

Primosole 1943: when British and German Paratroopers fought for the bridge over the Simeto

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On the night of July 13-14, 1943, hundreds of British paratroopers prepared to jump over the plains of Catania.

Their objective was seemingly simple: to capture the Primosole bridge intact, prevent Axis forces from destroying it, and hold it until the arrival of the British Eighth Army's ground units.

The plan, named **Operation Fustian**, was supposed to open the way for the Allies towards Catania. But almost nothing went as planned.

The transport planes were hit by anti-aircraft fire, including friendly fire, formations were scattered, and many paratroopers landed far from their assigned zones. The British units that managed to reach the bridge found themselves isolated, with few munitions and almost no heavy weapons.

Waiting for them were not only Italian units.

In the hours immediately preceding, elements of the German **1. Fallschirmjäger-Division** had also arrived in the same area. The bridge over the Simeto thus became the scene of a rare event in military history: a direct clash between British and German paratroopers, both having arrived on the battlefield through the sky.



British paratroopers adjust their harnesses before an airborne exercise. The image documents the preparation procedures for the jump adopted by British airborne troops during the Second World War. Photo by Jim Mapham and Bert Hardy, official photographers of the War Office. Imperial War Museums, catalog H 37730, War Office Second World War Official Collection.

Sicily after the Allied landing

On July 10, 1943, the Allies launched **Operation Husky**, the invasion of Sicily.

The British Eighth Army, commanded by General Bernard Montgomery, landed along the southeastern sector of the island. Their task was to advance north, capture Syracuse, Augusta, and Catania, and then proceed towards Messina.

The initial advance was rapid, but the Sicilian terrain favored defense.

Bridges, waterways, narrow roads, and elevations allowed Italian and German forces to slow down the movement of British columns. The plains of Catania were protected to the south by the Simeto River and a series of natural and artificial obstacles.

The Primosole bridge was the main crossing along the coastal road between Lentini and Catania. It was a metal structure about 120 meters long, located along State Road 114, a few

kilometers from the city.

Capturing it intact would have allowed the Eighth Army to quickly cross the Simeto and break into the plains of Catania. Losing it or finding it destroyed would have forced the British to organize a crossing under enemy fire, slowing down the entire offensive.



Map of the Allied amphibious landing in Sicily on July 10, 1943, initiated as part of Operation Husky. The map shows the intended routes for British and American forces, the main landing areas, and the deployment of Italian and German units present on the island. Source: United States Military Academy.

Operation Fustian

The task of capturing the bridge was assigned to the British **1st Parachute Brigade**, part of the 1st Airborne Division and commanded by Brigadier Gerald Lathbury.

The brigade included:

- the 1st Parachute Battalion;
- the 2nd Parachute Battalion;
- the 3rd Parachute Battalion;
- reconnaissance elements of the 21st Independent Parachute Company;
- engineers, anti-tank gunners, and medical personnel;
- a glider-borne component.

The plan called for the paratroopers to land on both sides of the Simeto, occupy the bridge, neutralize the explosive charges set for demolition, and form a defensive perimeter.

South of the bridge, the 2nd Battalion was to capture three small elevations identified on British maps as **Johnny I, Johnny II, and Johnny III**. To the north, other units would prevent Axis reinforcements from arriving from Catania.

Once the position was consolidated, the paratroopers would await the link-up with the 50th Northumbrian Infantry Division, advancing from the south.

It was an ambitious plan, but it relied on one essential condition: the airborne and ground forces had to coordinate precisely.

That condition ceased from the early hours.



A Scammell recovery vehicle and several destroyed or abandoned vehicles at the southern end of the Primosole bridge, in Sicily, in July 1943. In the background, the wrecks of the gliders used during Operation Fustian are also visible. Photo by Major Wilfred Herbert James Sale. © National Army Museum, NAM. 1975-03-63-13-197.

The disaster in the Sicilian skies

The operation was compromised already during the flight towards the target.

The formation that took off from the North African bases was mainly composed of Douglas C-47 Skytrain, accompanied by Royal Air Force aircraft and planes tasked with towing the gliders. After crossing the Mediterranean during the night, the transports reached an extremely congested airspace, traversed by numerous Allied aircraft and hit by anti-aircraft and naval artillery fire.

A few days earlier, during other airborne operations in Sicily, friendly fire had already caused severe losses among the American transport planes.

The formation headed to Primosole was also hit by a combination of German, Italian, and Allied anti-aircraft fire. Some aircraft were shot down, others damaged, and still others forced to abort the mission. Numerous pilots performed evasive maneuvers and dropped the paratroopers far from the planned drop zones.

Men, weapons, and materials were thus scattered over a very large area. Some paratroopers landed kilometers from the bridge; others fell into enemy-controlled areas, in fields, canals, or in the immediate vicinity of Axis positions.

Only a part of the brigade managed to regroup near the target. According to reconstructions, in the early hours, just under 300 men reached the bridge, a force significantly smaller than that envisaged by the operational plan.



Two Douglas C-47 Skytrain transport aircraft of the 81st Troop Carrier Squadron of the USAAF, loaded with paratroopers, fly towards southern France during Operation Dragoon, on August 15, 1944. Photo: U.S. Air Force.

The Fallschirmjäger arrived a few hours earlier

The presence of the German paratroopers was one of the decisive elements of the battle.

The **1. Fallschirmjäger-Division**, commanded by General Richard Heidrich, had been transferred to Sicily to reinforce the Axis defenses. Part of the division arrived by air in the Catania area just hours before the British drop.

Among these units was the paratrooper machine gun battalion commanded by Major Werner Schmidt.

Schmidt's men had landed near Catania during an Allied air raid. Some vehicles and anti-tank weapons were destroyed, forcing the unit to move on foot towards Primosole.

The German commander immediately understood the importance of the bridge. His men positioned themselves south of the crossing, setting up positions with machine guns and mortars.

When, at night, the British paratroopers began to descend from the sky, the Fallschirmjäger were already in the area and were organizing the defense.

The clash between the two airborne forces had not been planned by either side. It was the result of an extraordinary operational coincidence: British and Germans were sent almost simultaneously to the same decisive point on the battlefield.



German paratroopers of the Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 1, belonging to the 1st Fallschirmjäger-Division, at Fornebu airport, near Oslo, in April 1940. The photograph, taken during the Norway campaign, documents one of the first major airborne operations conducted by German forces in World War II. Photo by Willi Ruge. Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-757-0023-32.

The capture of the bridge

Despite the dispersion of the drop, small British groups managed to reach the objective.

The men of the 1st Parachute Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Alastair Pearson, attacked the positions around the bridge and neutralized the sentries. British engineers located and removed the charges set for demolition.

By the early hours of July 14, the bridge was in British hands.

To the south, about 140 men of the 2nd Parachute Battalion occupied the Johnny heights, capturing hundreds of Italian soldiers. The 3rd Battalion, however, was particularly severely dispersed and only a few of its elements managed to reach the area.

At around 4:30 in the morning, the bridge was still intact and under British control.

From a strictly tactical point of view, the first part of the mission was successful. A reduced and disorganized force had reached the objective and prevented the destruction of the crossing.

The problem was maintaining it.



A British Bren Gun Carrier advances from the Primosole bridge towards the Catania plain during the Sicily campaign of 1943. The bridge over the Simeto represented a decisive passage along the axis of the Allied advance towards Catania and Messina. Photo by Sergeant Gladstone, No. 2 Army Film & Photographic Unit. Imperial War Museums, photo NA 5281, War Office Second World War Official Collection.

The Axis counterattack

At dawn on July 14, the Fallschirmjäger began to react.

German machine guns and mortars opened fire on British positions south of the bridge. Other German and Italian units progressively converged in the area.

The battle thus did not only see the confrontation between the two paratrooper units. Italian coastal units, artillerymen, motorcycle units, and elements of the **10th Reggimento Arditi** also participated in the defense, launching attacks against British positions.

Post-war British sources have sometimes downplayed the Italian role, focusing mainly on the duel between the British “Red Devils” and the German “Green Devils.” More complete

reconstructions, however, show a complex battlefield, where various Italian units continued to fight and support the defense of the bridge.

The British paratroopers held out for hours, repelling attacks and fighting from isolated positions. But ammunition was rapidly decreasing and casualties were increasing.

They lacked adequate artillery support, had very few anti-tank weapons, and could not count on the immediate arrival of reinforcements.

The reinforcements that did not arrive

The 50th Northumbrian Infantry Division was supposed to reach Primosole quickly from the south. However, its advance was slowed by Axis resistance, demolitions, and fighting for other crossings.

One of the main obstacles was the Malati bridge, further south, which was supposed to be captured by No. 3 Commando.

This operation also encountered much stronger resistance than expected. The British commandos were attacked by Italian units of the Carmito tactical group and had to temporarily abandon the position.

The consequence was decisive: British ground forces failed to reach Primosole within the established times.

The paratroopers on the Simeto continued to hear the noise of fighting and armored vehicles in the distance, but reinforcements did not appear.

The airborne plan was turning into a battle for survival.

The British withdrawal

In the afternoon of July 14, the situation became untenable.

The Germans increased the pressure and gathered all available personnel for the counterattack, including drivers, specialists, and logistics service men.

The British were tired, dispersed, and almost out of ammunition. The perimeter around the bridge was becoming increasingly difficult to defend.

Lieutenant Colonel Pearson then decided to withdraw.

It was not a disorderly retreat, but a tactical withdrawal. The men crossed the bridge and deployed further south, trying to maintain control of the accesses and prevent the Germans from freely using the crossing.

The British had captured the bridge, defended it for most of the day, and prevented its demolition. But without the arrival of ground forces, they were no longer able to maintain direct possession of it.

The arrival of the British infantry

In the early hours of July 15, the vanguards of the 50th Northumbrian Division finally reached the area.

The reunion, however, did not immediately conclude the battle. The bridge and the northern bank of the Simeto were still under German and Italian fire.

The task of permanently recapturing the crossing mainly fell on the battalions of the **Durham Light Infantry**, supported by the tanks of the 44th Royal Tank Regiment.

The 9th Battalion Durham Light Infantry repeatedly attempted to advance on the bridge. The British infantry had to cross a narrow space, completely exposed to enemy machine guns, mortars, and anti-tank weapons.

The initial assaults were repelled with heavy losses.

Some Sherman tanks managed to reach or cross the bridge but were hit by German weapons fire. Without armored protection, the infantry had to withdraw again.

The 9th Durham Light Infantry suffered about a hundred casualties during the attacks, including over thirty fatalities.

Crossing the Simeto under fire

The breakthrough came through a combination of frontal pressure and lateral maneuver.

While the 9th Battalion continued to attack in the bridge area, Lieutenant Colonel Pearson led elements of the 8th Durham Light Infantry towards a ford on the Simeto.

The companies crossed the river away from the main axis, managing to establish a bridgehead on the northern bank.

The maneuver threatened the flank of the German positions.

Meanwhile, communication problems contributed to the withdrawal of some Axis units. A part of the German paratrooper engineers left their positions, allowing the British to consolidate at the southern end of the bridge.

On the night between July 15 and 16, after further fighting, the British finally managed to establish control of the crossing and the northern bank.

The Primosole bridge had been captured.



British engineers repair the damage to the Primosole bridge over the Simeto River after its capture in July 1943. Control of the Primosole and Malati bridges was essential to allow the British advance in the Catania plain and prevent their destruction by retreating Axis forces. Photo by Sergeant Gladstone, No. 2 Army Film & Photographic Unit. Imperial War Museums.

A victory paid at a high price

From an operational point of view, Operation Fustian achieved its main objective: the bridge was not destroyed and remained in British hands.

But the cost was extremely high.

The figures vary depending on the sources and criteria adopted. Commonly reported estimates attribute about 141 dead and 168 wounded or missing to the 1st Parachute Brigade in the entire operation. Only a part of the men launched managed to reach the bridge; many were killed,

captured, or remained isolated far from the objective.

The battalions of the Durham Light Infantry also suffered heavy losses during the subsequent assaults.

German and Italian losses are more difficult to determine precisely.

From a strategic point of view, moreover, the capture of the bridge did not produce the immediate breakthrough hoped for. Axis resistance on the Catania plain continued, and the British advance remained slow.

The Eighth Army failed to quickly take Catania through the coastal route. The city would only be evacuated by Axis forces at the beginning of August, as part of the general withdrawal towards Messina.

The role of Italian units

The narrative of the battle has long focused almost exclusively on British and German paratroopers.

The Italian units present in the area are often described as coastal forces quickly overwhelmed. The reality was less uniform.

Some units disintegrated during the British drop or were captured en masse. Others continued to fight, participating in counterattacks and supporting Axis positions.

Among the units involved were elements of the 213th Coastal Division, artillerymen, motorcycle companies, and men of the 10th Reggimento Arditi.

In some sectors, Italian units maintained their positions even after the withdrawal of German units, risking isolation.

Recognizing this contribution does not mean changing the outcome of the battle, but restoring the combat to its real dimension: Primosole was not just an Anglo-German clash fought on Italian soil, but a battle of the Sicilian campaign in which units of the Regio Esercito also participated, with varying results.

The bridge after the battle

Once captured, the bridge had to be repaired.

The bombings and fighting had damaged the roadway, but the main metal structure remained standing. The British Royal Engineers worked to clear the road surface of debris and make the crossing passable again.

Images from the time show British soldiers and vehicles on the bridge, among metal beams, craters, and shattered concrete.

The value of the objective was evident: that structure represented the mandatory passage for men, tanks, artillery, and supplies heading towards the Catania plain.

Why remember Primosole

The battle of the Primosole bridge remains less known compared to Arnhem, Normandy, or the battle of Montecassino.

Yet it represents one of the most significant episodes in the history of airborne troops.

At Primosole, almost all the elements that would characterize the great airborne operations of the Second World War were concentrated in a few kilometers and in less than four days:

- the deep attack;
- the initial surprise;
- the dispersion during the drop;
- the loss of heavy weapons;
- the isolation of men on the ground;
- the necessity to defend a decisive bridge;
- the delay of relief columns;
- the fight against elite enemy units.

The British paratroopers captured the objective with a much smaller force than expected and held out until their capabilities were exhausted.

The German Fallschirmjäger reacted quickly, using their experience and tactical improvisation.

The Italian units, despite different behaviors, participated in the defense and counterattacks.

The British infantry finally completed the mission, crossing the Simeto under devastating fire.

Primosole was neither a perfect battle nor a quick victory. It was a confused, bloody struggle often fought by small groups without connections, acting without fully knowing what was happening a few hundred meters away.

The bridge over the Simeto

Between July 13 and 16, 1943, the Primosole bridge became much more than a metal structure over a Sicilian river.

For the British, it represented the gateway to Catania.

For Germans and Italians, it was a point to defend to slow the Allied advance and allow the reorganization of Axis forces.

For the paratroopers of both sides, it was the place where training, courage, and esprit de corps had to confront the harshest reality of war: scattered men, incomplete orders, insufficient ammunition, and a determined enemy a few meters away.

The bridge was eventually captured by the Allies, but not with the expected speed and not without a very high price.

Primosole thus entered history as one of the symbolic battles of airborne forces: a fight in which British and German paratroopers, arriving almost simultaneously from the sky, clashed for control of the road to Catania.