

## **Operation Husky**

On July 9<sup>th</sup>, activity was feverish as the soldiers packed their gear and drew ammunition and rations. Tents were struck. Excess gear was turned into the supply sergeants. Dinner was served early that evening, and then the troops were transported to the airfields. Operation Husky was on!

Each member of the Regiment received a slip of paper with the following message from Colonel James Gavin, commander of 1-505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment:

Tonight you embark upon a combat mission for which our people and the free people of the world have been waiting for two years.

You will spearhead the landing of an American Force upon the island of Sicily. Every preparation has been made to eliminate the element of chance. You have been given the means to do the job and you are backed by the largest assemblage of air power in the world's history.

The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of every American go with you.

Since it is our first fight at night you must use the countersign and avoid firing on each other. The bayonet is the night fighter's best weapon. Conserve your water and ammunition.

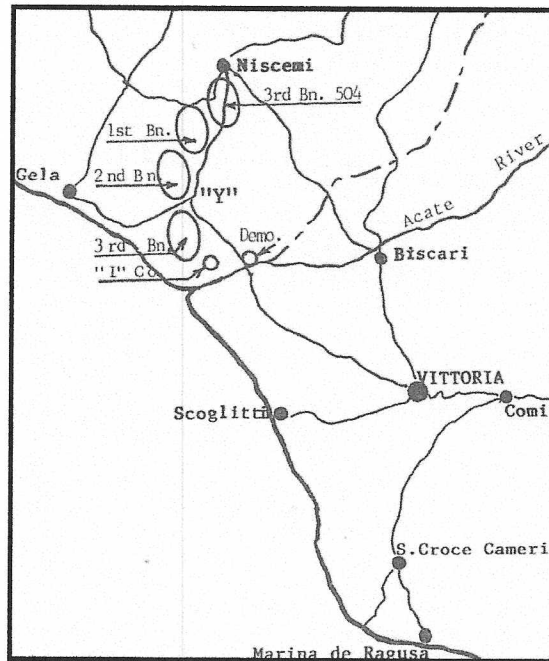
The term "American Parachutists" has become synonymous with courage of a high order. Let us carry the fight to the enemy and make American Parachutists feared and respected through all of his ranks. Attack violently. Destroy him wherever found.

I know you will do your job.

Good landing, good fight. And good luck.

- Colonel Gavin

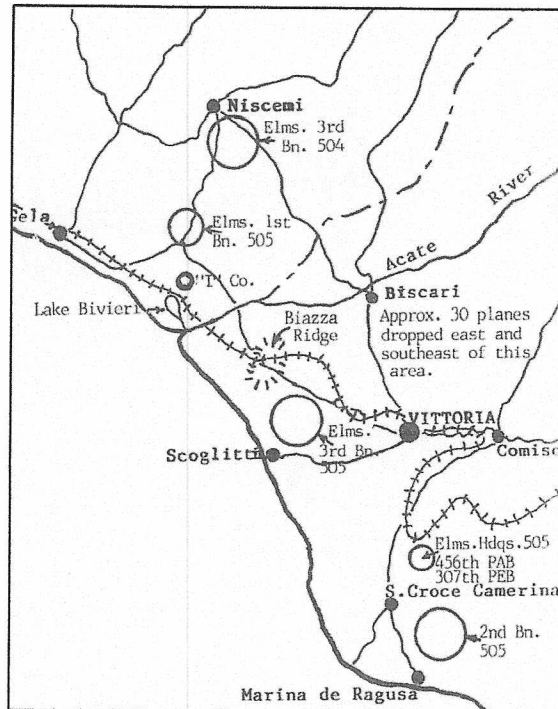
The men finally chuted up, and the planes began to take off. It took an hour and six minutes to get all the aircraft in the air on a route leading to Malta before turning toward Sicily. Everything to that point had gone according to plan. After that, very little went according to plan.



**The Planned Drop Zones**

The troop carriers were to fly 200 feet (about 61 meters) above the sea to avoid radar detection. However, a violent wind storm whipped the carrier formations, creating problems as the pilots fought the wind. At such a low level, the pilot feared being thrown into the waves just below their aircraft. The flight crews were navigating by compass and elapsed time. The wind upset the elapsed time measurements and blew the formations off their compass headings. The storm midway on the route became a tailwind, so most pilots overshot their first significant landmark, Malta.

The early hours of the assault to liberate Sicily could have been a disaster. A few planes, either because of luck or superior navigation, managed to drop their sticks of 16 paratroopers within one to three miles of the correct drop zones. Half of A Company of the 1st Battalion, including the battalion command element with Art, were dropped near the Y crossing: the Regiment's most important objective. The rest of the battalion and Regiment were scattered far from their assigned drop zones. The resulting little groups of paratroopers, as they had been trained, proceeded to attack every German or Italian element that they encountered. This small group of soldiers led by Art Gorham was to accomplish the mission assigned to the entire Regiment.



**The Actual Drop Zones 9-10 July 1943**

The plan was to land forces on the beaches on the southeastern end of the island, preceded by paratroop drops inland from the beaches to establish blocking positions to prevent the enemy from reinforcing their beach defenses and to stop or disrupt any counterattacks. The 505<sup>th</sup> PIR was to seize and hold a critical Y-shaped Road junction (Objective Y) Which would block a road from the town of Niscemi that led to the beaches near the town of Gela (See enclosed maps). Holding this objective would help protect the First Infantry Division (1ID) landing just to the south. The invasion began in the early morning hours of 10 July, with a night jump by the 505 to a drop zone just north of the Y road junction followed a few hours later by the landing of the 1<sup>st</sup> ID. The narrative that follows will focus on the period of 10 -12 July and the actions of LTC Gorham and his paratroopers. <sup>2</sup> (See map with planned drop zones at end of discussion.)

### **Sequence of events**

10 July 1943

At 0530, the paratroopers overran the pillboxes and then turned the enemy machine guns they had just captured against the winery. The paratroopers captured about 40 Italian and German prisoners. The presence of Germans was disconcerting given that the 505<sup>th</sup> PIR was told to not expect German troops in the area. Even worse, the Germans turned out to be an advanced outpost for a Kampfgruppe of the elite Hermann Goring Panzer Division, which was positioned just to the north near the town

of Niscemi, undoubtedly poised to attack south, toward the beaches where the Allied troops were landing. The road from Niscemi ran south of the Y intersection and then to the beaches near the seaside town of Gela, beaches on which the U.S. First Infantry Division (1ID), would, if things were going as planned, be landing at this time. The road from Niscemi also ran right past the strong point that Sayre had just captured.<sup>4</sup>

At about 0600, Gorham with 30 men from his headquarters company arrived. After congratulating Sayre for a job well done, they began organizing a defense, anticipating an enemy attack from the north on the road from Niscemi. Bolstering the lightly armed paratroopers' firepower were 20 captured machine guns with 500,000 rounds of ammunition. The troopers, now about 90 strong, did not have long to wait. (During the period covered by the narrative, LTC Gorham probably never had more than 100 paratroopers under his command, probably even fewer, thanks to casualties.) At 0700, a German armored column approached from the north, Preceded by an advanced guard of two Motorcycles and a Volkswagen. The paratroopers, following LTC Gorham's command, allowed the advance guard to close to within point blank range, then opened fire killing or capturing them. The tanks deployed and stopped. The Germans then sent in two companies of about 200 men, of a Panzer Grenadier unit. The German infantry advanced on foot across open ground. The troopers again following LTC Gorham's command allowed them to close within about 100 yards, then opened fire. The Germans were decimated. Only a handful escaped. The German tanks did not advance. The reasons for the tanks not doing so are not clear, but it is not hard to imagine that the crews were stunned by the volume of fire the troopers put out with their 20 machine guns.

LTC Gorham, meanwhile, had not lost sight of his mission to seize Objective Y. During a lull in the fighting, he began to withdraw southward toward the Y road junction. LTC Gorham reached the vicinity of the original drop zone, about 1,200 yards north of the Y road junction. He halted there, sending out patrols in the hope of finding stray paratroopers in the area. Unfortunately, none were found. LTC Gorham could observe the Y road junction from this position and could see that it was defended by a group of pillboxes. He dispatched CPT Sayre with a squad of troopers to seize the objective. As Sayre approached the objective, he observed naval gunfire falling near the enemy position. Unfortunately, he also saw the U.S. Navy spotter aircraft getting shot down by a German fighter. The Navy guns were now firing blindly. Sayre reasoned that the assault on the pillboxes could be very costly, so he attempted a ruse instead. He sent an Italian prisoner to talk to the Italian defenders to tell them that the Americans would pound their position with a barrage of naval gunfire if they did not surrender. Sayre, of course, had no contact with the Navy ships, But the defenders did not know that. The defenders surrendered. LTC Gorham brought the rest of his group to join Sayre on Objective Y and again, hastily, organized a defense in anticipation of a German advance down the road from Niscemi. Again, they did not have long to wait. Four German tanks approached from the north.<sup>6</sup> The tanks again faced a withering barrage from the troopers. They withdrew to the north. The paratroopers had more captured

machineguns from the Objective Y pillboxes. Also, Naval gunfire was still falling in the area, and the Germans perhaps assumed that the Objective Y defenders controlled this fire. These factors could explain the German withdrawal.

The paratroopers remained in dire straits, however, greatly in need of support. LTC Gorham again dispatched CPT Sayre and a patrol to move south toward the landing beaches in search of the 1<sup>st</sup> ID, which should have landed by now. At about 1130, Sayre encountered scouts from the 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry (2/16 IN). The infantry linked up with the paratroopers on Objective Y. LTC Gorham attached his band of troopers, as required in the Regimental plan, to the 2/16 IN commanded by LTC Joseph Crawford. Anti-tank firepower was only slightly improved, however, as 2/16 IN had only a single 57 mm anti-tank gun. Using a 2/16 IN radio, a report was sent to the 1<sup>st</sup> ID command post, where MG Matthew Ridgway, the 82d Airborne Division Commander was located, that Gorham's intrepid band of troopers had seized Objective Y, meant to be taken by the entire 505<sup>th</sup> PIR.<sup>8</sup> Writing after the war, then-Colonel James M. Gavin, Commander of the 505<sup>th</sup> PIR, who was fighting with another band of his paratroopers to well to the east of Objective Y, said "Colonel Gorham and his small group of troopers...Accomplished all the missions assigned to the entire regimental combat team. It was a remarkable performance, and I know nothing like it that occurred at any time later in the war".<sup>9</sup>

The combined force of 2/16 IN and the paratroopers pushed north from objective Y, advancing about a mile against light opposition, stopping at dusk and digging in.<sup>10</sup>

11 July 1943

At dawn, the 2/16th IN, with LTC Gorham's paratroopers still attached, advanced to seize Hill 41 about half a mile to the north. Encountering only light resistance, they seized the hill and began digging in as best they could in the rocky terrain. About an hour later, they were attacked by at least four German tanks, possibly more. (The accounts vary.) Many of the 2-16 IN soldiers broke and ran to the rear--about 200. (The 2/16 IN was a veteran unit that had taken heavy casualties in the prior North Africa campaign. Many new replacements filled the ranks and we're probably panicked by the tanks in their first serious fight.) None of the well trained paratroopers retreated. To a man the paratroopers held their ground under LTC Gorham's leadership. As the tanks closed in on their position, LTC Gorham, without concern for his personal safety, repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire as he ran from one position to the next, demonstrating to his troopers, using an M1 rifle, how to fire at the tanks' vision slits. The paratroopers, known for their marksmanship, took up the job with alacrity. It is this action that earned Gorham his first DSC. Strangely absent from the award recommendation, however, is what Gorham did next. He ran forward at great personal risk with a bazooka, totally exposed to enemy fire, dropped to one knee and destroyed a tank at close range. At about the same time, 2/16 IN soldiers wheeled the units only 57 mm anti-tank gun into position, fired and destroyed another tank. The remaining tanks now withdrew.

Given his much-depleted ranks, LTC Crawford ordered a withdrawal to a hill 500 yards to the rear, which was steep and crisscrossed with ravines – a difficult position for tanks to attack. On the way, the paratroopers picked up six Browning automatic rifles discarded by the fleeing 2/16 IN soldiers. They reached the hill without incident and organized a defense and with darkness were able to get some much-needed rest.

12 July 1943

At 0200 the 2/16 IN received orders to retake Hill 41. At 0300 they moved out in company columns with the paratroopers in the lead. As they neared the crest of the hill, two enemy machine guns opened fire, most of which went over the heads of the paratroopers but raked the 2-16 IN behind them, wounding multiple soldiers, among them LTC Crawford. The paratroopers, led by LTC Gorham, crawled to within grenade range, lobbing grenades into the enemy position, silencing the machine guns. The surviving enemy fled down the backside of the hill. On the hill, the paratroopers took cover in the freshly dug trenches and foxholes the enemy had prepared.

At dawn, the Americans discovered that the Germans had worked their way around the flanks of their position. At 0700, German tanks (the accounts vary as to the number and type) attacked from the north. LTC Gorham crawled forward under fire at great personal risk with a bazooka, one account claims it was the same bazooka he had fired the day before accompanied by a few troopers, including LT Dean McCandless and Corporal Thomas Higgins (Whose eyewitness affidavits accompany the 505<sup>th</sup> Recommendation for Award for Gorham's DSC, attached). Gorham raised up on one knee to fire the bazooka. Unfortunately, the German tank crew spotted him and got off the first shot, killing LTC Gorham. (The accounts vary somewhat. LT McCandless and CPL Higgins claim that LTC Gorham got off the first shot and knocked out the tank. He was subsequently killed while attacking a second tank with a rifle and grenades.) The paratrooper's doctor, CPT William Comstock, ran forward to check on LTC Gorham, but fell gravely wounded. LT McCandless dispatched CPL Higgins to find a jeep. He returned with one and under fire, evacuated the wounded doctor and LTC Gorham's body. The paratroopers and the 2-16th IN motivated by LTC Gorham's bravery while giving up his life would hold Hill 41, beating off several enemy assaults.

All of this can also be reviewed at [www.OhioHero.org](http://www.OhioHero.org).