

IN ITALY BY DOUGLAS BRASS REPRESENTING THE COMBINED AUSTRALIAN PRESS

Italian mainland
First toehold
Friday

The ferry service to Europe is running again. It was running this morning, unexcitedly, reliably, half an hour after the first British troops were ashore in Italy. I used it to come ashore here and will use it to go back to Sicily later on.

The danger of a trip to Europe existed chiefly in our imaginations just as it has existed in the imagination of those first assault troops not quite sure what they would find along these beaches. Nobody bothered us, from air, sea or land, until we set foot north of Reggio. Nobody would have bothered us even then - had a Luftwaffe group not decided at that moment the moment of its first and only flash raid of the day. Divebombers came down out of the sun. Their bombs straddled the men around us, two landing craft, and several trucks with magnificent lack of effect. I had a nervous moment, but it was a useless piece of bombing. That the Luftwaffe waited until 10.30 to make its first attempt to hinder landings was indicative of the one-sided nature of the whole offensive. It seemed to be an admission of weakness or unwillingness.

A couple of hours before we had not very hopefully approached the colonel ^{charge} of the embarkation beach at South Messina. Could he take one or two of us across? "Sure" he said, "climb aboard. But I warn you it may be a one-way trip". He had some "ducks" (amphibious landing craft) preparing to leave. We clambered aboard one of the "ducks". The driver, Richard Oliver, a snubnosed North Countryman from Sunderland slipped his vehicle into gear and lumbered down the beach. The truck bumped once or twice, spluttered, lost its feet, changed its motion and suddenly became a boat, rolling drunkenly in the first offshore wavelets. Driver Oliver kept on driving as if this operation was the most natural thing in the world. He turned round to me, "wouldn't smoke if I were you", he said, "we're carrying ammunition".

Sicily was slipping away behind us and Italy slowly becoming clearer though the sun behind its hills kept details of its landscape vague until we approached its beaches. The bank of smoke which had overclung the coast in the early morning as a result of artillery bombardment was sheering off in a warm breeze from the north. Reggio was looming up on our beam and more ships were everywhere - landing craft and naval vessels. Driver Oliver's craft was gradually establishing itself as leader of an amphibious convoy. His company was behind us in irregular rows, ploughing and heaving along for all the world like a fleet of pleasure craft at a regatta. As we rolled and plunged the more careful of us searched the sky for aircraft. There was one plane fantastically high leaving a vapour stream like a comet against the blue. This was an enemy reconnaissance. His photographs must have held quite a lot of interest for the Axis-Italian command. There were no other planes. Driver Oliver lit a cigarette. "No smoking?" I reminded him. "It's all right, sir," he said, "we are not carrying any petrol".

Italy was now closer than Sicily. We were going obliquely across the Straits ignoring for some probably very good military reason the shortest crossing from the vicinity of Messina. It was becoming less like a ferry trip and more like a voyage. "Just like driving your own private launch" Driver Oliver confided.

Our guns began firing again, over our heads. We could see gunflashes on the Messina coast, hear their passing scream and watch the points of detonation on the mainland. Firing was directed high above the beaches, along the first mountain ridges where some elements of the enemy we learned later were still showing signs of an uneasy presence if not of marked activity.

Someone said "Apparently we've just walked into Reggio". And it certainly seemed that the city must have been occupied so quiet was the coast along its front.

We could make out now the individual craft lying along the Italian beaches, as well as individual buildings, traffic here and there on well-defined roads. One of these roads suddenly spurted forth several high columns of dust. We thought these were shellbursts. They weren't. They were demolitions where British engineers were clearing obstructions to hasten the traffic rapidly piling in a restricted area. But we thought they were shellbursts and hoped vaguely we wouldn't be landing close by. But our landing was even simpler, more amazing, than our take-off. We swayed inshore, hit bottom, changed from propeller to wheels and staggered up the beach.

/A policeman

A policeman waving a coloured flag showed us where to go. These men on the beach might have been there a month. They had been there perhaps four hours. "All tickets please" one of them shouted. "Go and drown yourself mate" a driver replied "I left my waistcoat pocket behind".

A few fires were still burning along the waterfront where the morning's shells had found something more than instantaneously inflammable. Here Eighth Army troops on the mainland were practically unanimous in praising the artillery bombardment as the principal factor in the lack of resistance. The morning's barrage, following those of the last few days, had utterly demoralised the Italian defenders.

The bombardments had given the coast a terrific shaking. There were marks of it everywhere - along the beaches, roads and tracks, in the villages and up the ridges. Many Italian soldiers were too shellshocked even to give themselves up and were found in a dazed condition hiding in holes or houses.

Resistance to the landings has been outrageously slight, practically non-existent. Two or three shells apparently had landed near the beach soon after dawn but they were the only ones.

We visited several dressing stations. The only casualties were accident cases or normal cases of suddenly developed sickness. The only battle casualty in one whole battalion was a private whose companion had accidentally shot him through the foot in landing. This first assault on Europe has been bloodless for the attackers. I looked for one of the men who had brought one of the first vehicles. He was Fred Channel of Birkenhead. "We didn't expect this sort of thing - quite", he told me. "We expected to have to fight for it. All we had to do was get ourselves ashore while our guns on the other side did the job. The barrage was a terrific sight. Whole hillsides were a mass of fire. Bursts seemed to be coming down to the beach then retreating again up the slopes. As long as we could remember they were our guns it was fine". Channel had landed his truck a quarter of an hour after the first assault infantry. The firstfooters - sappers and supporting infantry - had stepped ashore round about zero hour at half-past four. They had found no mines, only wire. The sappers sent up their allclear signal just after five.

It was these white and green Very lights I had seen and guessed at from the other side of the Straits. Very soon after that the landing was in full swing. More traffic was moving inland when we landed this morning up wide tracks cleared through orange groves by bulldozers. Tracks bordered with uprooted trees were wide and carrying twoway lanes. Their preparation in such rapid time, in such otherwise impenetrable country, was a fine achievement. The great part of an army was winging into action as if it had merely advanced up a road and not crossed eight miles of sea and carved its way through sand and vegetation.

It was a triumph for allied military engineers on top of the triumph of allied gunners. It was a lesson on the future.

We entered Reggio today expecting to find it deserted and damaged but not expecting to find it smashed so badly as it is. Bombing and shelling have done their work and Reggio is sadly, impressively like some Sicilian cities. Reggio, first Italian mainland city to be occupied by British troops, was something of an anticlimax. There was nobody in Reggio today apart from the Eighth Army troops, their prisoners and a few inevitably smart Carabinieri, and scattering and begging old men and women, these last beginning to pluck up enough courage to loot the peanut and flour stores. One building we found relatively undamaged was the handsome State Opera House recently built and dedicated it seemed more to Fascism than to art. Its chandeliered reception rooms carried portraits, photographs and busts of Mussolini on every wall, its glass covered bookcases many volumes of the history of Fascism and one elaborate morocco set of the Duco's "writings and speeches". Up one of its marble staircases I found a soldier softly playing Georgia on a grand piano whose polished mahogany was blackened with hastily destroyed papers. Outside this ornate tomb of Fascism somebody had scribbled on the wall. "Viva Bruno Mussolini". Reggio was a disappointment.

Shellfire burst forth later in the day from the mouth of the Straits instead of Messina's hills and shores. The Royal Navy was at work again. Several ships opened a bombardment of the headland. We could see our ships flare, rock and gush black smoke low on the horizon and their shells land spectacularly to the south. One could imagine artillerymen across the Straits grinning respectfully and saying "There's the the navy at work again messing up our targets. Gad, what a punch they pack". It seemed to us, sitting safe on the Italian shore, that the guns both on land and at sea packed a punch only the enemy could comprehend. It had been a gunner's invasion.