

TAC NEWS

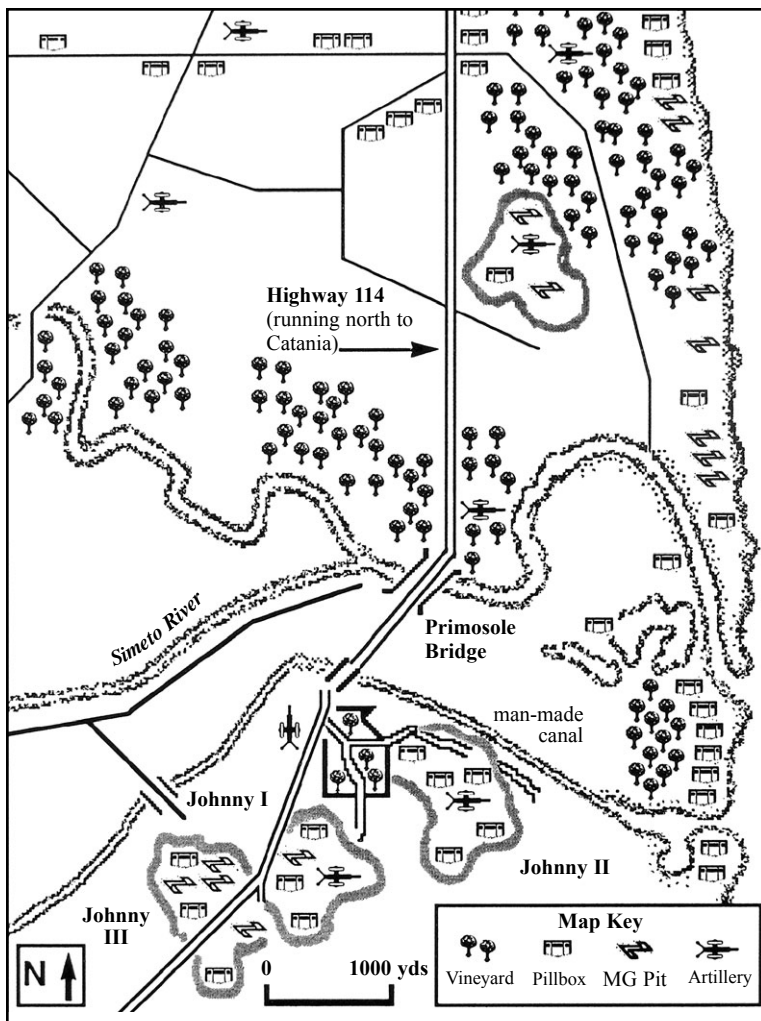
GHQ, 28100 Woodside Road, Shorewood, MN 55331 USA • 612-374-2693 • www.ghqmodels.com
May–June 2016 Modeling Excellence Since 1967

The Battle for Primosole Bridge

Highway 114 runs the length of Sicily's eastern coast, connecting Cape Pásero with Messina. Some six miles south of Catania, the highway spans the Simeto River with a two-lane box girder bridge called "Primosole" (Sunrise). During July 1943, this nondescript bridge became the strategic lynch pin for the Allied conquest of Sicily.

The Allied invasion of Sicily; code-named Operation HUSKY, commenced on July 10, 1943. The British Eighth Army, commanded by Gen. Bernard Montgomery, landed on Sicily's southeastern shores below Syracuse while the American Seventh Army, led by Gen. George Patton, landed on the southwestern shores by Gela. The British landings were a piece of cake.

Sicilian conscripts manning beach defenses promptly surrendered while the Italian 54th *Napoli* Infantry Division, Syracuse's main Axis reserve, dissolved under heavy naval and air bombardment.



The Americans on the other hand were counterattacked by the German *Hermann Göring* Panzer Division, commanded by Gen. Paul Conrath. Conrath lacked command experience on the divisional scale but his panzers none the less rolled to within a few hundred yards of the beach before the GIs

rallied and stopped them. The chance to destroy the invader at water's edge was now lost but Conrath didn't realize it. He drew in his flanks and launched another assault. This attack, coupled with *Napoli's* collapse in the east, opened the Axis front directly in front of the Eighth Army.



General Bernard Montgomery

Montgomery saw the opening as an historic opportunity. Heady with easy victory over the Italians, Monty shed his preinvasion conservatism and concocted a master stroke. He peeled off Lt. Gen. Oliver Leese's XXXth Corps to roll up *Hermann Göring's* open left flank and pin them

against the Americans. With the Germans thus trapped, Lt. Gen. Miles Dempsey's XIII Corps would race up coastal Highway 114 and slam shut the escape route to Messina. Without hope of evacuation the entire 350,000-man Axis Sixth Army had no choice but to surrender.

Monty's battle plan hinged on speed. Its objectives had to be realized before the Germans redeployed into the defender-friendly Sicilian terrain before Leese and Dempsey. Securing Dempsey's main axis of advance required the capture of the Primosole Bridge located deep behind enemy lines. The job was given to Brigadier Gerald Lathbury's "Red Devils" of 1st Parachute Brigade. The particulars of the operation, code-named FUSTIAN, were left to Lathbury. With just hours to prepare he kept his battle plan simple:

- A. Lt. Col. Alistair "Jock" Pearson's 1st Battalion, under the cover of darkness, would drop directly on the Primosole and seize it by coup de main.
- B. Lt. Col. John Frost's 2nd Battalion would occupy three hills; code-named Johnny I,

II, and III some 2000 yards south of the bridge. This high ground controlled Highway 114 and the bridge's southern approaches.

- C. Lt. Col. E.C. Yeldham's 3rd Battalion would land 1000 yards north of the bridge to counter any sortie from Catania.
- D. Two hours after the initial drop, the ten six-pounders of the brigade's anti-tank unit would land on secured zones near the bridge to reinforce Pearson.
- E. The brigade would then hunker in and hold until relieved by XIII Corps, scheduled to arrive at dawn.

Monty ordered FUSTIAN implemented on the night of July 13/14. Later he wrote, "I intended to make a great deal of effort to reach Catania by nightfall on July 14; given some luck I felt it could be done; but I must have have the luck."

The British Paratroop Attack

HUSKY was marred by several "friendly-fire" tragedies as airborne formations crossed over the invasion fleet. To avoid a repeat, 1st Parachute Brigade's flight path was routed well clear of Allied shipping. despite precautions



Brigadier Gerald Lathbury

the Red Devils crossed paths with a solitary supply convoy. Raw gun crews, the targets of nightly Luftwaffe harassment, lit up the darkness with a gauntlet of tracer fire. Four C-47 Dakotas splashed and another fifteen aborted the mission, returning to their bases in Tunis. With the target still an hour's flying time away, Lathbury had lost 200 men.

The remaining aircraft took violent evasive action and the formation scattered into a giant arc tipped

by Messina to the north and Malta to the south. This was another catastrophe. Inexperienced air crews, dependent on pathfinders for navigation, milled about in the darkness attempting to locate the target by dead reckoning. Many Red Devils, given the green light while miles offshore, jumped to watery graves. Others landed on the slopes of Mt. Etna, twenty miles to the north.

At 10:00pm, an hour behind schedule, the first parachutes began to blossom above the Primosole. Axis defenders, expecting airborne reinforcement from Italy, cheered descending canopies until the alarm sounded, "British paratroops overhead!" Searchlights cut the darkness and a murderous crossfire downed three gliders and four Dakotas. Only 50 of Jock's 530-man 1st Battalion, with no radios or heavy weapons, hit their drop zone. Luckily the Primosole security unit stampeded after a glider smashed directly into the bridge and the objective was seized without battle. After stripping away the demolition charges 1st Battalion formed a perimeter defense anchored by abandoned pillboxes on the bridge's southern face. Stragglers continually filtered in and by dawn the bridge force numbered 120-strong.

Pearson's misfortunes were shared by the entire brigade. The jump left Yeldham's 3rd Battalion thoroughly scattered. The colonel noted in the war diary at 2:30am his force consisted of: "CO and batman, RSM and batman, intel sgt and one pte." Third Battalion never regained command and was lost for the battle.

John Frost's headquarters unit and a portion of his 2nd Battalion's A Company landed with great precision, but the rest of the battalion landed elsewhere and all heavy weapons were lost. Frost badly injured his knee on landing but he fashioned a makeshift cane and hobbled about until he had gathered some 140 men. Although his force numbered no more than an under-strength company, and he faced an entrenched battalion, Frost ordered attack. Luckily the Italian defense was half-hearted and defeated with minimal loss. As 2nd Battalion hunkered in, Lathbury emerged from the darkness heading a forty-man detail.

frost and Lathbury briefly counseled. All surviving radios had malfunctioned; British airborne operations were plagued by faulty radios throughout the war, and the fate of 1st and 3rd Battalions was unknown. Lathbury assumed the worst and continued onto the bridge.

Without functioning radios Frost couldn't call in his assigned naval support and Lathbury couldn't warn off the brigades' anti-tank unit as it started its scheduled run at 11:00pm. Expecting a secure landing zone the gliders carrying the gunners were instead pinpointed by searchlights and blisters by a murderous MG crossfire. Five were shot down while a sixth overshot the landing zone and cartwheeled into the Simeto River. Half the unit was thus lost with only three of the surviving 6-pdrs making the bridge force.

Summary of the Air-Drop

Of Fustian's 135 Dakotas and eleven Abermarles; fourteen were lost, forty-nine were severely damaged, with a further forty-seven receiving some battle damage. Thirty aircraft dropped their sticks on the correct drop zones, nine were close, but seventy-four either aborted the mission or missed the mark. As the full extent of the fiasco became known Allied airborne operations were ordered suspended pending a board of inquiry. Of 1st Parachute Brigade's 1863-man roll; only five anti-tank guns, twelve officers, and 283 enlisted men made the bridge area, just 16% of the brigade's total strength. An immediate and concerted counterattack would have annihilated the Red Devils, but fortunately the majority of Axis defenders in the bridge's immediate area were Italians eager to surrender.

To be concluded in the July–August Tac News...



NEW RELEASES FROM GHQ

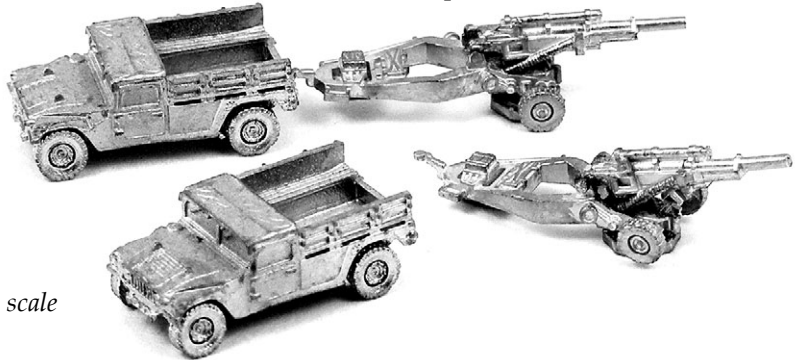
1/285th Scale WWII Micro Armour®

M51 Quad .50 Trailer
US107 5/pk \$11.95



1/285th Scale Modern Micro Armour®

M102 105mm Howitzer
N595 2/2/2/pk \$11.95



Photos not to scale

1/285th Scale Modern Micro Armour®

M1086 FMTV LWB
N594 4/pk \$11.95



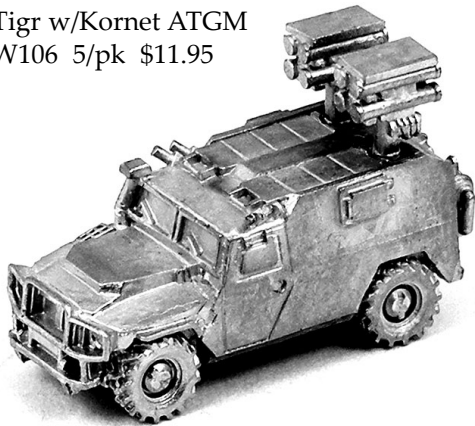
1/285th Scale Modern Micro Armour®

Freccia IFV
N593 5/pk \$11.95



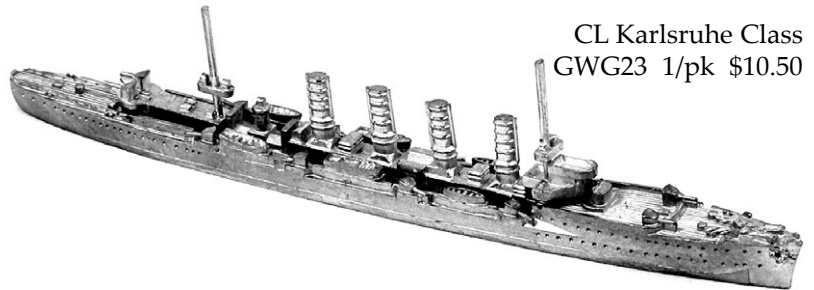
1/285th Scale Modern Micro Armour®

Tigr w/Kornet ATGM
W106 5/pk \$11.95



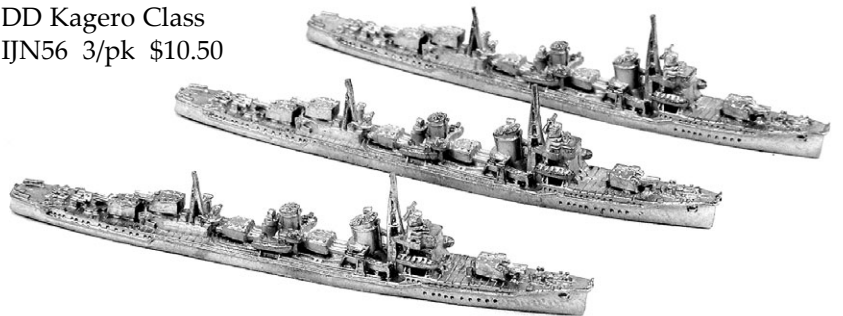
1/2400th Scale Great War Micronauts®

CL Karlsruhe Class
GWG23 1/pk \$10.50



1/2400th Scale WWII Micronauts®

DD Kagero Class
IJN56 3/pk \$10.50



Watch for the
2016-2017
Releases
coming soon!

The GHQ forums at www.ghqmodels.com are informative, friendly and free to join. You'll find gaming, modeling, painting info, and more for newbies and old hands alike!