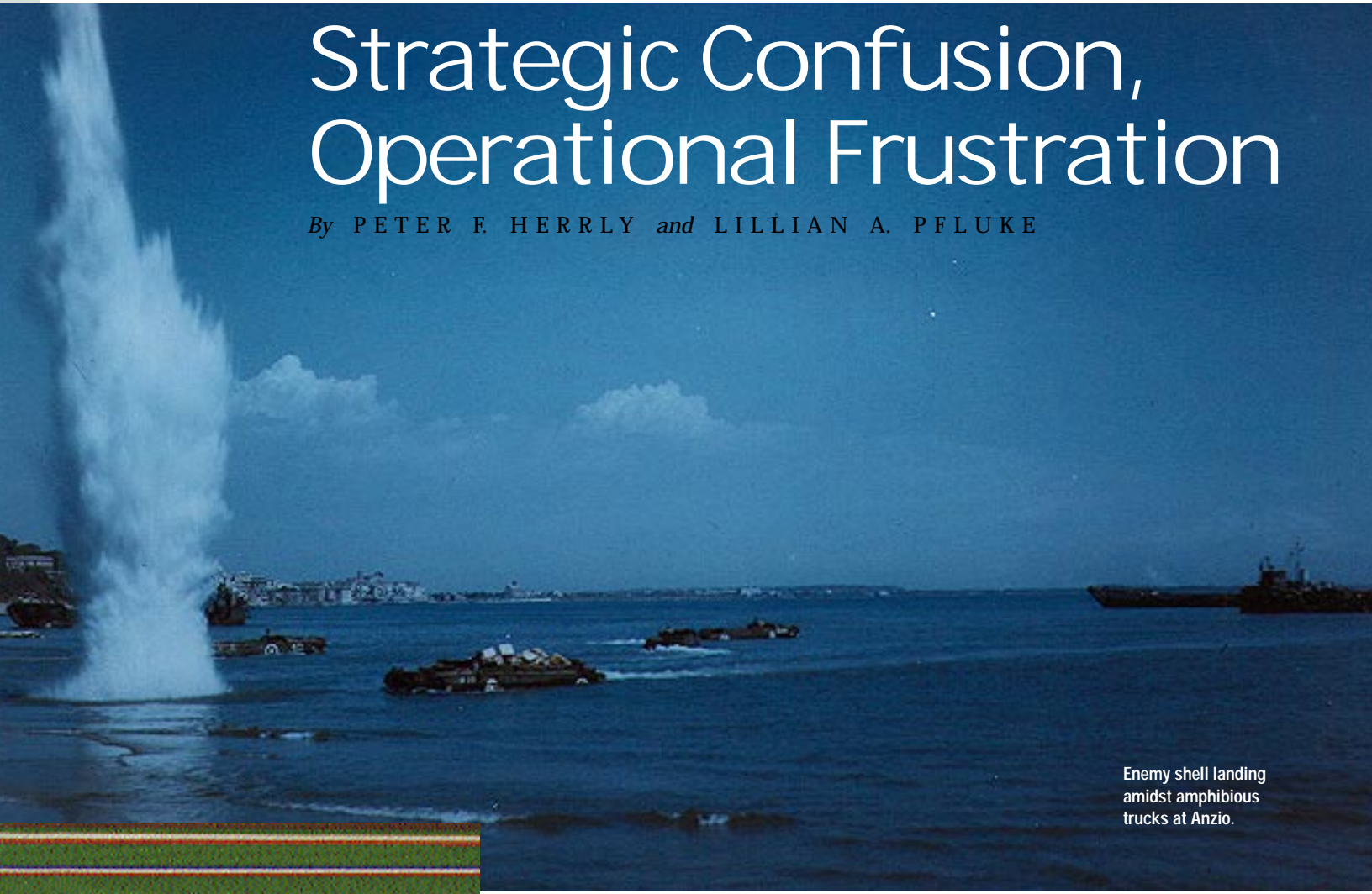


Southern Italy:

Strategic Confusion, Operational Frustration

By PETER F. HERRLY and LILLIAN A. PFLUKE



Enemy shell landing amidst amphibious trucks at Anzio.

U.S. Navy



Our Mediterranean experiences had reaffirmed the truth that unity, coordination, and cooperation are the keys to successful operations. War is waged in three elements but there is no separate land, air, or naval war. Unless all assets in all elements are efficiently combined and coordinated against a properly selected, common objective, their maximum potential cannot be realized. Physical targets may be separated by the breadth of a continent or an ocean, but their destruction must contribute in maximum degree to the furtherance of the combined plan of operation.

— Dwight D. Eisenhower ¹

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Fifty years ago, in one of the most controversial campaigns of World War II, the Allies swept out of Sicily into southern Italy with high strategic hopes but vague operational objectives. After attaining a bitterly contested amphibious lodgement at Salerno on September 9, 1943, and the subsequent capture of Naples, the campaign turned into a succession of difficult and bloody battles that still resonate with frustration: the Volturno and Rapido Rivers, San Pietro, Operation Strangle, and most anguishingly Monte Casino and Anzio. Even the final battles that broke the German Winter Line and liberated Rome on June 4, 1944, remain controversial. Military historians debate if capturing the retreating Germans—not Rome—should have been the overriding Allied objective of this concluding phase of the campaign.

During the campaign for southern Italy, Allied land, sea, and air forces fought as members of a joint and combined command, under first General Dwight Eisenhower and then General Sir Harold Alexander. In retrospect these leaders prosecuted the campaign based on what we today refer to as the *foundations of the joint operational art*: air and maritime superiority, forcible entry, transportation, direct attack of enemy strategic centers of gravity, and sustained action on land.² Eisenhower and Alexander also relied on what Joint Pub 1 calls *leverage among forces* for the joint combat power that ultimately yielded a hard-fought victory.³ This analysis examines the southern Italian campaign in terms of current doctrine to reveal how its lessons influenced the development of military operations.

Strategic Context

Campaigns link battles to strategic purposes.⁴ Joint doctrine stresses that this process must define those strategic objectives toward which campaigns are directed.⁵ The campaign for southern Italy illustrates this rule. The Allied failure to set clear and precise theater strategic goals resulted in campaign difficulties and operational frustration. The

confusion arose from diverging British and American views on operations in the Mediterranean once the North African and Sicilian campaigns inflicted significant losses on the Axis and cleared sea and air lines of communication in the southern Mediterranean. The Allies resolved their differences over whether to attempt more in the Mediterranean by agreeing to knock Italy out of the war and tie down German forces.⁶ Thus further Mediterranean operations became a strategic supporting attack for efforts in northern France. But until the last minute, the United States and Britain could not decide where and how to pursue these limited goals. America was in favor of seizing Sardinia and Corsica and Britain wanted to operate in the Adriatic and Aegean Seas with the Balkans as the objective point. They compromised on Italy. General Arnold, who headed Army Air Forces, offered a key argument in the decision: the seizure of the complex of excellent airfields around Foggia would greatly aid the strategic air offensive against Germany.⁷

The decision split the difference between opposing views, but unfortunately included some of the worst aspects of both. The Allies would land in southern Italy, although at U.S. insistence major assets—seven divisions and large numbers of landing craft and long-range fighters—would be stripped from the theater and sent to Britain. Despite this reduction in resources, Prime Minister Churchill added the capture of Rome to the campaign's objectives. Granted, Rome was a glittering prize: liberating the Eternal City carried with it political and psychological benefits. But Churchill's intervention created a strategic and operational dilemma. Knocking Italy out of the war meant the taking of Rome even though the best way of tying down large numbers of Germans with minimum forces was by fighting in southern Italy without reference to the capture of Rome. This dilemma was not fully recognized and never resolved. Thus, when Allied forces came ashore in Italy, their commanders had no clear idea of how the campaign should be prosecuted or toward what end.⁸

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Invasion of Italy (September 1943)



Campaign Design: Salerno

Eisenhower's first planning assumption was that the *synergy* of available land, sea, and air forces would prove decisive. (Joint Pub 1 states that joint synergy results "when the elements of the joint force are so effectively employed that their total military impact exceeds the sum of their individual contributions."⁹) Despite shortcomings the Allied forcible entry at Salerno demonstrated the synergistic impact of land, sea, and air integration.

Joint considerations, including the distance from Sicilian air bases and the characteristics of the available beaches, drove the choice of Salerno as a landing site. (Unfortunately, as will be seen later, the same factors

though no marines participated, Marine doctrine did

were apparent to the Germans who rapidly reacted to the landings.) The amphibious landing would not have been possible without American preparations that were prompted by the disastrous experience of the British at Gallipoli. During the interwar years the Marine Corps developed amphibious doctrine, tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment, and improved interface with naval and air power. This effort paid off in World War II: though no marines participated in the Salerno landing, Marine doctrine did. In fact, the Marine Corps trained the Army divisions that spearheaded the North African and Sicilian landings. In turn, the lessons from these invasions were crucial to the Allies in conducting the Salerno assault on short notice.¹⁰

Then as now operating in littoral areas offered major challenges as well as opportunities for joint synergy. In this regard the Salerno invasion has important implications today for joint forces. For the first time air interdiction supported amphibious lodgement (demonstrating the operational tenets of *simultaneity* and *depth* found in Joint Pub 3-0¹¹). Air attacks kept a skillful enemy off-balance and ill supplied. On the eve of the invasion, for instance, the Allies bombed Field Marshall Kesserling's headquarters near Rome and almost killed him.¹² In another illustration of indirect and often hard-to-quantify effects of strategic air attack and air interdiction, the Allied bombing of Rome contributed to the Italian government's decision to get out of the war. At the tactical level, one reason the German armored counterattacks at Salerno were piecemeal and uncoordinated was a lack of fuel caused by air interdiction which hampered movement by armored and mechanized units to the battlefield and significantly limited mounted training prior to the invasion.¹³ Allied air also helped protect Allied naval movements with timely reconnaissance, counter air, and suppression of key enemy coastal radars. For their part Allied navies effectively neutralized the U-boat threat and cleared sea approaches of mines.¹⁴ Most importantly, naval and air firepower was indispensable in helping ground forces hold off heavy counterattacks. German commanders reported that Allied naval fire and air bombardment made exploitation of their tactical successes on land impossible.¹⁵ Lastly, by the end of the Salerno



Loading LSTs at Italian port.

U.S. Army

battles, the Allies achieved air superiority and retained it for the balance of the campaign.

Nevertheless, there were significant problems in getting the greatest possible synergy from Allied forces. The impact of naval gunfire suffered from a decision to seek tactical surprise and forego such support for U.S. forces (in contrast to the British who used naval gunfire effectively in the same landings).¹⁶ Moreover, the Army Air Force's reluctance to divert P-51 fighters from "more important missions" to artillery and naval gunfire support spotting reduced the accuracy of naval gunfire.¹⁷

Counterair efforts were not fully effective early in the invasion while *Luftwaffe* attacks contributed to the distress of land and naval forces. The only available carrier air was British, but their carriers generated sorties at low rates and were insufficiently trained in ground support operations which revealed British naval aviation's long period of neglect under the Royal Air Force.¹⁸ Allied land-based air could only loiter over Salerno for short periods due to range and fuel limitations as well as delays in establishing hasty airfields on shore. Unlike General Alexander Vandegrift of the Marines on Guadalcanal, American and British commanders at Salerno failed to fashion land tactical plans to emphasize seizure and protection of airfields ashore as a first order of business. The *Luftwaffe* advantage in shorter flight time to

the beachhead led to heavy naval casualties and an anxious period for Allied forces. In terms of joint doctrine today, some of the difficulties can be attributed to ineffective command and control. Based on the North African experience with fragmented command and control of theater air, General Eisenhower had a theater air commander, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, whose pursuit of strategic attack and air superiority was necessary and sound. Below that level, Admiral Henry Kent Hewitt, USN, the amphibious force commander, was not the supported commander for the lodgement. If he been so designated—as envisioned under current joint doctrine—the theater air commander would have continued to orchestrate the air effort. But Hewitt, and

later the ground commander of the landing force, General Mark Clark, could have designated priorities and timing for air support of the landing. The effect of command relations on lodgement was demonstrated when Allied Tactical Air Forces Headquarters in North Africa informed Hewitt that air cover was being reduced, indicating that it did not share his urgent protests since he faced only a "light enemy air threat." One hour earlier Allied naval forces had suffered catastrophic hits on two cruisers and pulled the command flagship out of the area.¹⁹

Strategic Air

The campaign achieved remarkable synergy by interacting with the strategic air offensive. As early as January 1942 Eisenhower had seen the potential effects of such interaction:

We felt we were bringing a new concept, almost a new faith, to strategic thinking, one which envisioned the air coordinated with ground operations to the extent that a ground-air team would be developed, tending to multiply the effectiveness of both.

Many ground soldiers belittled the potentialities of the airplane against ground formation. Curiously enough, quite a number of Air Force officers were also antagonistic to the idea, thinking they saw an attempt to shackle the air to the ground and therefore a failure to realize the full capabilities of air attack. It was patiently explained over and over again that, on the contrary, the results of coordination would constantly advance the air bases and would articulate strategic bombing effects with ground strategy, so that

Crossing a rebuilt
bridge over the
Serchio River.



U.S. Army

as the air constantly assisted the advance of the ground forces its long-range work would contribute more effectively and directly to Nazi defeat.²⁰

This strategic doctrine was manifest in the seizure of Foggia's airfields and the subsequent formation of 15th Air Force. American heavy bombers operating from Italy gave a new dimension to the Combined Bomber Offensive, forcing the *Luftwaffe* to face in another direction and diffuse its defensive efforts. The new basing brought key production facilities in southeastern Germany within reach. More importantly it increased the effectiveness of attacks on Rumanian oil fields and German synthetic fuel plants (attacks which helped Allied land action in Russia, the Mediterranean, and northwestern France).

The drawback was an Allied failure to understand that strategic air assets carried a logistical price tag, including sealift. For instance, bringing heavy bombers of Northwest African Strategic Air Force to Foggia involved shipping assets that could have moved two ground divisions to Italy; maintaining the bombers required shipping equal to the needs of the entire British Eighth Army.²¹

Anzio

The reasonably effective operational synergy obtained at Salerno contrasted with the failure to exploit similar advantages of naval and air power at Anzio. Conceived of

as a way to break the deadly stalemate on the German Winter Line, the Anzio landing did achieve operational surprise. Naval and air power again worked well to secure a lodgement. But the Allied commanders lacked sufficient resources to expand and exploit the beachhead and exert leverage to move the Germans. General Lucas, commanding the landing force, has been criticized for lack of boldness. But Lucas had to deal with the conflicting intent of his commanders. The combined commander, Alexander, wanted him to push to the Alban Hills, but the ground commander, Clark, ordered him to orient on protecting his force. Due to constraints in amphibious lift, Lucas simply did not have the combat power for daring operational schemes. (As Joint Pub 1 states, "the operational concept may stretch but not break the logistic concept."²²)

Operational Art

The Allied failure at Anzio was partially rooted in not adhering to another operational tenet, *anticipation*, which is taken up in Joint Pub 3-0.²³ The Allies, despite superior signal intelligence, failed to anticipate German moves. Kesserling surprised Allied leaders with his stand at Salerno, the fighting withdrawal to the Winter Line, the defensive design at Casino and elsewhere, and the reaction at Anzio. The failure to anticipate German moves and countermoves stemmed in part from an Allied inability to set the proper *timing* and *tempo*²⁴ for the campaign. Forced to husband their resources, the Allied key to victory should have been taking full advantage of air and naval power and deception and surprise to avoid enemy strength. But in repeated attacks along the Winter Line the Allies sent tired, shot-up units into action where failure to concentrate, poor combined arms and air-land integration, and inability to train, plan, coordinate, rehearse, and execute were disastrous.

Contributing to Allied operational problems was Allied failure to *synchronize maneuver and interdiction*.²⁵ The poor results of Operation Strangle were partly due to an Allied failure to tie the interdiction effort to the ground maneuver scheme, and vice versa.

Finally, after examining operational aspects of the campaign for southern Italy, the inability to achieve effective *operational reach*

the Allies failed to
anticipate German
moves

appears as perhaps the most basic flaw. As previously noted the pitfall in choosing Salerno was that it was obvious to the Germans. A better lodgement would have been north of Rome, something which the enemy feared since such a landing would have cut off substantial German forces. Also as noted the major factor in picking Salerno was the range of Allied land-based air. But with the benefit of hindsight there was another option, “a campaign not fought,” as suggested by Joint Pub 3-0 in its treatment of *basing* as an indispensable foundation of joint operational art in extending operational reach.²⁶ The official Army history of the campaign states that: “No one during the early months of 1943 seems to have been thinking of Sardinia and Corsica as stepping stones to northern Italy, even though the islands would offer staging areas for amphibious operations and airfields for short-range bombardment and close support.”²⁷ Adding Malta to this line of operation by constructing expeditionary airfields there would have further increased aircraft range and sortie rates. Further benefits would have accrued from pursuing *multiple options* (like southern France) as advocated in the Marine Corps manual, *Campaigning*.²⁸ This operational approach was conceivable in 1943 since a similar approach—the interaction of land, sea, and air to bypass enemy strength—was at the core of campaign design in the southwest Pacific.²⁹

Although ultimately successful, the Allied campaign for southern Italy was flawed in two ways. First, the failure to define strategic objectives trapped the campaign designers into pursuing ambitious goals with insufficient resources. Second, Allied leadership compounded the problem by not prosecuting the campaign as efficiently as possible. Italy was not the soft underbelly that Churchill predicted, but rather a “tough old gut,” as General Clark quipped.³⁰ Nevertheless, studying this campaign vis-à-vis current doctrine illustrates some important lessons of military history for joint commanders. JFQ

NOTES

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), p. 210.

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Warfare of the U.S. Armed Forces*, Joint Pub 1 (Washington: National Defense University Press, November 11, 1991), pp. 54–57.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, Joint Pub 3-0 (Washington: Government Printing Office, September 9, 1993), pp. III-2 and 3, and U.S. Marine Corps, FMFM 1-1, *Campaigning* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 34.

⁶ Martin Blumenson, *U.S. Army in World War II: The Mediterranean Theater of Operations, Salerno to Cassino* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 8.

⁷ Blumenson, *The Mediterranean Theater*, p. 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–15. See also H.P. Willmott and Peter F. Herrly, unpublished presentation to the National War College and National War College Alumni Association 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the Campaign for Southern Italy, November 1, 1993.

⁹ Joint Pub 1, p. 48.

¹⁰ Allan Reed Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 350–51, and H. Kent Hewitt, “The Allied Navies at Salerno, Operation Avalanche—September 1943,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 79, no. 9 (September 1953), p. 961.

¹¹ Joint Pub 3-0, p. III-14.

¹² Blumenson, *The Mediterranean Theater*, p. 68.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–07. Hewitt wrote that: “In justice to all concerned, it seems certain that the [HQ NATAF message reducing air coverage because of the light enemy air encountered] was sent before the news of the attacks on *USS Philadelphia* and *USS Savannah* had been received. But the incident does illustrate the time lag in communications and the dangers of decisions being made in a rear area for a front line commander who is the one best able to appreciate the immediate tactical situation. I realized fully that a 100 percent effective air defense was impracticable and that some successful enemy attacks must be expected. But, given the overriding importance of maintaining the naval gunfire upon which the Army was then relying for the retention of its narrow foothold on the beach, I did think that this was certainly *no* time for the *reduction* of fighter cover over the ships. I am a strong believer in unity of command, particularly in tactical operations. Tactical unity of command implies that a tactical commander should have under his own control all the available instruments necessary to the successful accomplishments of his mission.”

²⁰ Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, p. 47.

²¹ Blumenson, *The Mediterranean Theater*, p. 239.

²² Joint Pub 1, p. 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. III-16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. III-19. See also FMFM 1-1, pp. 72, 75.

²⁵ Joint Pub 3-0, p. IV-19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. III-21.

²⁷ Blumenson, *The Mediterranean Theater*, p. 13.

²⁸ FMFM 1-1, p. 39.

²⁹ Joint Pub 1, pp. 25–29.

³⁰ “Tough Old Gut,” *The World at War*, videorecording, vol. 13 (London: Thames Television in cooperation with the Imperial War Museum, 1980).