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VOLUME III

THE WAR IN 1943

by

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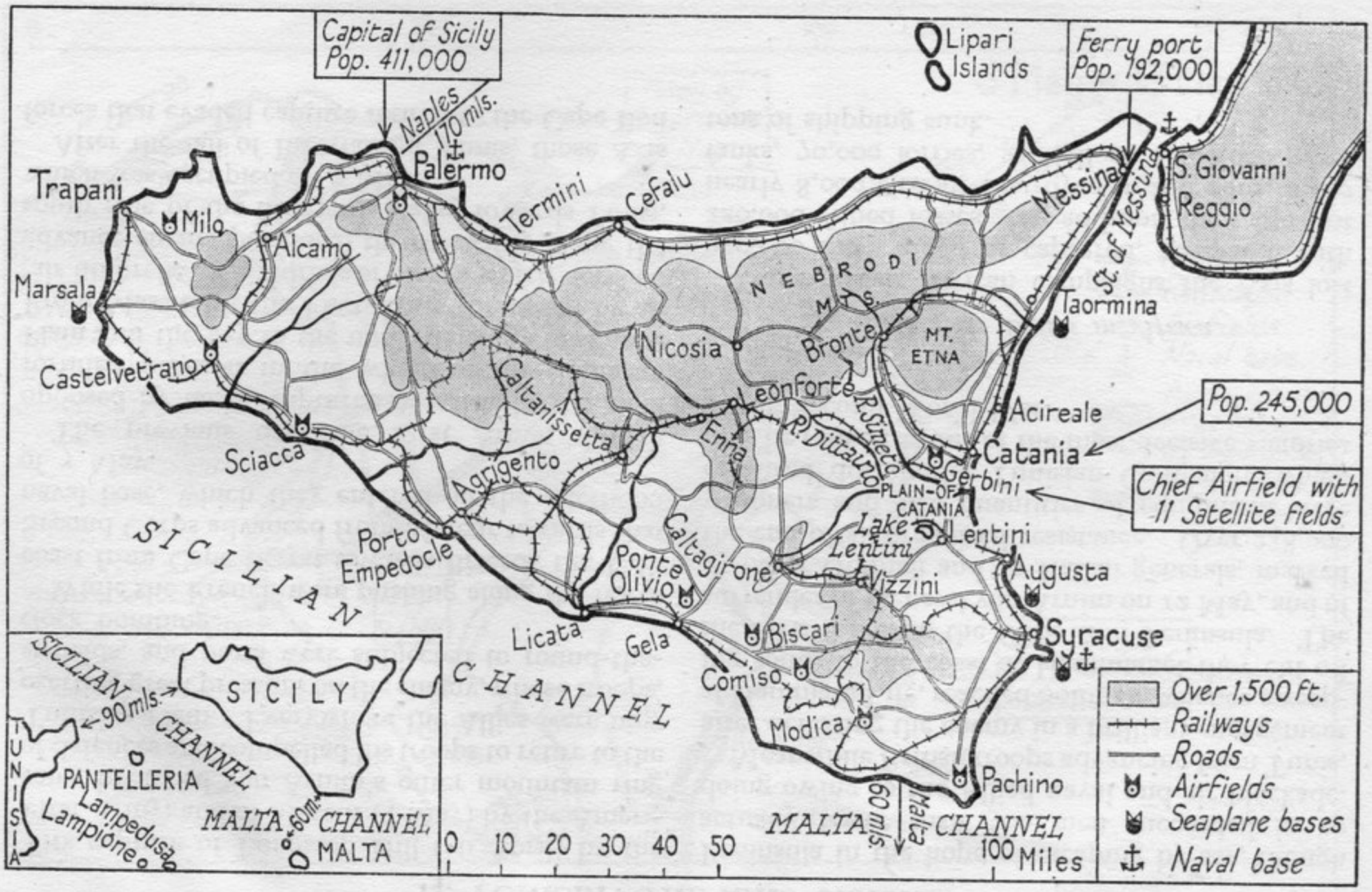

15. SICILY

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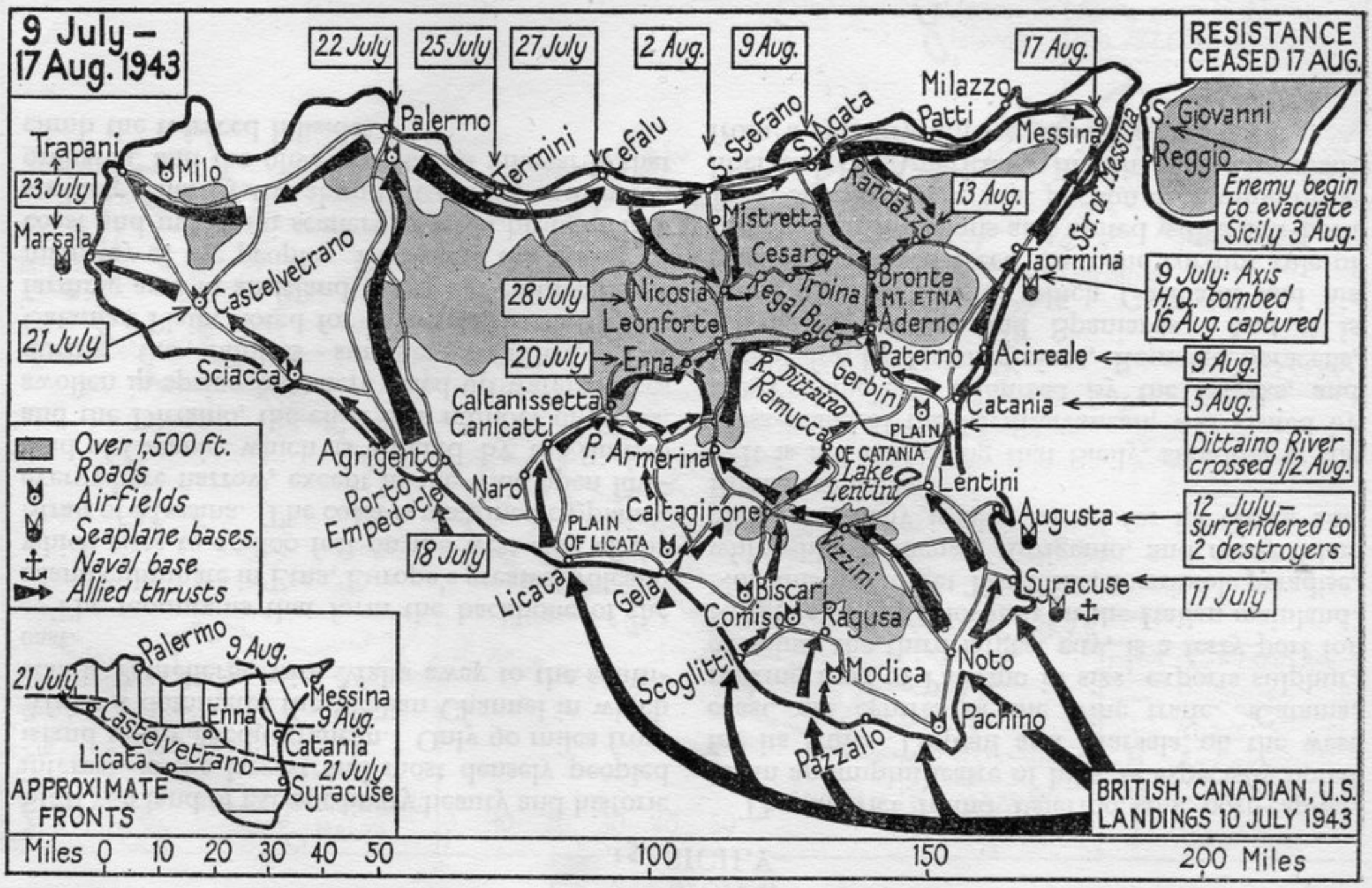
SICILY, a land of extraordinary beauty and historic interest, is the largest and most densely peopled island in the Mediterranean. Only 90 miles from Africa it dominates the Sicilian Channel in which stands Pantelleria, with Malta away to the south-east.

The mountains that form the backbone of the island culminate in Etna, Europe's greatest volcano which rises to 10,800 feet on the west side of the Strait of Messina. The coast is margined by plains, everywhere narrow, except in the wide open low-land of Catania, which is watered by the Simeto and the Dittaino, the chief of a number of rivers, swollen in spring but mere dried up watercourses during the rainless summer months. The Catanian Plain, noted for its wheat, is the richest farming area in an island where agriculture is the mainstay of the people. Elsewhere the beauty of coast and mountain scenery is often brought into striking relief by the abundant orange and lemon orchards, and the olive groves and vineyards that climb the terraced hillsides.

The district round Palermo, the port-capital, set in an amphitheatre of hills, is especially noted for its fruit. Trapani and Marsala, on the west coast, are centres of the wine trade. Catania, ranking next to Palermo in size, exports sulphur. Messina, the third largest city, is a ferry port for Reggio and San Giovanni on the Italian mainland. Nor must we forget Taormina, a veritable paradise, which like Syracuse, Agrigento, and many other places in Sicily is also famed for its Greek and Roman remains.

It is not surprising that Sicily, standing at the cross-roads of the Mediterranean, was visited by the Phoenicians, colonized by the Greeks, and fought for by Carthaginians, Romans, Saracens, Normans, French, and Spaniards. And it is fitting that an island, which Garibaldi and his gallant Thousand freed from the corrupt rule of the Spanish Bourbons and united with a new-born Italy, should be the first portion of Europe to be liberated by Americans, British, and Canadians from a tyranny unprecedented in history.



16. THE LIBERATION OF SICILY

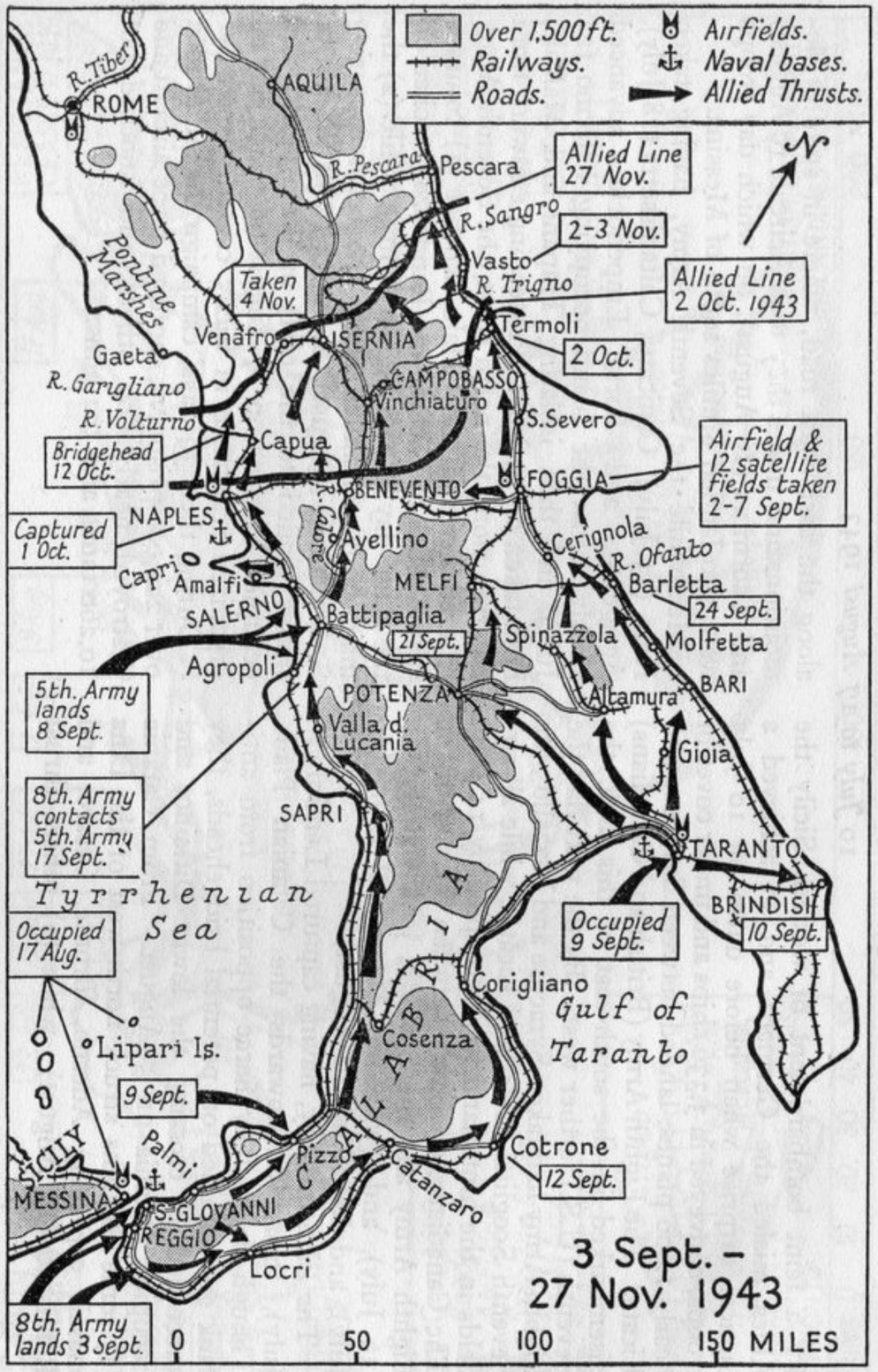
10 *July to* 17 *August* 1943

By a feint bombardment of western Sicily the Allies misled the Germans and so achieved a tactical surprise when before dawn on 10 July troops, conveyed in 3,336 ships and under cover of nearly 1,000 planes, landed between Syracuse and Licata. The Eighth Army (British and Canadians) disembarked in the south-east of this area, the Seventh (U.S.) farther west. By the next day the Eighth Army had taken Syracuse and Pazzallo ; the Seventh Scoglitti, Gela, and Licata ; while all airfields in the hinterland were occupied by 14 July. The Canadians, operating between the rest of the Eighth Army and the Seventh, took Caltagirone (16 July), and, (with the Americans) Enna (20 July), and Regalbuto (2 August).

The Eighth Army, having captured Lentini (16 July), thrust on towards the Catanian Plain. Though delayed by fierce opposition from anti-tank guns trained on potential bridgeheads, they succeeded in crossing the lower Dittaino, and occupied Catania on 5 August. From Catania (1) some columns struck north-west of the Etna massif capturing Aderno, Bronte, Cesaro, and Randazzo (13 August) ; while (2) others thrust along the east coast road, where in spite of demolitions and mines they took Acireale (9 August) and Taormina (16 August), on which day troops were also landed 8 miles south of Messina.

Meanwhile the Seventh Army, having taken Naro (13 July), Canicatti, Caltanissetta (18 July), Agrigento, and Porto Empedocle, advanced swiftly across the island occupying Palermo (22 July), and thus isolating Trapani and Marsala, both taken on 23 July. Proceeding eastward from Palermo along the north coast, the Seventh Army entered Termini and Cefalu, whence (1) columns struck south to Nicosia and Randazzo (reached on the same day as the Eighth Army), while (2) the main body continued along the coast capturing S. Stefano (2 August), S. Agata (with the aid of troops landed to the east) on 11 August, and occupied Messina on 17 August on which day all organized resistance in Sicily ceased.

During their 39 days' campaign the Allies took over 200,000 prisoners, captured 1,100 aircraft and destroyed nearly 600 others, and knocked out 10,260 tanks and 502 guns.



17. ADVANCE IN ITALY

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3 *September to* 27 *November* 1943

SIXTEEN days elapsed after all organized resistance had ceased in Sicily before the Eighth Army under General Montgomery crossed the Strait of Messina (3 September) and occupied Reggio, San Giovanni, and other ports in Calabria. On 9 September units landed at the naval base of Taranto whence while some (*a*) took Brindisi, others (*b*) struck north towards the Adriatic coast, and (*c*) north-west towards the rail and road junction of Potenza.

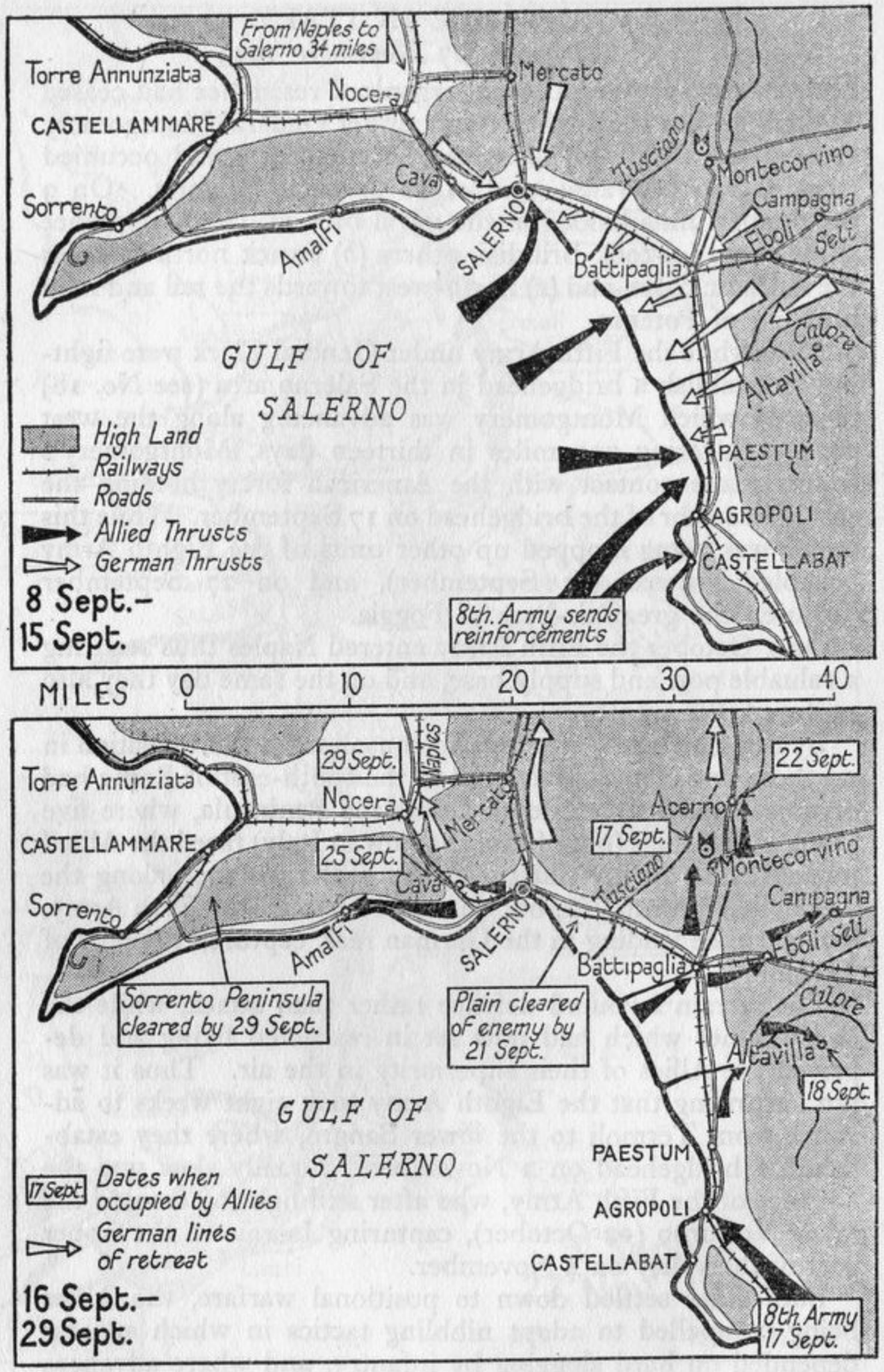
Meanwhile the Fifth Army under General Clark were fighting to establish a bridgehead in the Salerno area (see No. 18) towards which Montgomery was advancing along the west coast. Covering 200 miles in thirteen days, Montgomery's troops made contact with the American forces holding the southern sector of the bridgehead on 17 September. While this sector was being mopped up other units of the Eighth Army occupied Potenza (21 September), and on 27 September captured the great air-base of Foggia.

On 1 October the Fifth Army entered Naples thus securing a valuable port and supply base, and on the same day they also captured Benevento.

By this time the Germans had consolidated their position in northern and central Italy, and to the south-east of Rome had organized defences in depth across the Peninsula, where five German divisions (out of some 25 now in Italy) faced the Allied forces. The enemy put up a very stiff resistance along the Termoli–Volturno line, but on the 20 October the Fifth Army, by a surprise landing in the German rear, captured the port of Termoli.

The terrain favoured defence rather than attack, while the bad weather which had now set in restricted flying and deprived the Allies of their superiority in the air. Thus it was not surprising that the Eighth Army took eight weeks to advance from Termoli to the lower Sangro, where they established a bridgehead on 2 November. Equally slow was the advance of the Fifth Army, who after stiff fighting crossed the lower Volturno (12 October), capturing Isernia in the upper part of the valley on 4 November.

Both sides settled down to positional warfare, the Allies being compelled to adopt nibbling tactics in which success depended on hard slogging by infantry, and where advances were measured in yards rather than miles.



18. TOUCH AND GO AT SALERNO

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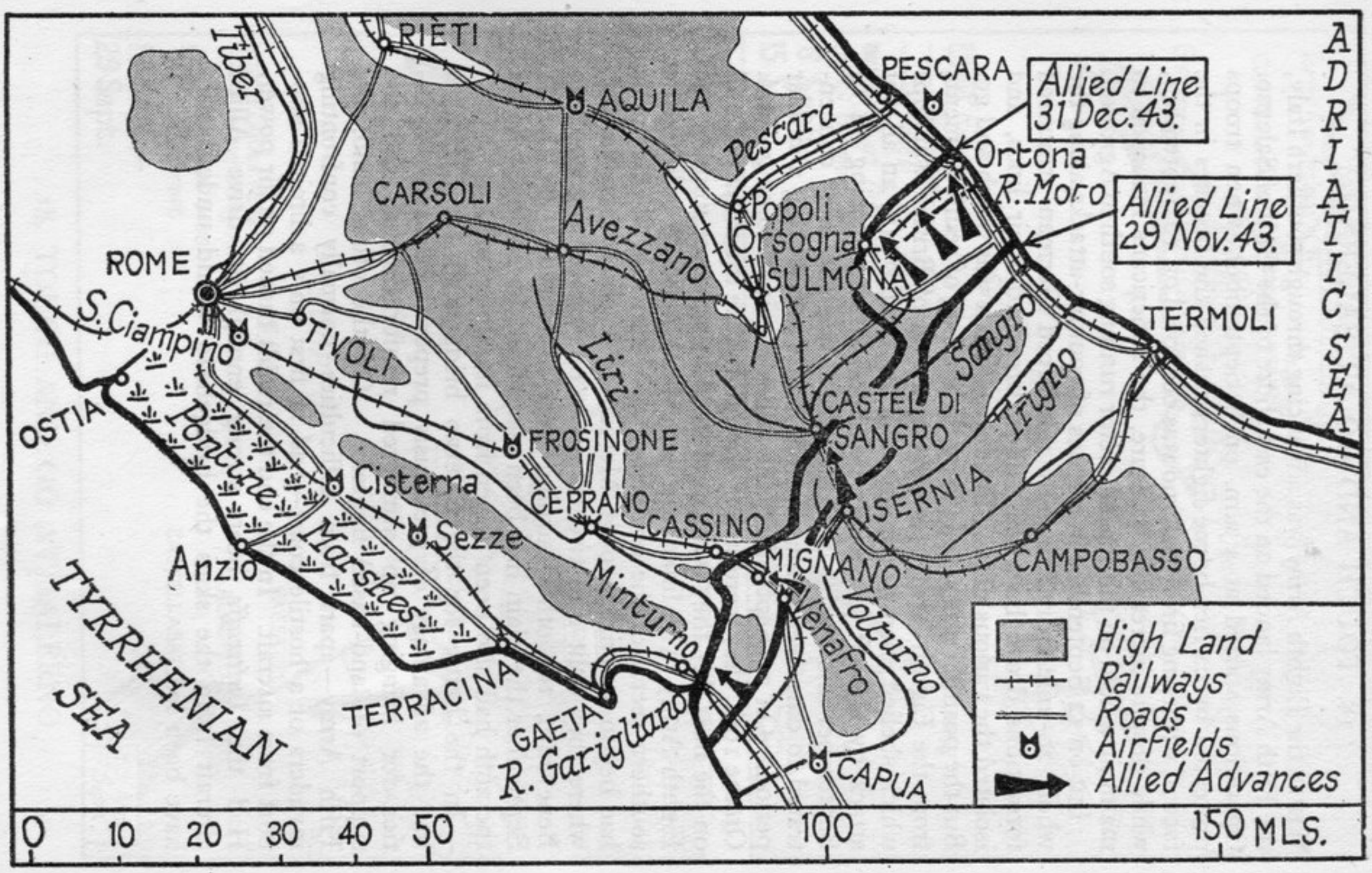
WHILE the Eighth Army was advancing through southern Italy, the Fifth Army landed on the east shore of the Gulf of Salerno. Operations started at 4 a.m. on 8 September, when troops protected by carrier-borne fighters rushed the beaches in the face of withering fire. Salerno was occupied on 10 September, while despite increasing pressure, the Americans managed to maintain a hold on the coastal sector running south to Agropoli.

But on 12 September in a series of counter-attacks along the whole 20-mile front, strongly reinforced German armoured formations drove back the Allies, breached their lines, and isolated the various units. For three days it was touch and go. But the position was saved (1) by the landing of reinforcements from the Eighth Army, (2) by the arrival of British warships which shelled enemy positions, and above all by (3) an all-out attack by aircraft (especially bombers) which, starting on 14 September and lasting for three days, was the most concentrated to date ever made over one battle area during a similar period. On 15 September, the Allies regained some ground. On the 16th, they were strong enough to take the initiative, and on the next day they were reinforced by advance units of the Eighth Army, who linked up with the Americans holding the southern sector of the bridgehead. Meanwhile the Germans had begun to retire through Mercato to Avellino (see No. 19), where they split into two columns, one continuing north to Benevento, the other turning west to Naples. By the 21 September the plain had been cleared of the enemy, who by the 26th had also been driven from its hinterland.

In the battle for the Salerno bridgehead the Germans had the advantage of previously prepared positions, facilities for bringing up armoured reinforcements, and the support of land-based fighters. On the other hand, the Fifth Army—apart from difficulties normally confronting invaders of a hostile coast—had at first only a limited support from aircraft. In the end the result turned on air power. Had the *Luftwaffe* been strong enough to drive Allied aircraft from the skies the bridgehead would undoubtedly have been lost.



19. ROADS TO ROME

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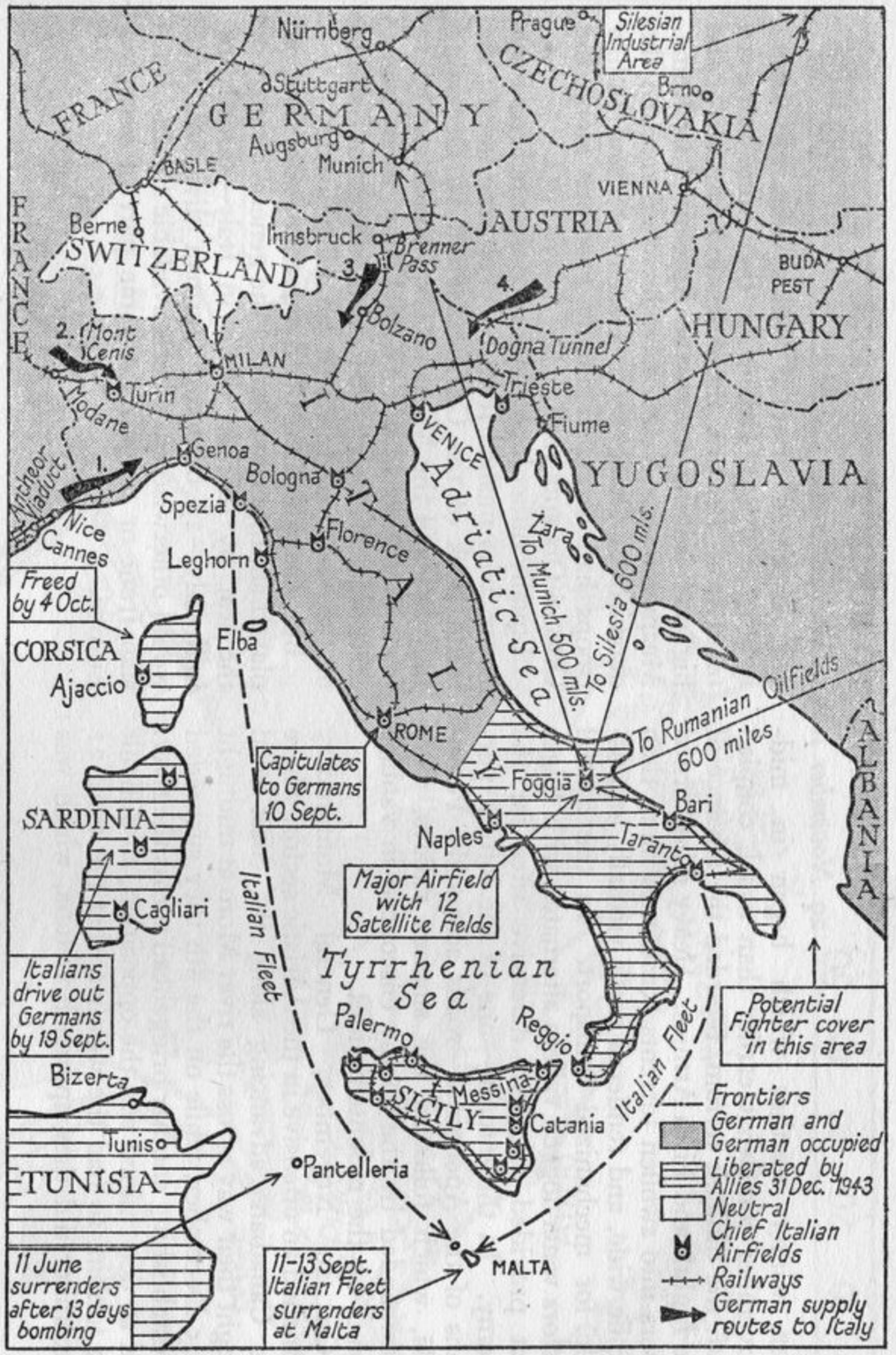
29 November to 31 December 1943

THE winter weather which began in mid-November somewhat earlier than usual, coupled with the difficult terrain, retarded the advance of the Eighth and Fifth Armies. Heavy rains turned rivers into swollen torrents sometimes more than a mile wide, and rendered roads virtually impassable for mechanized transport. In the coastal sectors water-logged valleys alternated with ridges that provided excellent defensive sites for the enemy. In the interior—one of the loftiest portions of the Apennines—roads across the Peninsula, which followed the sinuous valleys, were commanded by the enemy ensconced in vantage points on the mountain sides.

On 29 November, General Montgomery launched an offensive in the Adriatic sector, where the Canadians advancing along the coast road fought their way across the river Moro at midnight on 5 December, while on the 8th they succeeded in establishing another bridgehead across the river. But so determined was the opposition, so difficult the terrain, so bad the weather, that not until 21 December did they approach Ortona, which was only captured after a week's house to house fighting. By 31 December they were some 10 miles from Pescara, the Adriatic terminus of the highway leading across the Apennines to Rome. Meanwhile the New Zealanders had reached the outskirts of Orsogna (16 December), and Indian troops had breached enemy positions along the Ortona–Orsogna road.

Equally difficult conditions confronted the Fifth Army, who pushed from the Volturno line to the south bank of the Garigliano. On 19 December they stormed the Mignano Gap, and attempted to force their way into the Liri Valley, their immediate objective being the foothill fortress of Cassino on the main road to Rome, 90 miles distant.

But though the Allied advance was slow, it played an important part in the general strategy of the war by holding down in Italy—directly or indirectly—25 or more German divisions, who would otherwise have been available for the Russian front or to garrison some part of occupied Europe.



20. ITALY IN 1943

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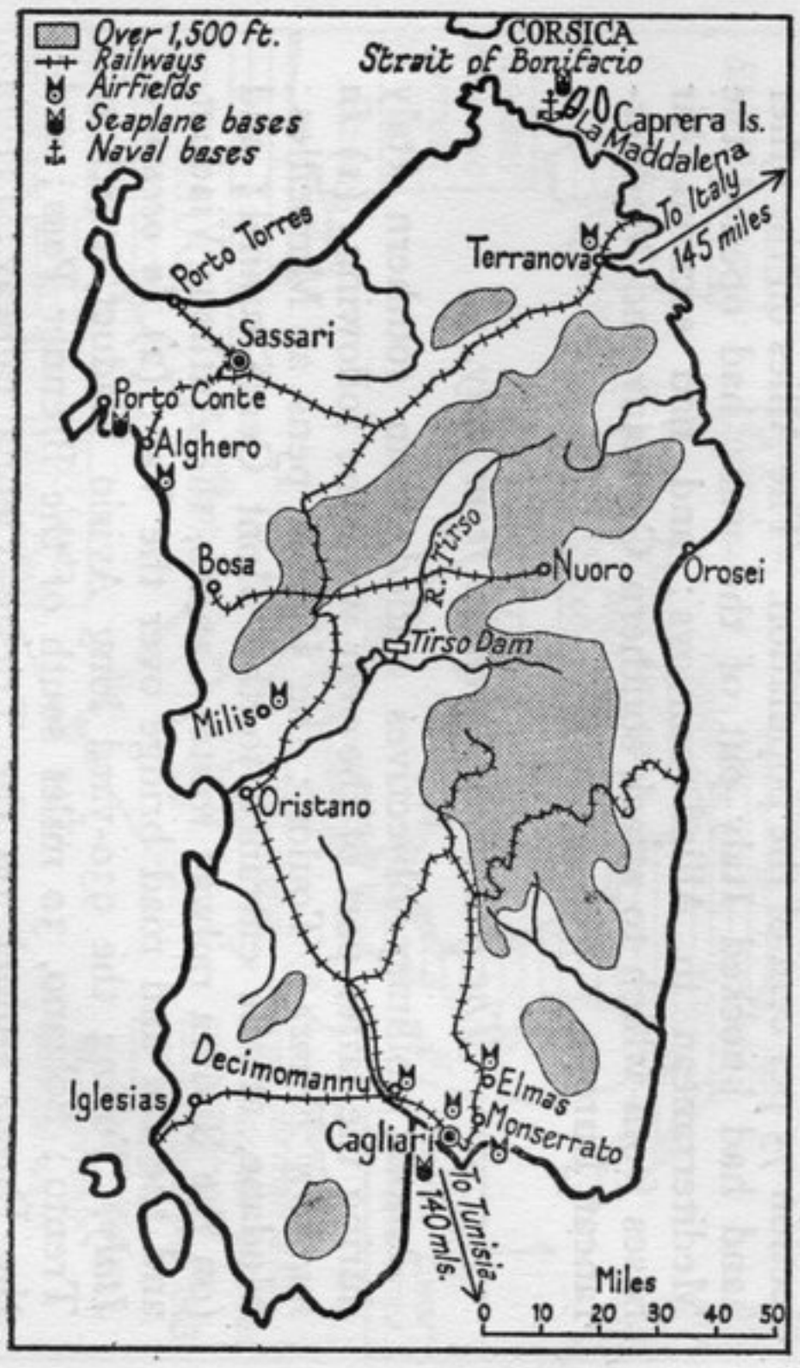
THE loss of Italy's African Empire, the Axis defeat in Tunisia, and the Allied invasion of Sicily had serious repercussions on the Fascist régime. And when on 16 July President Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill called on the Italians to surrender their appeal did not fall on deaf ears. What neglect to respond would mean was emphasized when, on 19 July, over 700 Allied bombers attacked military targets in or near Rome. On the same day Mussolini met Hitler at Verona, but he returned empty handed, and, after an adverse vote had been recorded against him by the Fascist Grand Council, the dictator resigned (25 July). Imprisoned, he was, however, rescued and conveyed by air to Germany.

Marshal Badoglio, charged by the King to form a Government, assumed control of the armed forces, and dissolved the Fascist Party. On the day that the Allies landed on the mainland of Italy (3 September), Badoglio's envoys consented to surrender, though the fact was not made public until 8 September. Moreover, Badoglio agreed to co-operate with the United Nations, and on 13 October Italy declared war on Germany.

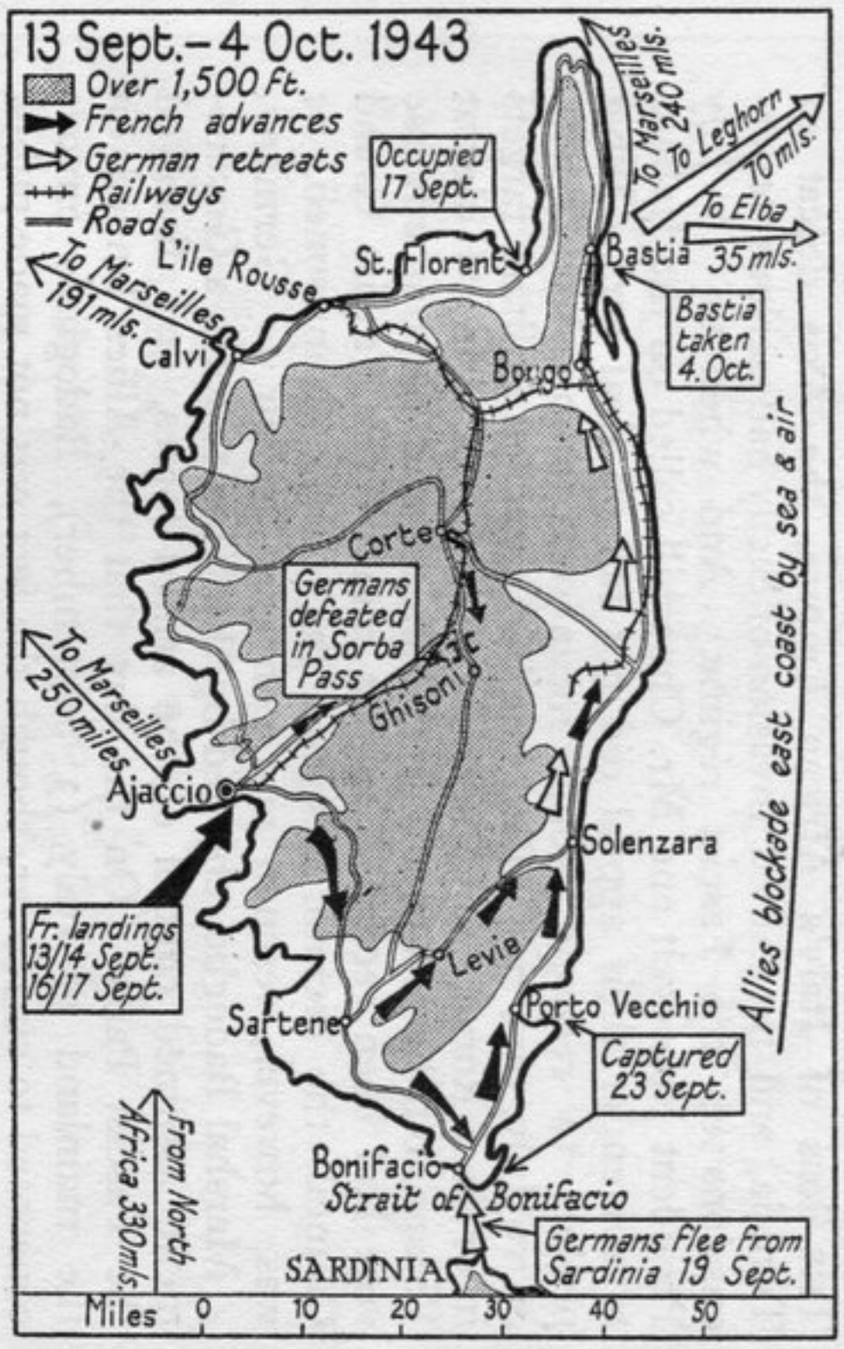
Meanwhile the Germans controlled two-thirds of Italy including Rome and the industrial north, and held in subjection 75 per cent of the population. The Allies on the other hand had knocked Italy out of the war; had opened the Mediterranean to Allied convoys; and had secured Air bases from which to attack southern Germany and Mediterranean Europe.

The Allied Air Offensive from Italy.

Among military objectives raided from southern Italy during the latter part of the year were the following: (1) *In southern France:* Toulon; the U-boat pens at Marseilles; Modane, at the entrance to the Mont Cenis tunnel; and (on the Riviera railway route) Cannes, the Antheor Viaduct, and the rail and road bridge over the Var; (2) *In occupied Italy:* Turin; the 930-yard long Avisio Viaduct, north of Trento; Bolzano, 30 miles south of the Brenner Pass; and the Dogna tunnel, on the Trieste–Vienna railway; (3) *In southern Germany:* Innsbruck, commanding the Austrian approach to the Brenner Pass; and Augsburg.



21. SARDINIA



22. CORSICA

21. THE GERMANS CHASED OUT OF SARDINIA

SARDINIA, a mountainous island comparable in size to Sicily, is relatively thinly peopled. It is separated from Corsica by the $7\frac{1}{2}$-mile-wide Strait of Bonifacio, on which stands the naval base of La Maddalena. Apart from its strategic importance, Sardinia's chief value to Italy lies in its lead and zinc mines. In recent years hydro-power has been developed. The Tirso Dam, in the centre of the island, is one of the largest in Europe. A smaller dam, 10 miles east of Sassari, was bombed by Allied aircraft on 19 May 1943. So too, on various occasions, were other military objectives, including airfields and seaplane bases of which Axis troops made considerable use during the Tunisian Campaign.

When Italy capitulated, Sardinia was held by only a small number of German troops and two Italian divisions, who forced their former Allies to withdraw from the island, the majority crossing the Strait of Bonifacio to Corsica, where they began to arrive on 19 September.

22. CORSICA FREED

CORSICA is 52 miles from Italy, and 112 miles from France. Before the island was freed, many patriots took refuge in the *maquis* (shrub-forest), whence they waged guerrilla war against the enemy. There were 40,000 Italian and nearly 12,000 German troops in Corsica at the time of Italy's capitulation. Some Italians sided with the patriots, 10,000 of whom had been armed with tommy-guns dropped by parachute, or landed by submarine. On the nights of 13/14 and 16/17 September, French troops landed at Ajaccio, already evacuated by the Germans. Before long the French held most of the west of the island, and having defeated the Germans in the Sorba Pass (with the aid of U.S. Rangers), they captured Bonifacio and Porto Vecchio (23 September). By the end of September the enemy held only Bastia and Borgo. As these towns were obviously untenable, most of the remaining 4,000 Germans in the island attempted to escape to Elba and Leghorn by sea or air, a difficult process in view of an Allied blockade in both elements. With the fall of Bastia (4 October), Corsica was freed from the enemy, 20 days after the first Allied landing.