

INVASION OF ITALY

From Alex. Clifford for Combined British Press

Sicilian Embarkation Port,
Thursday

They've been embarking to invade Italy all the afternoon in this shadeless sunstruck port.

The fierce white glare of light has been lying over everything drowning all colours and making men screw their eyes almost shut even when occasional cloud went across the sun. The bare stone of the jetties has been throwing back the heat with a sharp ovenlike glow. And sweating men laden with assault equipment have been pouring into the harbour area in endless khaki streams.

They've been coming in all day passing through the towns and villages of the coast in trucks or on their weary dustladen feet. Sicilian men and women sitting at their doors selling their basketfuls of hazelnuts and grapes and tomatoes watched them as they went by. Barberbers left their clients and pushed aside the bead curtains of their saloons to watch some specially long column of footsloggers trudge past. The children ran along side them and offered them tomatoes or bunches of grapes. The Sicilians saw it just as an interesting troop movement - they couldn't know where the men were bound. They watched it simply as a show.

Down at the quayside the different units were penned into roped off strips as passengers for different excursion trains are kept separate at big railway stations during a bank holiday rush. Beneath/improvised shelter of corrugated iron and old bits of tarpaulin a small committee of officers with sweat streaming down their faces were sorting the various units out and releasing them to their ships in the proper order.

Carefully the waiting men avoided any unnecessary movement for they didn't want to sweat more than they already had. The only thing worth wasting energy on was a patch of shade. But there wasn't any shade here. It was an open unsheltered wilderness of dusty earth and glowing stone.

One by one the units were released from their pens and sent onto the quaysides. From their tinhats - which were now much too hot to touch outside - down to their duststained boots they were accoutred for landing. All that they needed to sustain life and preserve life and take life was on their backs. Most have just one blanket wrapped up in a waterproof gas cape. Their emergency rations and their first-aid kits and their mosquito cream and the other special little comforts and necessities that are issued for any landing were in their haversacks. From each haversack hung a white enamel mug. All waterbottles were full. There was rifle or machinegun or tommygun on every shoulder.

The men who were not actually assault troops but who would be landing in succeeding waves carried all sorts of odd extras. Most had pickaxe or shovel or some sort of entrenching tool. Some had minedetectors. I watched a column of them marching along the quayside and every man seemed to have something different. One had a bunch of noticeboards, another an armful of coiled wire, another a caseful of mines, another a Verrey light pistol with ammunition and so forth. One man just had a large loaf of white bread. "You never know when you'll need it," he said.

They picked their way along the shiplined quayside over boxes full of ammunition and rations, heaps of pneumatic lifebelts, handcarts full of miscellaneous kit and great coils of rope. They exchanged ribald jokes with some ackack gunners stationed there who had rigged themselves up a little shelter against the sun. Someone dropped a bar of chocolate which melted in three seconds on the hot stone into a brown gooey mess so that the ranks divided to pass round it. There was a holdup when someone saw a lovely violet jellyfish fringed with black in the turquoise sea and everyone stopped to watch it.

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Several people noticed that the rations were compo-assorted hampers which provide food for fourteen men for one day or one man for fourteen days. There were shouts of "It isn't just bully-beef this time." A water-pipe along the quay was leaking and shooting up a fine spray of water into the air and men were trying to catch it in their mugs. "Is it drinking water?" one asked me. "I don't know" I said. "Well you've got to die some time" he said cheerfully and drank it off.

On they marched endlessly. The sweat made little clean furrows down their dusty faces showing the glowing ruddy tan beneath. Again and again they rubbed the sweat out of their eyes so that they could twist their necks and look up at the planes in the sky. Fighters and bombers had been humming overhead all day long and these great processions of light and medium bombers in groups of a dozen have become so common that no one really wants to gaze at them any more. But you somehow cannot avoid looking to see whether as many come back as went out. If the total you see is still divisible by three it is all right. Somehow today it always seemed to be all right.

Gradually the serried rows of landing craft filled up. Men shouted from ship to ship whenever they saw anyone they knew. They all knew where they were going and what they were in for and I suppose most were wondering a little apprehensively what it would be like.

But there was excitement in the air and it made men friendly and cheerful. This is the third invasion by sea we have done in the Mediterranean in three months but it is still exciting.

It grew cooler with evening and the shuttling bombers were silhouetted against dramatic banks of clouds. Some of the landing craft began to steal out to sea. They manoeuvred gently on the dancing waters, forming up into convoy. In a few hours they would make landfall in Italy.

MINISTRY OF INFORMATION