

EVERYTHING JUST TICKED ALONG

BY ROSS MUNRO REPRESENTING COMBINED PRESS

With the Invasion Forces,September 5, 1943.

We had been ordered to prepare to embark. Flares had been stopped and everyone had a snooze to steady him up for the jaunt over the Straits. We loaded on our kit, said a few goodbyes to good friends and marched down to the pebble beach.

Our path was marked with white tapes and the organization on the beach was an eye-opener to me. Even in complete darkness everything went right. We moved to our craft and piled into it. The only sound was the landing craft motors turning over and the voice of the British beachmaster giving instructions in Oxford overtones over a broadcast system.

Halton, of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and myself were in the same landing craft with Brigadier Capt. Mike Dare, Montreal; Capt. Bob Prince, New York City; Lieut. John Morris Prescott and Capt. Perry Cadegan, Glace Bay, with about thirty other ranks and two loaded jeeps. From here the landing was directed.

It was a perfect night for such an attack. The sea was calm and satiny under the starry skies. There was no moon and a slight sea haze which reduced coastal visibility. And Italy looked so close. Infantry companies, going in first, took off in their landing craft and shortly afterwards our flotilla edged off the beach and put to sea. We were on our way.

We sailed out into the Straits at 3 a.m. and it was like any other boat trip. You felt like dozing off for forty winks. But at 3.30 you jolted into reality in short order when the 8th Army artillery barrage begun right on the dot. The idea was to hit the whole area where the British and Canadian troops were landing and hit it hard. If any guns showed their positions by blazing away counter battery experts were on hand to knock them out of action.

We stood on our packs to get a better view of the artillery spectacle. It was so stupendous it almost made you forget you were in the middle of Messina narrows going to Italy. First the guns around Messina flamed and flashed and then medium regiments supporting the Canadian positions further south let loose.

There, between two shores, we were right in line for ear splitting sounds. Flashes almost blind you out at sea if you stared at them. Six searchlights reached stiffly into the sky presumably markers for navigation and other operational needs. All the time we expected enemy bombers to come over with flares and attack but there was not a single raid on the landing craft before daylight.

Everything was going so well we thought something terrible would happen before long but right to the finish of the landing job everything just ticked along.

About 5.15 a.m. Cpl. Don Filmore Stellarton, N.S. operating a field wireless in a craft, picked up the first reports from troops touching down. The troops had gained their shoreline objectives and were moving swiftly into the town. Others were getting ashore without opposition on another sector of the beach. News was good all the way. The Brigadier then ran his craft in 300 yards from the shore and standing on the stern looked the situation over.

Two big fires were burning in the northern suburbs of Reggio. Canadian troops were all over the beaches and moving inland in the half light of dawn. We cruised south along the coast and had a close look at the town from the sea and it seemed to have fallen. A German 88 m.m. battery, a good distance away, pounded at the landing craft but the ranging was not particularly good. Artillery from Sicily concentrations was still going full blast lifting the barrage inland as the Canadians gained ground.

Lying off Italy preparing to land in our boat Cpl. Earl Crozier, Toronto, quietly remarked "makes you think of the Toronto Express, doesn't it?" Messina Straits from shore to shore palled now in a grayish smoke - some of it deliberately laid by gunners and the Navy but the smoke concoction which shielded us also had the pungent odour of gunpowder from thousands of rounds of high explosive which had been fired.

As it was going ashore our flotilla grounded on the beach and we all walked off "dryshod" which is Combined Ops word for dry landings. For the first time I lost a good portion of my kit by jumping into the sea. The first soldier I talked to on the beach was an impeccably turned out British redcap provost corporal who was handling the traffic on the beach as if he were in Algiers or Surrey. The troops are pushing into various parts of Reggio and I followed them about the city which was as empty as a shell.