

Kermit Roseberry – Chapter Two

1942

After the 10 day furlough, I reported to Ft. Wayne. AAF, stand's for Army Air Field. There we were issued our flying gear. Oxygen mask, leather wool lined jacket and pants wool lined boots. Sun glasses mittens, parachutes and a brand new C-47



We received orders to fly it across the southern Atlantic, via Trinidad FS, meaning fuel stops. Belim Brazil FS, Asuncion islands FS then to Dakar North Africa. Then to Algeria. Where we checked in with the 51st Troop Carrier Wing.

Flight Path to Africa for Rosy and his crew.



Mascara Airfield - We were occupied with delivering cargo and other equipment to outlying units in the desert. The runways were



steel mats laid out on the desert floor. Made for some rough landings and take offs. We sometimes flew special units behind enemy lines and dropped them to carry out what ever orders they had. We never had a clue as to their mission or what ever happened to them once they left the door of the airplane. Pulling static lines into the air plane was sometimes hard to accomplish especially if they became tangled. There were only three people on the crew. Pilot copilot and engineer, sometimes the copilot would have to give me a hand with the static lines.



There was no designated position for the engineer on takeoff and landings I stood between the pilot and copilot. Otherwise I just roamed the aircraft checking engines and cargo compartment doing flight checks. Some mission's required a navigator. We would draw one from the pool of navs. He was like me, there was no position for him, so he rode in the cargo compartment. The C-47 was built as a cargo plane for the civilian market, but the military took them over it was the best dammed air plane ever built. They are still flying them to day all over the world.

I remember during a mass air drop of troops on the beaches of Sicily. The formations had to over fly the invasion fleet lying off the coast. As they approached the ships some nervous gunner opened up on them. The carnage and mayhem visited upon the formations of aircraft was hard to comprehend. The story was bandied back and forth for months by the troops. But no official report was ever mentioned. I kept expecting to hear a report of the tragedy.



On the BBC radio or in the army news but none was forth coming. In later years I would repeat this story to other people. Mostly in a bar somewhere. But the looks I received told me it was not going over to well. I remember mentioning it at one of our reunions to one of our pilots. Jerry Millhouse, he works at the Air Force museum at Wright Pat. He sent me the following an official version of the operation. So after all these years I feel vindicated.

Kermit Roseberry (Rosy)
Master Sargent, USAFR Retired



Version 1

Air Power and the Invasion of Sicily

With few exceptions, air power performed successfully throughout the Sicilian campaign. Although the NAAF's efforts minimized friendly ground and Naval losses to enemy air power. Air ground operations again proved unsatisfactory to the U.S. ground forces. For most of the campaign on call air support remained non-existent. Maj. Gen. John P. Lucas, Commander of VI Corps. Voiced an apparently widespread opinion: "Air missions took too long to accomplish even after

the planes had been moved to Sicily, Authority to fly this mission could be obtained in about three hours whereas the mission itself only took 20 or 30 minutes."

Near the end of the fighting, however, the Allies introduced "Rover Joe" (in British usage, the "Rover" tentacle), a communications unit located with front line divisions or brigades or sometimes smaller units, consisting of an armored scout car equipped with radio sets and a joint staff of army officers and one RAF officer. It communicated with the Army Air Support Control, the joint Army-RAF communications group at the WDAF/8th Army Headquarters: with the Air Liaison Officer at the wing or group airfield; and by means of a VHF radio, directly with aircraft over the target area. The staff of the tentacle kept in close touch with the local army unit commander. If he approved an air strike, the liaison officer at the wing was briefed. When the planes arrived, the tentacle's RAF officer directed them to the target. The U.S. Seventh Army and XII ASC used a similar system based on the jeep.

The partial failure of airborne operation as well as the failure to prevent the Axis evacuation of Sicily by completely interdicting the Straits of Messina marred the air effort. The initial paratroop and glider forces landed on D-day July 9th, seized many of their objectives, and caused great confusion to the island's defenders. Nonetheless, the landings proved costly in terms of manpower:



and, because the troops were so widely scattered, their effects on operations was disappointing.



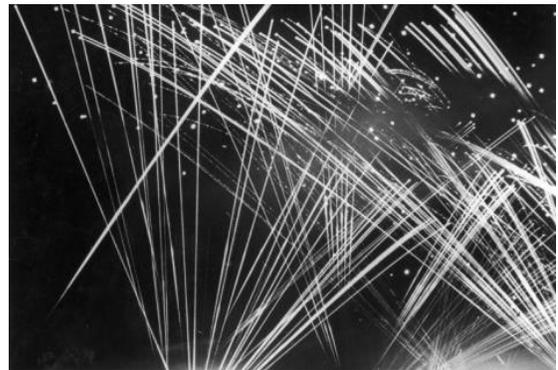
Subsequent missions did not remedy initial problems, and one reinforcement mission flown on the night of July 11 resulted in heavy losses for little discernable gain. The mission was scheduled to drop the 504th Parachute Regiment's 2,300 soldiers into the friendly American beachhead at **Gela** at about 11 p.m. Its approach route took it over friendly ships offshore and then over American occupied positions in Sicily. Generals Patton, Bradly, and Matthew B. Ridgway (the parachutist's commander) all took extreme care to inform the Army, especially the anti-aircraft crews, of the drop and instructed them to hold their fire. They also received assurances from the Navy that guaranteed anti-aircraft free passage over ships offshore.

Unfortunately, the mission arrived on the heels of the last Axis air attack of several that had hit the area during the day. An earlier attack had blown an ammunition ship sky high. A gunner in the fleet, confused and nervous from a day of Axis bombing and perhaps uninformed of the drop, opened fire on the slow, low flying, troop carrying aircraft. Within seconds every anti-aircraft gun on ship and shore joined him. They slaughtered the unprepared and ungainly transports, shooting down 23 and damaging 60 of the 144. The 504th Regiment reported 81 dead, 132 wounded, and 16 missing. Pilots lost formation and geographical bearings and proceeded to scatter the paratroops from Gela to the east coast.



Eisenhower demanded an immediate investigation by both Patton and Spaatz, exclaiming, "If the cited report is true, the incident could have been occasioned only by inexcusable carelessness and negligence.... You will institute within your command an immediate and exhaustive investigation into the allegation with a view of fixing responsibility." Eisenhower also asked for a complete statement of disciplinary action taken, if any proved necessary.

Spaatz visited both the 51st and 52d Troop Carrier Wings on July 13 and met with all group commanders who had led missions on the nights of July 9 and 11. As he informed Arnold in a letter the next day, he found morale high despite the losses. Spaatz had several pertinent observations for Arnold, who enthusiastically support airborne operations: (1) airborne operations can avoid excessive casualties only by achieving surprise: (2) excessive losses will occur if troops are dropped on organized battle positions: (3) ground and naval units need extensive training to prevent them from firing on friendly aircraft: and (4) surface forces should get ample warning before an airborne overflight of their positions and should be forbidden to fire on any planes during the designated time of the overflight. Tedder endorsed the report, adding “A.A firing at night is infectious and control almost impossible.” The lessons Spaatz, Eisenhower, and the advocates of airborne operations gleaned from the Sicilian operations paid dividends in the planning for the airborne phase of the cross channel invasion in Normandy, France.



Version 2

Friendly Fire's Deadliest Day

One night in July 1943, US guns at Gela, Sicily, hurled fire at unseen planes overhead. The result was the war's worst friendly fire incident.

By Robert F. Dorr

Troop transport planes carrying American paratroopers careened all over the sky, bursting into flames, disintegrating, spraying men in all directions. "It was horrible," recalls Charles E. Pitzer, who was a captain and pilot of one of the planes.

Colonel Reuben Tucker saw his 504th Parachute Infantry shot to pieces by friendly fire on July 11, 1943, as the unit approached Gela, Sicily, for a jump. More than 300 died. (Courtesy of Robert F. Dorr)



A day earlier, July 10, 1943, the Allies had landed 170,000 troops at Sicily in the largest amphibious operation to that point in history. Now, 2,000 paratroopers of Colonel Reuben Tucker's 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment were scheduled to make up a second attack wave, jumping into the harbor city of Gela from C-47 Skytrains and C-53 Skytroopers (C-47s customized for parachute operations). Instead, fellow Americans would kill many of Tucker's men in the greatest friendly fire disaster in American history.

The operation was codenamed Husky, the Invasion of Sicily, and it began on the night of July 9–10, with Pitzer and 226 other pilots dropping 2,200 paratroopers of Colonel James Gavin's 505th Parachute Infantry into Gela. The 82nd Airborne Division, commanded by Major General Matthew B. Ridgway, thus launched the first-ever significant combat parachute assault by Americans. Several transport planes were lost, but that gave no hint of what was to come.

Amphibious landings started in the morning. German aircraft spent the day attacking the invasion fleet, fraying gunners' nerves. Ridgway, considered too old

to parachute, reached Sicily by sea. He concluded that a second airdrop was unnecessary, but by then the momentum was unstoppable. A second drop, initially planned for the 10th, was hastily rescheduled for the 11th. One hundred forty-four C-47s and C-53s would carry the soldiers of Tucker's 504th. An order was issued to ensure that ships would be informed about the paratrooper transport planes passing overhead. But many of the ships' crewmen insist to this day that they never saw the order. Incredibly, naval commanders told Ridgway the navy could not guarantee the safety of his force.

On the night of the 11th, the C-47s and C-53s lifted off from unpaved, dust-strewn runways around Kairouan, Tunisia, and flew toward Sicily. Pitzer remembers cruising at 400 feet, the altitude at which drops were made. "It was radio silence and lights out," said Pitzer. Approaching the armada of Allied ships offshore from Gela, Pitzer and other transport pilots flew in V formations of nine planes each. Gunners aboard the ships had been shown recognition slides to help them distinguish aircraft types.

Twin-engine aircraft of similar appearance in these briefings included the C-47 and German Junkers Ju 88 bomber. But as darkness Infantry Regiment were scheduled to make up a second attack wave, jumping into the harbor city of Gela from C-47 Skytrains and C-53 Skytroopers (C-47s customized for parachute operations). Instead, fellow Americans would kill many of Tucker's men in the greatest friendly fire disaster in American history.



Matthew Ridgway

Major General Matthew B. Ridgway, the 82nd Airborne Division commander, had sent the 505th Parachute Infantry floating down over Gela safely a day before the incident that shredded the 504th. (Courtesy of Robert F. Dorr)

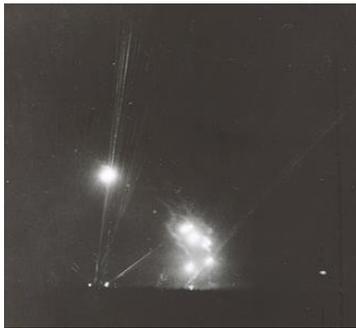
The first two formations of transport planes followed their prescribed course and discharged their paratroopers squarely on target. These would be the only airborne soldiers to float down safely to the correct drop zone. When the next formation appeared over the shoreline, a never identified nervous gunner on the beach began shooting. Other scared gunners on shore and aboard ships sent volleys of fire lofting into the night sky.

Accusations would later descend on the gunners like artillery fire. Maurice Poulin, a coast guard seaman 1st class who manned a 20mm gun on the troop transport

USS Leonard Wood (APA 12), calls the blame a “bum rap.” “We had been under attack by German dive bombers,” he says. “We did not know paratroop planes were coming.” Poulin went on to say that ships had orders “to elevate guns at 75 degrees and fire when attacked.” Crews in the gun tubs aboard the Leonard Wood sent their volleys of fire soaring skyward without seeing their targets. “We shot down many planes but had no knowledge of whose they were,” Poulin said.

Reuben Tucker was aboard a C-53 that began to disintegrate before reaching the shoreline. After a confused conversation between him and the pilot, the plane made a U-turn to fly back toward Gela. Under intense fire from friendly guns, Tucker and his paratroopers jumped. On the ground, he removed his helmet and banged it against a tank hull to alert the crew to stop firing on the planes.

Bombs explode and anti-aircraft fire streaks skyward during a German attack on US ships at Gela on June 12. Such attacks kept gunners at Gela on edge. (Courtesy of Robert F. Dorr)



It seemed as though every Allied gun battery on the Sicily beachhead and offshore was blowing C-47s and C-53s out of the sky. The US Army’s own official history reads, “The slow-flying, majestic columns of aircraft were like sitting ducks.” Dozens of transport planes were hit. One exploded in midair. Others, on fire, tried to ditch to save the paratroopers. Squadrons broke apart, tried to re-form, and scattered again. Eight pilots turned back for

Tunisia still carrying their paratroopers. Those over Sicily dropped paratroopers wherever they could. Some of the jumpers descended into the sea and drowned. Some were killed by friendly fire while dangling from their chutes in the night sky. One transport plane caught fire and headed down, veering sharply to avoid hitting an Allied ship. Careening across the water, the plane trailed a long orange plume of flame as men, some of them on fire, rained from the fuselage.

At the time, the shoot-down over Gela was the worst friendly-fire incident in US history. Three hundred eighteen American soldiers were killed or wounded. Twenty-three transport planes failed to return; others limped back to Tunisia badly damaged, one riddled with 1,000 holes; many landed with blood all over their floorboards. Brigadier General Charles L. Keerans, Jr., the 82nd Airborne’s assistant commander, was aboard a plane that was lost at sea.

Why did Americans kill so many of their own that second night over Sicily? Gunnery fire-control systems were inadequate and training was poor; gunners needed better preparation in aircraft identification, and pilots needed more practice in night formation flying. Improvements would come, and a year later, they would bear fruit in the Invasion of Normandy.

Rosy,

I mapped the route you took with a computer program. It looks like a long ride I think it would have been around 60-70 hours of flying time at 150 MPH. I think that you must have had a few more fuel stops than you mention in your email. Maybe you no longer recall. I am thinking you may have stopped in Florida before going to Port de Spain in Trinidad. I also think you had a fuel stop close to the eastern tip of Brazil.

Distances					
From	To	Initial Heading	Magnetic Heading	Distance	
5 segment path:				9701 mi	
FWA (40°58'42"N 85°11'43"W)	POS (10°35'43"N 61°20'14"W)	138.4° (SE)	144.0° (SE)	2548 mi	
POS (10°35'43"N 61°20'14"W)	BEL (1°22'45"S 48°28'35"W)	132.2° (SE)	147.1° (SE)	1208 mi	
BEL (1°22'45"S 48°28'35"W)	ASI (7°58'11"S 14°23'37"W)	102.0° (E)	122.1° (SE)	2391 mi	
ASI (7°58'11"S 14°23'37"W)	DKR (14°44'23"N 17°29'25"W)	352.2° (N)	7.8° (N)	1575 mi	
DKR (14°44'23"N 17°29'25"W)	ALG (36°41'40"N 3°13'01"E)	36.4° (NE)	44.0° (NE)	1978 mi	
Total:				9701 mi	
Code Dictionary					
Code	Source	Location			
FWA	FAA	Fort Wayne [Intl], IN, US			
POS	AIP	Port of Spain [Piarco Intl], Trinidad Island, TT			
BEL	DAFIF	Belém [Belém Intl - Val-de-Cães (Júlio Cezar Ribeiro)], PA, BR			
ASI	DAFIF	Georgetown [Wideawake Field (Wide Awake Field, RAF Ascension Island)], AC, SH			
DKR	DAFIF	Dakar (Yoff) [Léopold Sédar Senghor Intl (Dakar Yoff Intl)], DK, SN			
ALG	AIP	Algiers [Houari Boumediene Airport (Algiers Airport)], 35, DZ			

Tom McVey|
Dec 7, 2015