7 ANVIL, OVERLORD and the Italian Campaign

Before the Tehran (EUREKA) Conference, Churchill requested a summit meeting in Cairo (SEXTANT I) to resolve and co-ordinate Anglo–American strategic policy before meeting the Russians. Because of disastrous British ventures in the eastern Mediterranean, which were proving highly prejudicial to a deteriorating Italian campaign, Churchill sought a modification of the QUADRANT agreement, that addressed the transfer to Britain of seven Mediterranean-based divisions and 60 LSTs scheduled from November 1943.1 The attritional battles south of Rome, in which 11 ill-prepared and under-manned Allied divisions encountered 19 experienced and well-positioned German divisions, foreshadowed a long arduous winter campaign and had aroused his concern. To relieve growing anxiety over the front’s tactical imbalance, Churchill and the COS sought to redirect the transfer of those men and craft, designated for the cross-Channel attack, into the Italian campaign.2 Churchill petitioned Roosevelt, despite the president’s resistance, and questioned the practicality of the relevant QUADRANT decisions. Churchill’s willingness to negotiate more openly represented a change from the artful positioning of the MODICUM and SYMBOL meetings. Roosevelt entertained Churchill’s entreaties related to the following issues: increased American support for British efforts in the eastern Mediterranean, Operations ACCOLADE and HARDIHOOD,3 and the merger of the two Mediterranean commands into one.

However, Roosevelt, preoccupied with the possibility of a personal meeting with China’s Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek in Cairo, considered the QUADRANT agreement as settled. Both he and the JCS were alarmed and irritated at Churchill who sought to re-negotiate parts of the agreement, as if he were again abandoning OVERLORD in preference for an intensified Mediterranean policy.4 Although the Americans remained focused on a May OVERLORD, they were not indifferent to the problems raised by Churchill regarding the attritional warfare unfolding under appalling weather conditions and shortages on the Italian peninsula. The British wanted to raise the level of the Italian campaign, the Americans fought to preserve the sanctity of OVERLORD.

According to John Winant, American Ambassador to Britain, the British believed that the psychological moment for launching OVERLORD could not be fixed months in advance. Moreover, they feared that the QUADRANT agreement took precedence over subsequent changes in the military situation.
He concluded that the principal difference of opinion between the two parties was simply one of timing. Unknown to Winant was the Russian expectation of an executed OVERLORD at the earliest possible moment. Contrary to British thought, the Americans, fighting a two-ocean war, considered logistics as the primary factor for creating such an opportunity. Unfortunately, Churchill and Brooke aroused American suspicions again by advocating further British operations in the Dodecanese, a group of islands off the Turkish coast. Brooke complained in his diary entry of 1 November,

If only I had sufficient force of character to swing those American Chiefs of Staff and make them see daylight, how different the war might be. We should have been in a position to force the Dardanelles by the capture of Crete and Rhodes. We should have had the whole of the Balkans ablaze by now, and the war might be finished in 1943!

Although Roosevelt agreed to meet Churchill on 22 November in Cairo, he carefully avoided meeting him privately. 'Roosevelt was an artist in avoiding discussion of issues he did not want to discuss. On the other hand he was affable enough to make Churchill reasonably optimistic.' By avoiding a decision on future strategy prior to EUREKA, Roosevelt dashed Churchill's hopes for further Mediterranean action. Brooke hoped to present a united Anglo–American strategic policy to Stalin at Tehran, the opposite of what Roosevelt intended. If the president got his way, they would go to Tehran without a common plan.

Cairo: SEXTANT I

The participants at the Cairo Conference of 22–26 November tried to cram too much work into too little time, exhausting the participants before they traveled to Tehran. Churchill's attitude did not help. Brooding over the near-disaster at Salerno, he was convinced that a planned invasion of France would fail. When he discovered that 25 percent of the landing craft assigned to strengthen OVERLORD were to be transferred elsewhere, he exploded. Hopkins considered Churchill's behavior unsuitable. Brooke thought that Churchill's petulance covered a wish to form a purely British theater in the Mediterranean on which all the battle laurels would fall.

According to John Eisenhower, son of the General, SEXTANT I was laden with acrimony for several reasons: an accumulation of unpleasant decisions deferred from previous conferences, leaving basic disagreements unresolved, the loss of British partnership dominance, the concern over the meeting with Stalin and the presence of Chiang and his wife in Cairo. CCS meetings were lengthy, overcrowded and their participants frequently bad tempered.