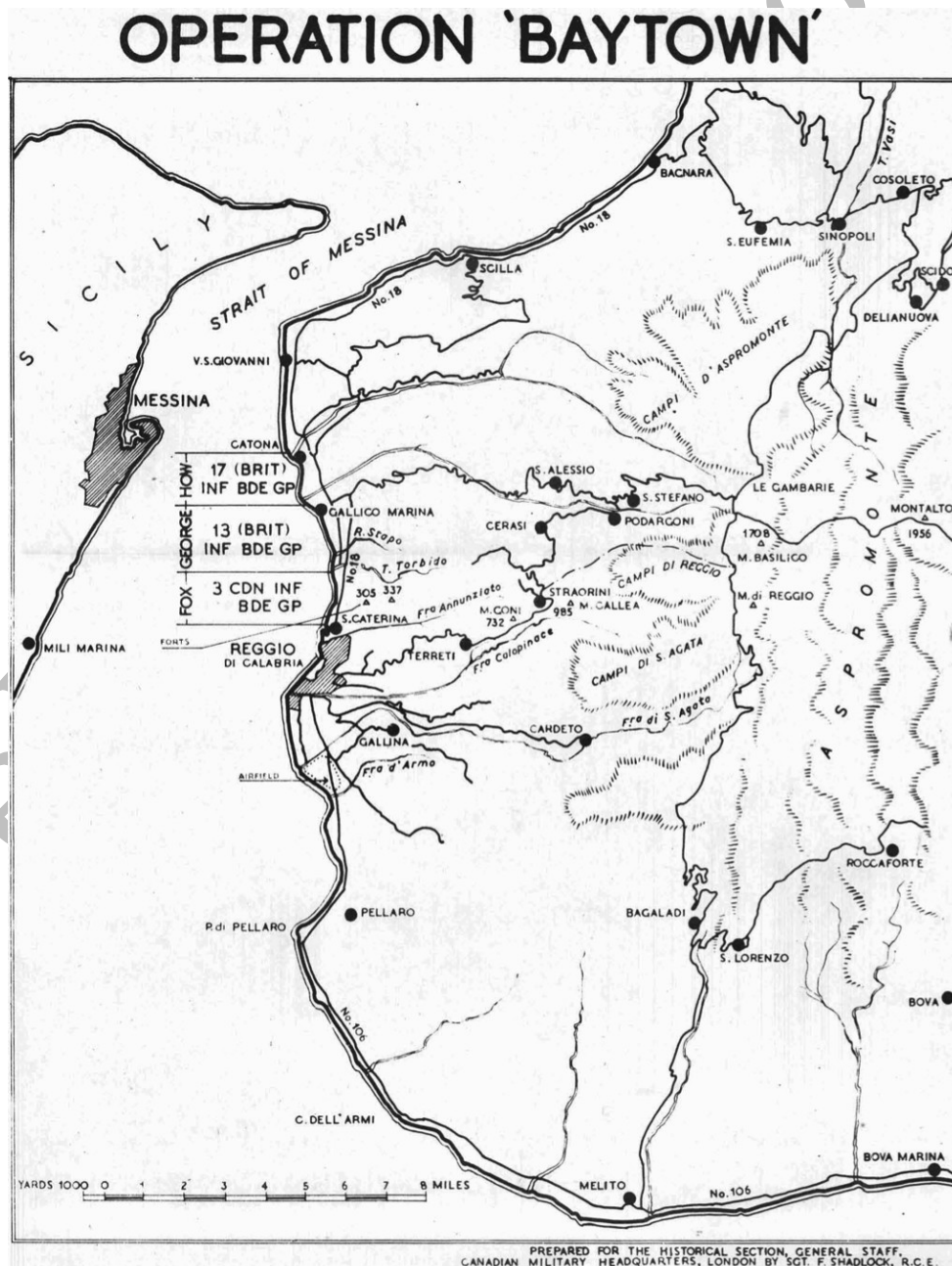


## Operation Baytown, The Calabria Landings, September 3rd 1943

### The Allied Plan For Invading The Italian Mainland

The final plan for the invasion of the Italian mainland, called for the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps of the British Eighth Army under General Bernard Montgomery to land on the Italian mainland at Calabria. Primarily this was to satisfy the Italian condition that Allied troops make a landing on the Italian mainland prior to them signing an armistice. Montgomery's orders were to secure the Messina Straits for the navy and to pin down as many German divisions as possible in the south so they could not be used against the main invasion to be made by the US 5<sup>th</sup> Army at Salerno. However should the Germans refuse to be drawn into remaining in the south, the task of the Eighth Army was then to exploit its bridgehead north with all possible speed until it was in a position to turn the left flank of the considerable forces, the enemy would bring to bear against the US 5<sup>th</sup> Army.



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The US 5<sup>th</sup> Army consisted of the 6<sup>th</sup> US Corps and the 10<sup>th</sup> British Corps. It was commanded by the American, General Mark Clark and was to land at Salerno in order to seize Naples and cut off the German forces in the south. Montgomery informed his corps commanders of the plans on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1943 and though he did not agree with them, he would carry them out.

### **The Landing Beaches**

The '**beaches**' selected for landing of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps extended north from the port of Reggio di Calabria to the village of Gallico Marina and fell within the '**Operative Sectors**'; FOX, GEORGE and HOW, which conformed with an Allied alphabetical partitioning of the entire strait. Within each operative sector, there would be up to three landing beaches designated using colours. In the final plan, HOW Sector extended from Catona south to the mouth of the River Pritola (not marked on the maps), then GEORGE Sector extended from the River Pritola to the walled mouth of the Torrento Torbido and FOX Sector extended south from the mouth of the Torbido to Porto di Reggio.

### **The Opposing Forces**

The coastal defences on the FOX, GEORGE and HOW beaches were not considered formidable and were confined to pillboxes mounting machine guns with the occasional one mounting an Italian 47mm anti-tank gun. Little wire was present on HOW and GEORGE beaches and none on FOX beaches. Inland the coastal defence guns were reported to be incapable of firing on the beaches as they were designed to fire seawards at naval vessels. Also there were forts inland and some of these were found to be equipped with 280mm howitzers with a range of 8,000 yards but again were not sited to cover the beaches.



On the left example of an Italian Pillbox, South of Noto in Sicily and on the right a mock up of the inside of an Italian Pillbox exhibited at the 'Museo della Sbarco', Catania, Sicily. GJT©

The doubtful honour of holding the front line in the Calabrian peninsula was given to the 211<sup>th</sup> Coastal Division, which had its headquarters at Cittanova, on the lateral road from Gioia to Locri. Its coastal battalions, interspersed with some dismounted cavalry groups (second-line troops formed into units about 500 strong), were spread thinly around the toe from the Gulf of Gioia to the Gulf of Squillace. Behind them a battalion of Blackshirt militia and a battalion of paratroops of the 184<sup>th</sup> (Nembo) Division were stationed in the Aspromonte to provide some necessary stiffening. All in all these defence forces could not be regarded as formidable; the estimated strength at the "Fox" beaches was no more than two platoons of infantry, possibly supported by a machine-gun section (p193, The Canadians in Italy).

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In addition in the south of Italy at the time of Operation Baytown was the German LXXVI (76<sup>th</sup>) Panzer Corps. This consisted of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Division, the 29<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadiers and the 26<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. The 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Division was in Apulia to give security to the Foggia airfields. The 29<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division was the southernmost German formation in Calabria and were to fight a delaying action to protect the northward move of the 26th Panzer Division. Of the 29<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadiers, the closest formations to the Baytown beaches were the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, which were in the Aspromonte region deployed south of Bagnara, covering the main traffic arteries.

### **The Calabria Landings September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1943**

The initial invasion of southern Italy, Operation Baytown, was launched on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1943 on the fourth anniversary of Britain declaring war on Germany and was carried out by the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corps consisting of the British 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division. The operation was carried out on a three brigade front with the British 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade Group landing in 'HOW' Sector, the 13<sup>th</sup> British Infantry Brigade Group landing in 'GEORGE' Sector and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Brigade Group landing in 'FOX' Sector.

As the Straits of Messina were relatively narrow the operation was executed as a shore-to-shore landing craft operation. The British and Canadian forces embarked in landing craft from beaches in Sicily near Mili Marina. They then crossed the straits to the coast of Calabria travelling an average of 12,000 yards. The flotillas of Landing Craft Assault (LCA) and Landing Craft Mechanised (LCM) that comprised the initial assault wave being joined by DUKWs and Landing Craft Infantry - Large (LCI(L)) in subsequent waves.

The flotillas of the first wave were led in by Motor Launches and guided by directional tracer from Bofors guns along with four vertical searchlight beams to allow coxswains to keep their bearings. Still, navigation proved difficult as the rapid and irregular currents, whirlpools, and winds in the Straits of Messina hampered navigation and though the night was starlit, with no moon, the Eighth Army artillery barrage accompanying the assault contained a high number of smoke rounds. These smoke rounds were also intended to indicate the location of the beaches but unfortunately instead caused the navigation lights of the guiding Motor Launches, which the LCA coxswains' were to follow, to be confused with other lights on the opposing shore.

Despite the problems the first wave of landing craft arrived on H-Hour, at 04:30, approximately an hour before first light on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1943. These troops of the British 5th Division and Canadian 1st Division of the Eighth Army were the first Allied troops to land on enemy held mainland Europe as an invasion force.

### **Aftermath**

The preconditions for an Italian Surrender having been fulfilled by Operation Baytown the Italians signed their surrender at Syracuse, Sicily, on the night of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September.

The German divisions were not to be drawn into staying in the far south of Italy and the Eighth Army had to therefore pursue them north. Two further amphibious assault landings were carried out by the Eighth Army to disrupt the German withdrawal and at least one further landing at Sapri. The two amphibious assault landings were Operation Hooker at Bagnara on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September and Operation Ferdy at Porto San Venere on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September. The landing at Sapri however was probably only to support the forward units of the Eighth Army as they approached Salerno to join up with the US 5<sup>th</sup> Army.



Postcard formerly Tom Turton's of the Lido at Reggio di Calabria (by kind permission of J. Farndale©)

### **Royal Naval Beach Commandos and Beach Bricks**

Both N and G Royal Naval Beach Commandos (RNBC) were deployed for Operation Baytown. N RNBC was landed with the British 5th Division and worked with the 33 Beach Brick in HOW Sector and 32 Beach Brick in GEORGE Sector. G2 and G3 of G RNBC landed with the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division and worked with 34 Beach Brick. G1 would land a few days later with 20<sup>th</sup> Beach Group supporting the 231<sup>st</sup> 'Malta' brigade in a subsidiary landing codename Operation Ferdy at Porto San Venere.

#### **Excerpt Taken From R.N. COMMANDO "N" By Lt Commander Maurice Vernon Redshaw RNVR Beach Master of N2 during Operation Baytown**

We sailed from Oued Merse in LCI(L) 241 (Lt John Reid RNVR), leaving behind us in hospital, Able Seamen Dowle, Ramsker, Smith, Spencer, Stanton and Sykes, suspected malaria had taken its toll. LCI(L) 241 arrived in Grand Harbour Valetta on August 22nd 1943, and sailed the next day to Catania in Sicily. From Catania village on the slopes of Mount Etna near Misterbianco and joined up with Tactical H.Q. of British 5th Division, here we lived in an olive grove, some of the boys slinging hammocks between the trees, we learned that we were to spearhead the assault force across the Messina Straits, and so become part of the first landing of British in the mainland of Europe, while we were preparing for the operation General Montgomery called and gave us a pep-talk and promised us a larger barrage than had been arranged for Alamein, it would be a new experience for us to go in under an Army barrage, Operation BAYTOWN was on. For ten days we had a lazy time basking in the sun and generally resting, my bodyguard (Syd Kipling) had organised a hammock for me, Tom (Lt Thomas Turton RNVR, BM N3) had a stretcher propped up on ammunition boxes, life would have been wonderful but for the flies of which there were millions- worse than we had in Algeria, the coming operation was referred to by the troops as 'Operation Suicide', owing to the fact that our job was to bring the main enemy forces down onto us while a further landing was to be made further up the coast a few days later behind the enemy engaging us.

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During the night of September 2nd-3rd 1943 we embarked in an LCA at a village called Milli Marina, my bodyguard and myself embarked in a motor launch which was to lead the assault and show the LCA's towards the right beach, our target was Gallico Marina just north of Reggio di Calabria, the Straits were about four miles just there and a strong current played havoc with our navigation, in addition to Montgomery's barrage our gunners were firing tracers on fixed lines over our heads for us to steer by, also in Sicily two searchlights were pointing skywards to assist us to make a fair course, both ideas were very good, but we found that all was soon obscured by smoke from the guns, we learned later that the opposition was light but, judging from the amount of stuff falling in the water around us quite a few of our guns must have been firing short. "H" Hour was 0430 September 3rd 1943 and we landed at that time on **How Green Beach** and settled down to controlling our end of the ferry service carrying the follow-up troops.

The enemy had already started to withdraw northwards, so it was decided to bring the main body across to Gallico Marina, we set up our H.Q. at the back of the beach, Tom and I shared a two-storied cottage there: cattle downstairs, Tom (who was pre war the publican of the Black Bull Inn in Whetstone) and I upstairs, the cottage was painted white, so I obtained a pot of black paint and wrote the sign 'BLACK BULL' on the front wall together the appropriate Whetstone telephone number, it must have been re-assuring to some of the troops landing on the days that followed. Our ferry service was so good that we received a signal from Montgomery congratulating us and saying that it was one of the major factors, which enabled the Army to advance so rapidly, and resulted in the linking up of the 5th and 8th Armies.

We had a number of callers at our cottage on the beach including George Formby and Beryl, the Western Brothers also called, they had used the 'Black Bull' at Whetstone and knew Tom. We had the occasional air-raid and during one of these Able Seaman Thomas was wounded and evacuated to Messina, also while we were there one of our Able Seamen went mad, chasing a woman through the streets of Gallico with an axe, we disarmed him and placed him under close arrest, apparently it was difficult to have him certified so a very kind doctor with 5th Division at the local Casualty Clearing Station made out a report to the effect that the seaman was possibly suffering from some obscure disease, I passed him on to the Navy sick bay in Reggio and we never saw him again.



Above, left to right Captain Williams, Lt Thomas Turton RNVR and Lt. Gibbs Photograph kindly given to the author by L. Kipling  
"Tom was always for a lark about, in a dry way, here he has joined the Army." GJT©

[Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942 -1945](#)

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RN Commando records at the TNA

RAF Beach Units, Baytown [http://www.rafbeachunits.info/List\\_of\\_Operations/BAYTOWN/baytown.html](http://www.rafbeachunits.info/List_of_Operations/BAYTOWN/baytown.html)

**Another account of landing during Operation Baytown from Fox Sector**

[BBC WW2 People's War - Activities in Sicily & Italy by John Bartlett](#)

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