

RN Beach Commandos and Operation Avalanche

The Salerno Landings September 9th 1943

Prelims

Three Royal Navy Beach Commandos, Dog, King and Mike were involved in Operation Avalanche, which Winston Churchill described just prior to the operation being launched as 'the most daring we have yet launched', primarily because it was the first large-scale opposed landing to be made on the European continent.

The Aim

The aim of Operation Avalanche was to land a force on the Italian mainland near the port of Naples with the object of the seizure and development of that port as a base for further operations.

Why Salerno?

The allies had little hope of strategical surprise because they had air supremacy and would not give up such a valuable advantage and Naples was the only major Italian port on the Mediterranean coast that was within the range of Allied fighter aircraft at that time and the Allies would need such a port to be able to supply the army. To assault the heavily defended port directly invited disaster, they would have to land near Naples and build up a large enough force and supplies to assault the port.

There were three possible beaches, Gaeta, Mondragone and Salerno. Gaeta was furthest being 80 km north of Naples and beyond single engine fighter cover. Mondragone is about 45 km north of Naples and is on the other side of the broad Volturno River; also the beach gradients were not well suited to landing craft. This left Salerno which was south of Naples and within range of RAF fighters⁽¹⁾ and had no major disadvantages except as General Eisenhower was to say "it's logic was obvious to the enemy as well as to us" and went in to the landing with no "illusions of surprising the enemy" but believed that air and naval gunfire support would allow the allies to land successfully.⁽²⁾

The German General in charge of defending Italy, Kesselring viewed the bay of Salerno as 'uniquely suitable' for an amphibious landing and planned accordingly and during August General Rommel held a full dress rehearsal of an invasion on its beaches!

Allied Organisation

In September 1943 General Eisenhower was Supreme Commander in the Mediterranean and his three service commanders were General Sir Harold Alexander, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham RN and Air Marshall Sir Arthur Tedder.

The allied landing force for Operation Avalanche was the US 5th Army an Anglo-American force commanded by the American Lieutenant-General Mark Clark consisting of the British X corps and the American VI Corps and had a total of eight divisions and two brigade sized units.

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942 - 1943

The British X Corps was commanded by Lieutenant General Richard McCreery and consisted of the 46th (Oak Tree) and 56th (Black Cat) divisions and the 7th Armoured Division with the British 2nd Special Service Brigade, consisting of No.2 Commando and 41 Commando Royal Marines under Brigadier Robert Laycock and a brigade of US Rangers with three US Ranger battalions under Colonel William Darby.

The American VI Corps was commanded by Major General Ernest Dawley and consisted of the 3rd, 34th, 36th and 45th divisions with the 82nd Airborne Division available to conduct operations from the air.

Under Admiral Cunningham were all allied naval and amphibious forces in the Mediterranean and it was the Western Naval Task Force commanded by Vice-Admiral H. Kent Hewitt USN which was to have the responsibility of transporting, landing and supporting the 5th Army. The Western Naval Task Force included ships from the US Navy, Royal Navy and the Dutch and Polish navies, including merchant shipping the landing involved around 900 ships.

The Western Naval Attack Force was further subdivided into the Northern Attack Force and the Southern Attack Force. Also because the air cover provided by Northwest African Coastal Air Force and Malta Air Command was at the edge of the range that could be provided by land-based air cover, additional air cover was provided by a carrier group, 'Force V', which in turn had a protection group, 'Force H'.

The Northern Attack Force, which was mainly Royal Navy, was commanded by Commodore G.N. Oliver RN and would take the British X Corps to the Northern Attack Area. The Southern Attack Force, which was mainly US Navy, was commanded by Rear-Admiral John L. Hall USN and would take the American VI Corps to the Southern Attack Area.

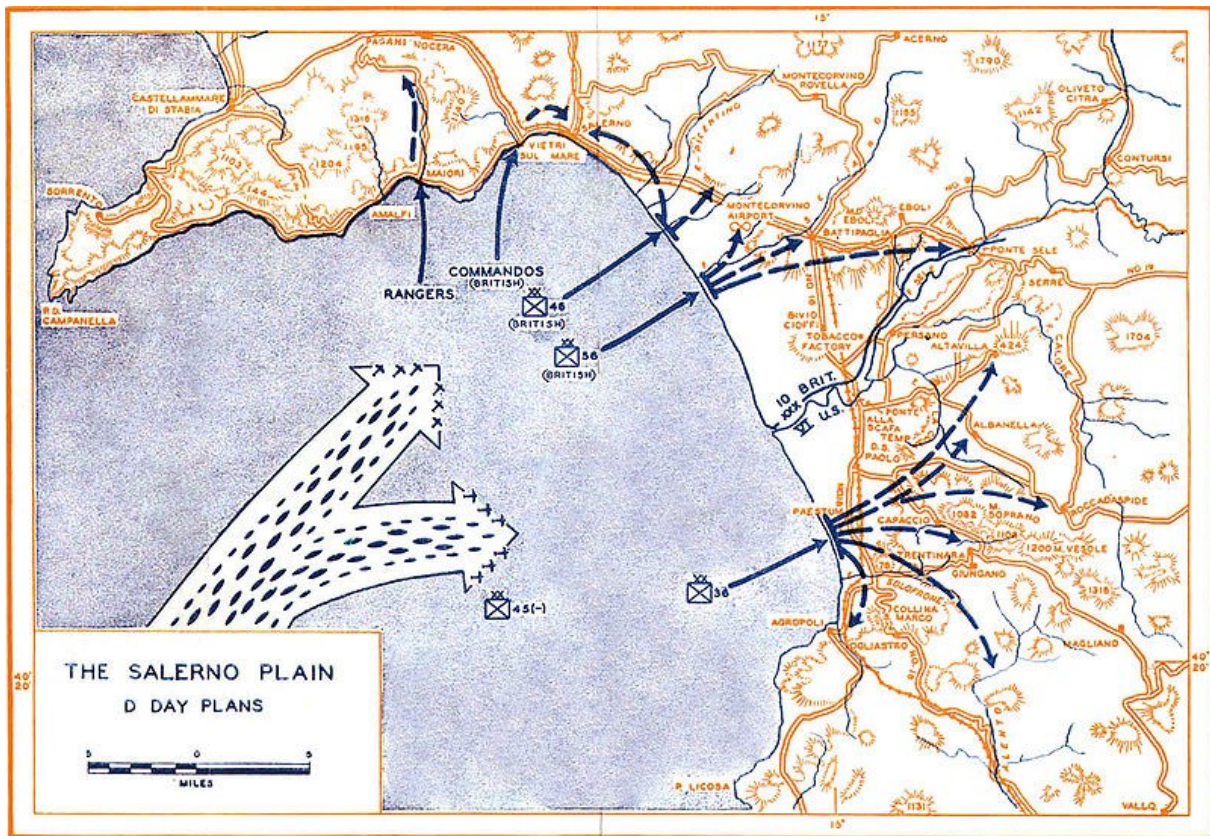
The Salerno Beaches

Within the Northern Attack Area, there were three designated beaches, which were, from north to south Uncle, Sugar and Roger sectors. Uncle was further subdivided north to south into Red and Green, whilst the other two beaches were subdivided into Amber and Green. Uncle and Roger beaches lie adjacent to each other to the South of Salerno town between the River Picentino to the north and the River Tusciano to the South, Roger beach being just south of the Tusciano.

The one designated American sector in front of Paestum in the Southern Attack Area was subdivided north to south, Red, Green, Yellow and Blue beaches.

To the north of Salerno the Ranger and Commando Brigades landed at Maiori 'Z' sector and Vietri 'X' sector respectively. The rangers were to dominate the mountains of the Sorrento Peninsular and the commandos were to capture and hold the passes through to Naples.

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942 - 1943



The Battle for the Salerno Beachhead

The initial landing was carried out on the 9th of September 1943 by two British divisions the 46th and 56th in the Northern Attack Area south of Salerno and the American 36th division landing in the Southern Attack Area further south with a Commando and Ranger Brigade landing to the north of Salerno. The American 45th Division was initially held in reserve at sea.

During the run in the allied fleet had been spotted by German aircraft so the assault troops were expected by the German troops who were waiting with artillery and machine guns but after some heavy combat the allied assault troops were able to take the beaches and move inland.

Critically the allied plans also had an inbuilt logistics bottleneck and this was the number of landing craft available to them. It had been planned the British 7th Armoured Division would be the main element of the initial reinforcements and their first units only started to arrive on the 11th of September, at the same time at his headquarters General Alexander recognising the imminent danger at Salerno had persuaded London to let him take over eighteen Landing Ship Tank which had been in harbour at Oran en route for India, and these started to ferry infantry reinforcements to Salerno immediately⁽³⁾ but by the 12th of September the greater rate of German reinforcement had put the Allies on the defensive.

With their advantage the Germans began a series of counter-attacks from the 13th to the 15th of September. During this period the outcome the operation was in the balance and but for the weight of naval shelling fired in support of the allied troops at the German forces by US and Royal Navy warships there could have been a major allied debacle like Dieppe but much bigger.

In desperation cooks and mechanics were used to plug gaps in the defence and on

[Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942 - 1943](#)

the 13th troops from the 82nd Airborne Division were dropped into the beachhead to go straight into battle however by the 15th of the Eighth Army under General Montgomery was getting closer and the German generals prepared to break off the battle. On the 16th of September the 8th and 5th armies made contact and the Germans withdrew in good order. On the 1st of October the Allies took Naples.

Later when Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cunningham came to write his despatches he reported his conclusion that the Navy had been the deciding factor. General Alexander disagreed and publication of the Dispatches was delayed for many months until the final version of the account was so watered down, it hardly does justice to the part played by the American and Royal Navies⁽⁴⁾.

[London Gazette - Landings in the Gulf of Salerno - published on the 2 May 1950](#)

[A letter written by Warrant Telegraphist Henry Hayles](#) started as he was leaving the beaches at Salerno on the 15th of September 1943 describes his transit to Salerno and his experiences there with Naval Party 874.

The Royal Naval Beach Commandos

The 46th Division landed on Uncle beach and the 56th Division landed to their right with Royal Navy Beach Commandos K and M on Sugar and Roger sectors respectively.

K Commando's commanding officer was Acting Commander A.A. Havers RN who was also the Principal Beach Master (PBM) for Sugar Sector.

M Commando's commanding officer was Acting Lieutenant-Commander P.U. Bayly RN (who had formerly been the Training Officer at HMS Armadillo); he was also to double up as the PBM of Roger Sector.

North of Salerno two detachments from D Commando commanded by Lieutenant-Commander J.C. Pearson RN, who was also the designated PBM for the area, were to be landed at two widely separate locations Maiori designated Z sector and Vietri X sector. Pearson commanded one small detachment of seventeen men at Maiori with the Rangers, whilst Lieutenant R.J. Franklin RNVR commanded a detachment of fifteen men, which landed with the British Commando Brigade at Vietri.

Amongst the D Commando men at Vietri was Assistant Beach Master Hugh Birley whose experiences at Salerno are recounted in '[Hugh Birley Assistant Beach Master 1943-45](#)'.

Notes

1. The Desert Air Force by Roderic Owen p211
2. Amphibious Assault – Manoeuvre from the sea, Salerno by Christopher Tuck p221
3. Salerno by Hugh Pond, p167
4. Salerno by Hugh Pond, Preface p12

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942 - 1943

Sources

Salerno by Hugh Pond first published 1961

Amphibious Assault – Manoeuvre from the sea, edited by Tristan Lovering MBE 2005

The Desert Air Force by Roderic Owen first published 1948

The Beachhead Commandos by A. Cecil Hampshire first published 1983

Beachhead Assault by David Lee first published 2004

Links

[Operation Avalanche: U.S. Navy's 4th Beach Battalion Assault on Salerno](#)

[Naples-Foggia 1943 U.S. Army Centre of Military History](#)

[Wikipedia – Invasion of Italy](#)