Airpower won its first victory over a land force. The Tuskegee Airmen saw their first combat. Not bad for one battle.

**Pantelleria, 1943**

By Herman S. Wolk

In 1943, the World War II Allies launched Corkscrew, a military operation whose aim was to seize the Mediterranean island of Pantelleria. It was an armed action meant to pave the way for an Allied invasion of Sicily and then the Italian mainland, but it turned out to be far more than that. By the time Corkscrew was finished, it had become a case study in the devastating uses of airpower and a major milestone in the exploits of the famed Tuskegee Airmen.

The importance of Pantelleria Island itself stemmed from its location—smack in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Some 53 miles to the west was Tunisia. To the northeast, 63 miles away, was Sicily. Thus, Pantelleria lay astride the route from North Africa, where the Allies earlier in 1943 had routed Axis forces, and Italy, the next target for invasion.

Between May 8 and June 11 in 1943, Allied aircraft flew 5,285 bombing sorties against targets on Pantelleria and dropped 6,313 tons of bombs on Italian and German forces ensconced there. The operation called for using sustained aerial bombardment to crush enemy power on the island and therefore reduce the number of Allied ground forces needed to capture and hold it. The plan succeeded—dramatically so. In fact, the aerial offensive marked the first time in history that an enemy land force was compelled to surrender in the absence of an accompanying ground invasion. Saturation bombing, plus limited shelling by the Royal Navy, broke the enemy's defenses and will to resist.

For all that, it was an offensive that almost didn't happen.

**Road to Pantelleria**

Allied leaders convened at Casablanca in January 1943 to
draw up plans to take the offensive against the Axis powers where they were most vulnerable—in the south of Europe. In addition to approving an around-the-clock strategic bombing offensive against Nazi Germany, Allied leaders, including Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, decided that they must conquer Sicily before pushing on to Italy and that the Sicily campaign would have to wait until the Allies had crushed German resistance in Tunisia. The Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff concluded that the Sicily operation, code-named Husky, would secure the Mediterranean sea lanes and airspace and ease the invasion of the main Italian peninsula.

This plan did not win universal support, however. Other senior officers—most notably Gen. George C. Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff—didn't want to wait. They argued for launching an attack on Sicily even before the final defeat of Nazi forces in North Africa. Marshall told Eisenhower that he was taking an overly conservative approach to his planning and that it lacked boldness and adaptability.

The final complication came from none other than Winston Churchill himself. The British Prime Minister, eager to carry the war to the enemy in Europe itself, argued for bypassing Sicily altogether and mounting a direct attack on the Italian mainland from Tunisia.

By February 1943, Marshall had come to realize that, with North African combat still going on, the Navy would not be in any position to provide aircraft carriers in support of Operation Husky. He therefore recommended to Eisenhower that the Allies first seize Pantelleria. Marshall reasoned that Allied fighter aircraft based at Marghara airfield on Pantelleria would then be in good position to support the invasion of Sicily when it did come.

Eisenhower's planners, however, concluded that attacking Pantelleria would be too tough and advised their commander not to take the chance. They wanted to postpone the invasion until the Allies had on hand forces substantial enough to defeat the Axis units in Sicily in full-scale combat.

By May, however, Eisenhower had made up his mind. He concluded that the advantages of occupying Pantelleria outweighed the disadvantages of mounting the operation under the existing circumstances. By seizing Pantelleria, the Allies could provide air cover and remove a serious Axis threat to the invasion of Sicily, he affirmed, and on May 13, 1943, the CCS approved the Pantelleria operation. Operation Corkscrew was born.

Primary responsibility for the bombing of Pantelleria fell to the Northwest African Strategic Air Forces, commanded by Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle—shown here preparing to take off on a flight over Tunisia.

Concentrated Bombing
Perhaps thinking about Marshall's comment that he lacked adaptability, Eisenhower decided the Allies would take the island without a heavy investment in ground power. He sought advice from Lt. Gen. Carl A. "Tooey" Spaatz, commander of Northwest African Air Forces. His goal: to make the reduction of Pantelleria "a sort of laboratory to determine the effect of concentrated heavy bombing on a defended coastline."

Eisenhower directed Spaatz to concentrate everything and then use his force to pound the island so that its defenders would not be able to contest a landing. The assault, Eisenhower emphasized, should be a "rather simple affair." He thought of the effect of the massive artillery pounding of Corregidor in the Philippines. His objective, he said, was "to see whether the air [forces] can do the same thing."

Under Corkscrew, Britain's 1st Infantry Division, supported by naval forces, was to occupy the island. The nearby Pelagian Islands of Lampedusa, Linosa, and Lampione would also be blasted and occupied, giving the Allies control of all the islands of the Sicilian strait.

Earlier, in 1941, British leaders had actually considered seizing Pantelleria--eight miles long and five miles wide with sheer cliffs--so as to eliminate it as an enemy base for aircraft and submarines interfering with British air and sea traffic in the Mediterranean. Churchill described Pantelleria as "a thorn in our side."

The problem had been in the making since the mid-1920s. Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, describing the Mediterranean as "mare nostrum," or "our sea," set Italians to building fortifications on the island. By the mid-1930s, construction of naval and air bases was well under way. As many as 100 Axis aircraft had been kept at Marghana airfield during the Tunisian campaign.

Although the Allied victory in North Africa greatly diminished Pantelleria's value as an Axis staging point, it still contained an underground hangar with large repair and maintenance shops.

As Corkscrew began taking more definite shape, it garnered additional opponents. At least one major player, Air Vice Marshal Arthur Coningham, commander of the Northwest African Tactical Air Force, did not share the enthusiasm of Eisenhower and Spaatz for the operation. Coningham found it difficult to take seriously the planned massive bombardment of the island. In fact, he made light of it, prompting Spaatz to recommend bluntly that he correct his attitude.

No one doubted that taking Pantelleria by air would be a significant challenge. Aerial reconnaissance over the rocky 42-square-mile island revealed more than 100 gun emplacements, embedded in rock or concrete. Additionally, pillboxes were scattered in the mountains and in the sides of cliffs.

The strength of the garrison was estimated at 10,000. This led Allied planners to worry that, if these troops were skillful and disciplined, the Pantellerian defense could be formidable. They took some comfort in the fact that, during the Tunisian campaign, anti-aircraft gunners on the island made a poor showing against Allied air attacks.

Extensive aerial reconnaissance proved a critical element throughout the operation.
The AAF's first African-American fighter pilots--later called the Tuskegee Airmen--flew P-40 Warhawks in support of the operation. Members of the 99th FS had arrived in North Africa from Tuskegee, Ala., in April 1943.

**Daily Coverage**

Beginning in late May, the Northwest African Photographic Reconnaissance Wing made at least one and sometimes two daily swings over the island. Coverage increased during June. And on June 11, the day ground forces landed, as many as five photographic missions were flown.

The reconnaissance film was interpreted at NAAF headquarters, where targets were assigned daily. Intelligence experts were assisted by Solly Zuckerman, an Oxford scientist on loan from the British Combined Operations Staff. They analyzed the aerial photographs for each bombing mission for the relation between effort and effect.

NAAF intelligence experts relied almost exclusively on aerial reconnaissance, working closely with the reconnaissance units to ensure immediate delivery of prints, to make target assignments. "The maintenance of a constant check through aerial reconnaissance of this kind constituted an essential part of the operation," stated the official Army Air Forces history.

The effect was sustained destruction of key targets, specifically coastal batteries and gun emplacements. Eisenhower and Spaatz were convinced that the Pantellerian garrison could not hold up under such a concentrated air bombardment. Their objective was to shatter the morale of the troops and civilian population.

For the duration of Corkscrew, Eisenhower's air arm was headed by Mediterranean Air Command. This was a small planning headquarters commanded by British Air Chief Marshal Arthur W. Tedder. MAC oversaw Northwest African Air Forces headed by Spaatz and comprising several operational units--Northwest African Strategic Air Forces commanded by Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle; Northwest African Tactical Air Force headed by Coningham; as well as coastal, service, and training commands. Also under Tedder were the Royal Air Force Middle East, with the US Ninth Air Force and the RAF Malta.

Eisenhower directed Spaatz to throw the full resources of the Northwest African Air Forces into the task. For Corkscrew, a joint command directly responsible to Eisenhower consisted of Spaatz; Rear Adm. R.R. McGrigor, Royal Navy; and Maj. Gen. Walter E. Clutterbuck, commanding the British 1st Infantry Division.

The US Twelfth Air Force and a number of groups from Ninth Air Force also took part in Corkscrew. One of the Twelfth units seeing its first action was the Tuskegee-trained 99th Fighter Squadron. The airmen of that unit--the first African-American
afe to fly in combat for the Army Air Forces—became known later as the Tuskegee Airmen. The 99th, which had just arrived in North Africa to reinforce the XII Air Support Command, flew P-40s as part of Corkscrew.

B-17 Flying Fortresses (top) were among the Allied aircraft that flew more than 5,000 sorties against Axis positions on Pantelleria, dropping more than 6,000 tons of bombs. Here, an AAF photo gives a bird's-eye view of a bombing raid on the island's airfield.

**Doolittle's Command**

However, the major responsibility for the attacks fell to the Northwest African Strategic Air Forces, flying from Tunisian bases, under Doolittle's command.

The NASAF comprised four groups of B-17 bombers (2nd Bomb Group, 97th BG, 99th BG, and 301st BG); two groups of B-25 bombers (310th BG and 321st BG); three groups of B-26 bombers (17th BG, 319th BG, and 320th BG); three groups of P-38 fighters (1st Fighter Group, 14th FG, and 82nd FG); one group of P-40 fighters (325th FG); and several wings of Wellingtons from the RAF Middle East Command.

While primarily providing escort for the bombers, fighter groups also conducted sweeps and dive-bombing missions.

The mission of NAAF was basically tactical—the support of land and amphibious operations. This support might be delivered by airplanes of the NATAF or by long-range bomber aircraft of the NASAF. (Except for several attacks on Ploesti, Romania, and Wiener Neustadt, Austria, in August and October 1943, Mediterranean-based aircraft did not conduct strategic operations until after creation of Fifteenth Air Force in November 1943.)

Although Doolittle’s units were totally committed to the operation, the NATAF, commanded by Coningham, was only partially devoted to the air offensive. Only units of the XII Air Support Command, based on the east side of Tunisia’s Cape Bon peninsula, and the Tactical Bomber Force were available to Coningham.
The AAF, RAF, and South African Air Force began flying scattered sorties against Pantelleria in early May. In late May, in consultation with Tedder, both Spaatz and Coningham decided that the air onslaught should be conducted in two parts. From late May through June 6, the heavy bombing would be incrementally intensified. In the second phase, from June 7 to June 11, Pantelleria would be attacked around the clock, the weight of daily attack increasing from 200 sorties to between 1,500 and 2,000 sorties on the 11th. At the same time, to confuse the enemy, targets would also be bombed in Sicily, Sardinia, and points on the mainland of Italy. Simultaneously, a naval blockade of Pantelleria would be carried out by British Adm. Andrew B. Cunningham's forces.

The Corkscrew air offensive began May 18, led by 42 B-25s, 44 B-26s, and 91 P-38s and P-40s of Doolittle's NASAF. Attacks were stepped up in late May against little enemy fighter opposition. These attacks were primarily directed against the airfield and the port of Pantelleria. There were some reports of anti-aircraft fire.

Reconnaissance in late May confirmed heavy damage to the island's airfield. Craters were evident, the main barracks and buildings near the underground hangar were destroyed by direct hits, and supply dumps had been heavily damaged. Moreover, damage to aircraft on the ground had been considerable. Coastal batteries and gun emplacements were continuously bombarded. Indications were that the bombing had badly disrupted life on the island.

On June 1, heavy bombers entered the fray, 19 B-17s, together with Wellingtons, pounded the island. By June 6, daily sorties increased to 200 or more. The number doubled or tripled over the next five days. Similarly, bomb tonnage greatly increased, 231 tons being dropped on June 5 and June 6 and intensifying with 600 tons on June 7.

Also during the first week of June, British naval vessels bombarded the harbor area of Pantelleria. On June 8, a naval task force consisting of motor torpedo boats, cruisers, and destroyers carried out a full-scale bombardment of coastal batteries and the harbor's docks.

The B-17s, along with medium, light, and fighter bombers, dropped almost 700 tons of bombs on June 8, followed the next day by more than 822 tons. Meanwhile, surrender leaflets were also dropped on the island.

Enemy fighter opposition, extremely light at first, picked up during the June 5-7 period when Me-109s and FW-190s appeared along with Italian fighter aircraft. Again, on the 10th and 11th, Sicily-based enemy aircraft appeared but failed to impede the Allied air offensive. Of several hundred enemy airplanes seen in June, 57 were definitely destroyed and 10 probably destroyed.
Allied bombing of Pantelleria was an effective demonstration of what airpower could achieve. It set the pattern for a strategy of increasingly intensive air and naval bombardment to pave the way for land forces.

**The Crescendo**

On June 10, the air offensive reached a crescendo. The Army Air Forces official history described how "wave after wave of bombers swept over former Tunisian battlefields and out across the Mediterranean." It went on to note that observers were "struck by the power of the aerial weapon which the Allies had forged."

The onslaught continued day and night, except for a three-hour lull during which another surrender call was made by the Allies. By the close of the day, more than 1,760 sorties had been flown by heavy, medium, light, and fighter bombers. On June 10 alone, 1,571 tons were released. It was one of the heaviest air attacks of the war up to that time.

With the failure of the second surrender call to meet with a response, the British 1st Infantry Division embarked on the night of June 10-11 to assault and capture Pantelleria.

As landing craft headed toward the island, B-17s delivered a final pounding to the Pantelleria harbor area. During the next 12 minutes, the Fortresses dropped tons of bombs, resulting in "simultaneous flashes and a great roar," stated the AAF official history. "Suddenly the whole harbor area appeared to rise and hang in midair, while smoke and dust billowed high, dwarfing Montagna Grande, Pantelleria's tallest peak."

At about 11 a.m. on June 11, Allied airplanes spotted a white cross on the airfield. Shortly thereafter, the first British assault wave hit the beach. The commander of the landing force contacted Pantelleria's military governor, Vice Adm. Gino Pavesi, who surrendered the island and the garrison of 78 Germans and 11,121 Italians.

A small number of captured German technicians maintained that German soldiers and anti-aircraft gunners would have made a much better showing than the island's garrison. On the other hand, the sheer intensity of bombing and its increasing weight, according to the testimony of prisoners of war, made it doubtful that the outcome would have been different.

The harbor facilities at Pantelleria had been badly damaged; the town itself had been practically destroyed; communications were a shambles; roads had been obliterated; electric power had been destroyed; and water mains were broken.

At Marghana airdrome, the airfield was cratered. Although the underground hangar had withstood a number of direct hits, except for two aircraft, all of the 80-plus enemy airplanes had been either destroyed or damaged.

The 1943 Pantellerian experience pointed the way toward the Allies' future strategy: Intensive air bombardment, increasing in tempo, and naval bombardment would precede landing operations. As the AAF official history noted: "The pattern set here was probably one that would be followed in other island operations and perhaps in the invasion of the continent itself."

Churchill hailed the Pantellerian triumph, and Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Commanding General, AAF, emphasized "the tremendous amount of bombs dropped and the negligible losses of airplanes, which speak well for planning, preparations, and execution."

The official AAF history noted, "The surrender of the Italian-held islands furnished a spectacular illustration of the intense
and violent force that the Allies could bring to bear upon the enemy. The reduction of the islands furnished the first proof of the power of such bombardments to induce surrender."

The fact was that Eisenhower's laboratory concept had paid off. Pantelleria had been conquered primarily by airpower. An invasion had not been necessary.

In a letter to Marshall, Eisenhower pointed out that many had opposed Corkscrew, noting, "I am particularly pleased that the operation turned out as it did because I personally had to make the decision for its capture in the face of much contrary advice, but I predicted that the garrison would surrender before any infantry soldier got ashore."

The Allies now intensified preparations for the assault on Sicily in July 1943. Allied airplanes operating from Pantelleria would play a critical role in that assault operation.


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