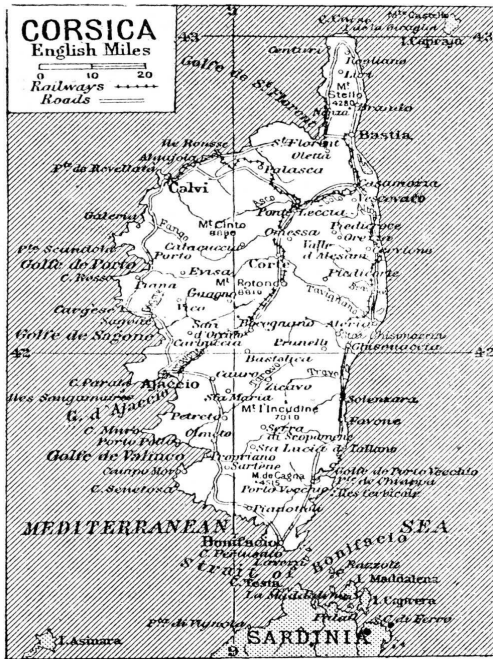


## 458 Squadron Deliver Final Blow to German Occupation of Corsica

On the 7th September 1943 Commandant von Senger of the German Armed Forces of Sardinia and



landed his SS Assault Brigade, on the island of Corsica at the southern tip: Bonifacio. His 12,000 troops were to join forces with the existing Italian occupation. (This would have swelled to a huge occupational force, considering the island inhabitants, numbered only 220,000). Unknown to von Senger at the time, that the very next day, the Italian government concluded an armistice with the Allies. This was a bit of a setback, as the island was garrisoned by the four divisions of Major General Giovanni Magli's Italian VII Corps. A contingent of 85,000 men. Von Senger immediately ordered the Reichsfuher-SS Assault Brigade to secure the bridgehead at Bonifacio, aiding the landing of his 90th Panzergrenadier Division from Sardinia. A support of a further 30,000 men and arms.

German Naval Command were given orders for the transportation of troops from Sardinia to Corsica and to give it high priority. In addition all equipment should be rescued. The task and movement of 30,000 men, over 4000

vehicles including tanks and guns, across the Strait of Bonifacio, was to take up to 10 days and was met with little or no intervention by Allied forces.

Von Senger tried to negotiate the surrender of the Italian contingent, but with little success. Whilst a small number of Italian units continued to support the German invaders, it is believed the majority withdrew into the interior mountainous regions of the island. Fighting (or avoiding) the German forces, alongside existing French resistance, but otherwise preventing any coast-to-coast military movements (conflicting reports differ widely on the numbers and their intentions). But despite opposition from the Italian and French insurgents, which apparently fought independently of each other without co-ordination or co-operation, the now 40,000 strong garrison of men retreated northward towards Bastia, destroying major ports and airfields in their wake.

The retreat was arduous for the convoy, being held down and restricted to the eastern road, by Corsican Partisans and the landing of Free French troops on the western coast at Ajaccio on the 13<sup>th</sup> September. Led by General Henri Honoré Giraud, they were to strengthened the barrage of fire from Allied air and sea assaults, controlling the German retreat. The 90<sup>th</sup> Panzer unit was outnumbered, and their escape route under heavy bombardment. Their only protection coming from artillery firing on the hills, giving a respite for the harried column of vehicles to edge forward, further hampered by German vehicle casualties blocking the road. Bastia was in their sights and had to be seized, but it was held by Italian Forces, determined to hold off the attacking German thrust on the town, with their artillery fire on the approach roads.

Ironically the artillery fire halting the German advance was from their own 88mm flack cannons. A gift to the Italians made by Adolf Hitler and deployed by Mussolini to protect Bastia. Only the battery was not now in Italian hands but the Free French. A double insult insofar as the unit was being commanded by a former SS-Unterscharführer, a defector now betraying his comrades. German morale was at it's lowest point. Leaflet drops ordering their unconditional surrender still didn't faze them though. They soldiered on in their determination, counter attacking the

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bombardment, with their own 88's.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> September Nazi Supreme Command (Oberkommando de Wehrmacht) issued orders for the evacuation of Corsica to their Naval Warfare Command. Over the next couple of days, the 90<sup>th</sup> Panzers successfully secured the route to the port and airfield of Bastia, back into German hands from the Italian military control. Their success was to be short lived, as von Senger received orders not to defend Corsica, but to start an immediate air and sea evacuation of the island. On entering the port they were to find the harbour virtually unusable, with scuttled ships and boats blocking the channel. Nestled in a natural basin surrounded on all sides by mountains, and the sea as the only exit point for take-off, the airfield initially would be their only means of escape.

Over the next few week the German Forces systematically made an evacuation of their men and war materials, using Junker 52 transport planes. By the 19<sup>th</sup> at least 3000 men had been airlifted to the continent. Constant Allied air and artillery attacks hampering their departure. A German light infantryman stated in his memoirs that one of the first to depart the island was their Commander von Lungershausen, handing over his command, to the next in line. This action was to continue down the ranks, being more interested in their own safety than the safety and leadership of their troops.

Allied NAAF medium Mitchell and heavyweight Liberator Bombers, increased air support from the 20<sup>th</sup> September, aiding strikes on Bastia shipping, port and airfield facilities. In the same month a detachment of RAF 500 Squadron moved into Ghisonaccia on Corsica, armed with Hudson lightweight Bombers, following the German withdrawal and capture of the airfield by Free French forces on the 26<sup>th</sup> September. They were to remain there until January/February 1944.

Of those overloaded Junker 52's that were to take off, attack by Allied forces did not cease. 328 wing RAF 39 Squadron based in Protville Tunisia deployed Beaufighter aircraft, searching and intercepting evacuating enemy transport planes, under the escort and protection of ME-109 Messerschmitt fighters.



It was reported that by the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October von Senger departed on the last German ship to leave Bastia harbour, leaving a destruction of the islands' harbours, road bridges, airfields, including 700 dead and 350 POWs. French Corsicans finally taking over this last evacuation point the very next day. The streets and buildings now empty and desolate. A ghost town.

*“So was the bombing operation of 458 squadron on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup>, as some report; unnecessary?”* Not at all. Firstly, although there are conflicting views on the actual day the German occupation completed their evacuation ranging between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> October, there is also very strong evidence that pockets of German and hostile Italian military were still in Bastia. Enemy activity still around the port, and aircraft being used, to evacuate to mainland Italy. 458 Squadron was therefore, quite rightly, detailed to attack.

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Following orders 458 RAAF Squadron took off from their base in Protville, Tunisia. They were to drop 35 x 250lb bombs on the ports' docks and warehouses of the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> October. The



458 RAAF Squadron - Bastia Harbour - Artist Impression

intention being to destroy war materials assembled for evacuation by German forces.

Knowing that the taking of Bastia was imminent, Colonel McKenzie their CO flew his personal Hurricane to Bastia, to witness his aircrafts' accurate bombing.

Four Wellingtons (XIII type) were ordered up led by F/O Maxwell, F/Lt Orchard, F/Sgt Verity and W/O D. O. Watson and their crews.

F/Lt Orchard boldly bombed the waterfront from 700 feet after diving from 5,000 feet. Shrapnel peppering them from their own bombardment. The rest of the squadrons' bombing run being delivered from a safer 7000 and 4000ft. The attack was indeed a success and without any opposition. At the end of the run a green 'Very' light was sent up. Colonel McKenzie undoubtedly congratulating the Squadron on their performance. The final campaign 'Operation Firebrand' completed, liberating the island of Corsica from the forces of the Third Reich.

Following liberation 458 squadron was ordered to Bone, Algeria and Col McKenzie joined RAF 500 Squadron in Ghisonaccia.

### Acknowledgements and Sources

Thanks is given to the diligent research obtained from the following sites and documents:-

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