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1940



Glider Pilot Regiment 1944



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7th Flight C, Squadron

The Soft Under-belly?

By Bernard Halsall MC

It was June 1943 and North Africa was in Allied hands. At a watering point near Mascara in about 120 miles inland from Oran, we met up with over 100 wooden crates, each of which contained a WACO Glider, an American product which none of us had seen before. We had to assemble these craft, and then, towed by U.S Dakotas, we each had a very few flights and no more than two of them at night, trying to get familiar with the glider.

Within three weeks we were to embark on the first ever-mass flight of gliders by the Allies, a 600-mile flight over the Atlas Mountains, flying at 9000 feet to land near Sousse in Tunisia. Severe turbulence was experienced over the mountains and the heat in the cockpit was extreme. The flight, which took over four and a half-hours and was by far the longest flight any of us had done. About ten gliders failed to make the full trip.

We had just over a week to study photographs and for all the other activities in preparation for the attack, culminating in a Church Service on the edge of an olive grove. The 1st Air Landing Brigade which comprised about 1250 men, flying in 130 gliders was to land on Sicily, in darkness, about 8 hours before and 25 miles ahead of the main assault by the 8th Army. This would be the first return to European soil by the Allies since Dunkirk. The objective was to land near to and then to capture by midnight, the Ponte Grande, a bridge over both a river and a canal, just south of Syracuse. During the night we were to occupy Syracuse town which the 8th Army units would reach before 11am.

I was airborne around 7pm The navigational plan was elementary. Fly due east to Malta, round the

beams of three searchlights, which would be pointing vertically upwards, and then due north to the target. To avoid enemy radar, we were to fly at under 100 feet for the estimated flying time of 4 1/2 hours!! To make the flight even more hair-raising, a 30mph wind caused navigational and stability problems.

At about 11.15pm I saw the coastline (of Europe!) but did not readily recognize it from the photographs we had been shown. The tug was anxious to return home (the tugs, flown by the U.S.A.F, were unarmed and unarmored, even lacking self-sealing petrol tanks) and as we had seen firing on the ground as well as flak coming up at us, we released at about 800 feet. At about 250 feet we crossed the shoreline and flew on into the darkness. We hit the first tree of the olive grove at about 80mph

Several minutes later, after we had all regained consciousness and gathered ourselves together (one had a broken leg but the rest were more or less all right), we moved off in the direction of the firing. It took us about four hours to reach the bridge, picking up stragglers and having to fight through several enemy positions. One glider had landed only 20 yards away and had captured the bridge without difficulty. However, most of the gliders had been released too early and had come down in the sea. Many men were drowned, others were scattered over scores of miles. With the arrival of our party there were just 87 of us to hold the bridge.

During the rest of the night and throughout the morning the enemy launched a series of vicious counter-attacks. Completely surrounded by an estimated 1000 enemy and with very little ammo left, the eight survivors finally surrendered at about 3pm. About 20 minutes later the 8th Army arrived and their tanks swept over the bridge we had managed to occupy long enough to prevent it being destroyed.

History had been made that night of the 9th July 1943. This was the first mass landing by glider behind enemy lines by the Allies. Four more were to follow before the end of hostilities.

Bernard went on holiday to Sicily in September 1996, the first time he had been back in 53 years. Time did not allow a visit to his landing site (the olive grove has since been built on), but he saw the new bridge which has replaced his and he did go to the War Graves Cemetery where so many of his comrades are buried and commemorated. This must have been a highly emotional experience and, on your behalf, I thank Bernard for recalling a seldom remembered but historic mission. It started the assault on what Churchill called "the Soft Under-Belly of Europe". To those who took part in the Campaign, those words were far from apt.