfere with the military plan. The subject of different expectations within the army and navy requires more work on it, but the caustic remarks about the performance of navy during the landings on Sicily by Major General S. Kirkman (CO. 50<sup>th</sup> Division) in his personal diary, despite the success of the landings, suggest that there were serious differences in expectations. See KCL, LHMA, Kirkman, 10 July 1943