

SICILIAN INVASION.

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ON May 15, 1943, I joined a field surgical unit that was returning to the Nile Delta. The morale of everyone was high. The Tunisian campaign had just been brought to a highly successful conclusion.

After a year in the Desert we were all looking forward to leave and to dipping deeply into the flesh-pots of Egypt; to sailing at Alex; to almost peacetime meals at the Union Club and the Union Bar; to lunch and swimming at Gezira; to stately dinners on the roof of the Turf Club and to dancing at the Continental and in the garden at Shepherds. The men had similar ideas and having been unable to spend a penny for months they all had credit balances in their pay-books that would have commanded the respect of any bank manager.

Many units were returning at this time. Some went all the way by road. A most amazing journey was made by a driver and a serjeant who drove their Brigadier's car from Corps H.Q., just south of Enfidaville to Cairo, a distance of some 1,700 miles in three and a half days. The Brigadier was delighted to see them and his car so soon but his congratulations were somewhat modified when the car had to spend the next week in the R.E.M.E. workshops.

My own unit went by sea from Tripoli to Alex. We joined up with the first convoy for many months to come right through the Mediterranean from England. Certainly no time was lost in exploiting the command of the Mediterranean that was given us by our occupation of the coast of North Africa. Our only excitement on this trip was when a R.A.F. pilot baled out ahead of the convoy and was picked up by one of the escorting destroyers; but, judging by the frequent changes of course we made, the Commodore of the convoy must have had reason to be much more worried than we were.

Most of the time our course took us close enough to the coast to see Derna, Tobruk, Bardia and Sollum, places that had been in the headlines for years and which were soon going to sink back into the obscurity from which they had been dragged by the war.

Our first dinner in Alex showed us that things were not what they were. Now that the enemy was hundreds of miles away Egypt was suffering a measure of austerity such as had never obtained when the enemy was at its gates. Rationing had been introduced and prices had soared but a spring bed and a hot bath were as pleasant as ever.

The next day we found our transport that had come by another ship and received orders to go to a camp at Geneifa on the Canal. We found the camp with the greatest difficulty and on arrival we were presented with a sack of official mail. Most of this on examination proved to be Area Routine Orders from Benghazi, Tripoli, Sousse and other sub-areas through which we had passed months previously and which had been following us ever since but from the rest there emerged the fact that an invasion was being planned somewhere, some time, and that we were going to participate in it. It was a rude awakening and with it vanished our dreams of a leisurely leave in Alex.

The broad outline of the plan soon became clear. We were to go ashore a few hours after the assault troops with a skeleton team carrying on our backs our own equipment and sufficient medical stores to operate for forty-eight hours until our three-ton truck was expected to arrive. The rest of the team were expected to arrive by hospital ship about this time, too, but it was not until six weeks later that our fifteen-hundredweight truck was due.

I suppose no Army in the history of the world has marched less than the Eighth Army in the Desert. Transport was the solution to every difficulty and sometimes when a camp

was well dispersed one took a car from the office to the Mess. We had become very truck minded and the idea of carrying equipment on our backs was another shock that we sustained at this time.

New equipment had to be drawn and our three-ton truck packed and waterproofed and got away to Alexandria for shipment within a few days. Its total weight had to be under five tons. We thought the weight of an empty three-ton truck to be about three tons and this would enable us to load nearly two tons of stores into it.

In order to make sure we telephoned the Brigade Major, the Brigade R.A.S.C. Officer and the Brigade R.E.M.E. Officer and they knew as much about the weight of an empty three-tonner as we did. Then some genius in the unit to which we were attached, possibly inspired by thoughts of an excuse for a pleasant luncheon in the French Club at Tewfik, decided to take a truck to the nearest weighbridge. He returned with the news that it weighed so many thousand kilogrammes. When the necessary calculation had been made this proved to be four tons and four hundredweight. This was a bombshell. Consternation spread throughout the camp. This meant that only sixteen hundredweight could be loaded into each three-tonner. How this difficulty was solved must remain a secret but it is enough to say that all the trucks were eventually landed without mishap.

Having got our three-tonner away we settled down to some serious training. Before the sun got too high we walked for miles with our own equipment and our assault packs, together totalling about sixty pounds. We went for runs over the sand hills around Geneifa and were soon very fit indeed.

After a fortnight the brigade to which we were attached was sent off on a full scale exercise in the Red Sea. I went on the advance party for this and I was surprised to find that it was the ship in which I had travelled from England to the M.E. over two years previously. The same ship, but a very different one. Landing craft had taken the place of the ship's lifeboats. The boat deck which had previously had a remarkable amount of deck space was now so crowded with gun platforms and mysterious-looking rocket apparatus that there was no room for a game of deck tennis. Cabins that had held one in peacetime and two on my first trip now had accommodation for six or eight. But the ship's officers were the same and I spent many pleasant hours with the ship's "Doc," the Engineers and the Purser.

When the rest of the Brigade was embarked we steamed down to the Gulf of Suez to Safaga Island. The plan was that we were to carry out a landing. The beaches had been prepared so as to resemble as near up as possible the beaches on which we were to land in the real invasion. There were wire and dummy mines and a defending force. Having overcome this opposition we were to go to a N.A.A.F.I. at which it was alleged there was even beer for the troops. In such a desolate place this seemed too good to be true and unfortunately we were never able to find out. In port it was dead calm and very hot but as soon as we neared Safaga Island a breeze sprang up and it became almost cool. To us landlubbers the sea did not look very rough but the Ship's Bo'sun said it was too rough for landing craft and, furthermore, that it was always like this here at this time of the year and that if we stayed a week we would never get ashore. This sounded like defeatist talk but was quite true.

The disembarkation of several thousand men with kit and stores from a large ship into assault craft within a few hours is not an easy problem to deal with. A large ship is, at first sight, a maze of decks, alleyways and companionways that vary with each deck and are not even the same on both sides of the ship. To the crew who have lived aboard the ship for months it is easy but the soldier had great difficulty in finding his way about to begin with. To add to the difficulties, the real invasion would take place in darkness and blackout precautions would have to be strictly observed. During these tedious days spent waiting for the weather to moderate sufficiently to permit a landing we rehearsed time and again the drill of getting units in the right order from their mess decks to the assembly points and from there to the sally ports until everyone could almost find their way about the ship blindfold. The voice of S.N.O. as he gave his directions over the loud speakers became

more and more plaintive, but the result was that in the real invasion the disembarkation went without a hitch.

The Higher Command were naturally loath to call off an exercise for which such careful preparations had been made but after waiting five days it was clear that the bo'sun had been right. It was decided to attempt the landing in a more sheltered bay some forty miles to the North. The ships weighed anchor and steamed away. As we left we spared a thought for the unfortunate men ashore who had gone to great trouble to prepare for our landing.¹ While we were comparatively comfortable they must have been sweltering in the heat of that desolate and barren coast.

A short stay at the new bay was sufficient to convince everyone that this place was no better than the last. We therefore went to the head of the Gulf of Akaba where conditions were certain to be suitable. As we steamed up this lonely gulf we got an idea of the immense scale of this operation for which we were rehearsing. Coming towards us was ship after ship bearing names that were well known before the war. They had carried out an exercise with two divisions and were now returning to port. For a few days the village of Akaba, which in normal times is visited only by dhows, had enjoyed the distinction of being the premier passenger port in the world.

As soon as the anchor was down the captain called for his motor boat and took a party ashore for a swim. We were longing for a swim. We were enjoying this a lot until a member of the Palestine Police Force came and warned us of the presence of sharks in these waters.

Meanwhile the Higher Command was doing some very quick thinking. They caused the beach defences to be repaired; plans for this new landing were made and maps distributed to all unit commanders so that all was ready for a landing in the small hours of the next morning.

The assault troops were sent off at 03.00 hours and about an hour later we saw tremendous flashes as the sappers blew gaps in the wire with Bangalore torpedoes. Shortly after this we saw Verey lights that indicated that first Red beach and later Green beach had been taken. While we were waiting our turn to go ashore S.N.O. kept us informed of the progress of the operation over the ship's loud-speaker system. It was light by the time we went ashore. The Sappers had cleared a safe lane through the mine field and marked it with tapes, the Military Police had notices everywhere marking ammunition dumps, vehicle assembly areas and dewaterproofing areas.

We contacted the colonel of the field ambulance with whom we were going to work and we were about to set up a dummy medical unit on what was thought to be the place corresponding to the map reference when the other half of the field ambulance who had come by another ship were seen to be settling down a mile away. We walked over to join them and having argued for a while as to who was in the right place we eventually compromised by meeting half-way. No sooner had we disposed the unit in the new place than an umpire came up to say that this place was still considered to be under rifle fire and that we were all dead. He also said that we had come ashore on a beach that had never been taken anyway. It all seemed very difficult but our colonel soon talked him round and we could consider ourselves alive again.

It had become really hot by now and no one was sorry when the time limit for the exercise expired. We made our way back to the beaches but before re-embarking I visited Green beach which was to be the main supply route. One began to appreciate how thoroughly this organization for combined operations had been worked out at the Combined Training Centre.

Back on board ship after a bath, a change of clothes and a late luncheon, we decided that this was really warfare in comfort. Everyone was glad after so many disappointments and changes of plan that we had made a landing at last and the Higher Command seemed pleased with the way things had gone.

¹ Why? They still had the N.A.A.F.I. and the beer!—ED.

We returned to port and disembarked. It might be thought impossible to keep the movements of such a large convoy a secret but a large measure of security was obtained. While we were waiting on the dockside for a train to take us to our camp an officer in a unit guarding the port came up to a group of officers and, thinking that they were just out from home, began asking the questions that new arrivals were always asked about England. What was the food shortage like? Were people getting enough to eat? How bad was the bombing and so on. As most of these officers had not been home for over five years their feelings at being mistaken for "new boys" can well be imagined.

We returned to camp and events moved to a climax. First the Corps Commander came and spoke to all officers in the Brigade. He gave a brilliant analysis of the exercise as he saw it from his position ashore and he emphasized the lessons we had learnt. Then we were inspected by the Army Commander and we learnt with satisfaction that we were still to be called the Eighth Army. He spoke under very trying acoustic conditions to over a thousand officers for an hour and a half. He analysed the psychology of the German and the Italian soldier and explained his technique of battle. Finally, about a week before we left, our Brigadier spoke to all officers in the Brigade down to the level of company commanders and disclosed the fact that we were going to invade Sicily. He described first the Army plan and then the details of the Brigade plan. Scale models of the beach and aerial photographs were studied. The Intelligence Officer told us what he knew of the dispositions of the enemy and details of water supply.

During the ensuing week we had further opportunities of studying the models, maps and photographs in a hut that was set aside for the purpose and suitably guarded. In the end I knew the beach on which we were to land and the surrounding country as well as I know my home town. We formulated our own plan. We were due to land about four hours after the assault troops and join up with the light section of a C.C.S. that was on another ship and set up a surgical centre in a certain wine cellar a quarter of a mile from the beach. A wine cellar seemed to offer certain advantages over other places.

The final week passed quickly and as we re-embarked in the same ship as we were in for the exercise everyone felt quite at home.

Our convoy of large ships passed through the Canal in daylight. We felt very conspicuous. Ships of this size had not passed northbound through the Canal for many months. One could not help reflecting that if the enemy could sink a ship of our size in the Canal it would be worth the loss to them of many bombers. Evidently the Higher Command thought so too as it was clear that the A.A. defences of the area had been considerably reinforced. The convoy lay in Port Said for a few days. On one day we all went ashore for a route march and a swim. This seemed to be tantamount to putting a telephone call through to the German Embassy at Ankara to tell them that we were coming. However I suppose the Higher Command realized that it was impossible to conceal the fact that the invasion was imminent and thought the risk justifiable. Certainly subsequent events proved them to be right. The secret of our destination had been well kept. Even the ship's officers, who always get to know most things, were betting on Greece being the objective right up to the time that the secret was out. As soon as the ship had cleared the harbour entrance the Captain broadcast our destination and read a message from the Admiral of the Fleet. Maps were distributed, copies of a booklet on Sicily given to each man and a timetable drawn up so that every officer could demonstrate the scale models of beaches and the maps and aerial photographs to his men. The keenness of everyone was very impressive. We were with a Brigade which had taken part in the defence of Malta. Nearly all the men had served over five years abroad and could have claimed to go home but they felt that first they had many old scores to settle with the enemy after those years when they had had to take it in Malta. The story of how well they fought and how effectively they settled their account with the enemy has so far been only partly told.

With so much to do the time passed quickly as we steamed past the now familiar coast of North Africa. Every day we expected to get warning of an impending attack from the

air but it never materialized. Doubtless the raid that the Commandos made on the airfields in Crete at this time contributed to our immunity. The Commander of the flotilla of landing craft in our Brigade gave us a lecture on some combined operations he had known. He concluded by describing the perfect combined operations at Vaasgo. In another lecture he reassured us considerably by describing in detail the precautions that were to be taken in this particular operation to see that we got put down on the right beach and by the time he had finished we felt that things could not possibly go wrong.

So far our trip had been like a peacetime cruise. We were reminded sharply that the war was still on when a signal was received from the Commodore of the convoy of ships carrying the motor transport which had left some days ahead of us. It stated that one of the ships had been torpedoed, fortunately with little loss of life. The various unit commanders held a hurried consultation to find out who had transport in this particular ship. For the next day one went round sympathizing with those who had lost trucks in this ship and thanking one's luck that it was not one's own. So well had the distribution between the various ships been made that no unit's efficiency was gravely affected. One officer came in for particular sympathy as his valise containing a precious bottle of whisky was lost in this ship.

The assault troops were due to land at 02.45 hours on July 10. On the morning of the day before we caught up the convoy of transport ships. Then a convoy of L.S.S.T. appeared and later a number of L.C.I.L.s attached themselves to our convoy. There were ships everywhere. Most impressive of the lot was the six-inch cruiser which was making a broad zigzag astern of us. Until now the weather conditions had been ideal but the wind got up and also the sea and it seemed to be getting worse. It was all right for us in a ship of 20,000 tons but we felt thankful we were not in one of the L.C.I.L.s that were trying manfully to keep up with us.

Just before the sun went down we got a wonderful view of Mount Etna fifty miles to the north. It seemed certain that the enemy would have O.P.s there who would give warning of our approach. It was not until we climbed Mount Etna a few weeks later that we realized that even a convoy the size of ours was invisible at that distance. Shortly afterwards the ships of our Brigade left the rest of the convoy and made for the release position. We arrived there about midnight and the weather showed no signs of abating. The sea was still far worse than that which had caused the exercise at Safaga Island to be put off. The Colonel gave a last word of encouragement to his battalion over the ship's loud speakers and they took their places in the assault craft about 01.00 hours. They would all be soaked to the skin before they landed. One wondered how many of them would be fit to fight by the time they got ashore but apparently when the time came everyone was so keen to get on to dry land that they would have overcome the strongest opposition.

After the assault troops had gone off there was a period of suspense. There was a fire burning away to the north-west which we assumed to be the result of a raid on Syracuse but there was nothing else to see and some tried to get to sleep. It was not easy as everyone was keyed up and excited. At last S.N.O. broadcast that he had received a signal to say that Red and Green beaches were now in our hands and the ferry service started. L.C.I.L.s came alongside with difficulty and embarked troops. One man had a lucky escape. He fell between the ship and the landing craft with his fifty rounds of ammunition, entrenching tool and several hand grenades all strapped to him. Luckily his Mae West was inflated and to everyone's surprise he stayed afloat and was pulled out by the bo'sun none the worse save for the loss of his rifle.

As it got light the wind dropped and the sea quickly subsided. The beaches were still under shell fire and occasional splashes were seen as shells fell among the craft that were unloading. One had been hit and was burning. Close inshore was a Dutch sloop which fired a broadside every time the guns of the shore batteries fired. Further out to sea was a monitor doing the same thing while our six-inch cruiser ploughed to and fro looking for a target worthy of her strength. Soon the guns on shore were silenced and the ships of our

Brigade moved close inshore. We could now see the details of the place clearly and we were struck by the fact that it looked exactly like the scale models.

All this time we were expecting to see the Luftwaffe. The D.E.M.S. (defensively-equipped merchant ships) gun crews were closed up and very keen to show what they could do if given a chance. Aircraft were spotted overhead and they were very disappointed when they proved to be British. The Luftwaffe seemed to have been caught on the wrong foot that first and vital day.

The move inshore had enabled the ferry service to be speeded up and our turn to go ashore soon came. Just before we left the ship we were greatly heartened by seeing a L.S.T. creep right inshore, open its doors, drop its ramp and land its Sherman tanks in a few minutes. This was the first time we had seen anything like this and it was clear from that moment that these craft, designed in Britain and built in the United States, were going to be the big success in the invasion.

We went ashore in an L.C.A. and had time to thank the tired but cheerful Second Lieutenant R.N., who was in charge, for getting us ashore without wetting our feet, and set off to the wine cellar along a path which seemed strangely familiar. This cellar, unfortunately, contained no wine but many fleas. However it proved a very good and a very safe dressing station until we were able to move inland and occupy a school forty-eight hours later.

There was work to be done as soon as we arrived and it says much for the organization that supplies of blood were available for the wounded right from the beginning. We worked steadily for the first twelve hours but during a break I found time to visit the beaches. Everything was going according to plan. The big ships had already unloaded and had left. The M.T. ships were unloading steadily and the combined Naval and Military team on the beaches were directing things smoothly. Already there was quite a formidable balloon barrage over the beach and A.A. guns were in place. Bulldozers had improved the unloading facilities and a wire track had been laid down.

In the evening a wave of enemy bombers came over but the barrage that they met must have surprised them. A few bombs were dropped but no damage was done.

The next day news filtered through from the other beaches. Everywhere things had gone well though on the American beaches it was touch and go for a little time. It was clear that the enemy had been completely deceived. He had expected us to land at the western end of the island and had made dispositions accordingly. The result was that when our troops landed on the south-eastern corner they had a very valuable forty-eight hours to consolidate before meeting the main force of the enemy.

On the second day the rest of our team who had come by hospital ship joined us and our transport came ashore. We went into a nearby village to reconnoitre more suitable premises. While we were there a driver came up and inquired the way to the Monte Highway. We felt that the conquest of Sicily had really begun. We were surprised to see that the Sappers had already got a train working. Everything had gone better than the most sanguine of us had dared hope and there was an Allied Army fighting in Europe for the first time since the fall of France.