

By A.B. Austin, representing the Combined British Press

near Naples,  
September 9.

We landed nearest to Naples. And armistice or no armistice we had to fight. When the Brigadier's message was passed through the landing craft in the small hours of the morning announcing this we smiled to ourselves. All the starlit coast from Capri out there behind us to the hills of the Campagna ahead seemed to be alight with "opposition". German opposition. Now at this hour of the siesta it is a perfect picture of an Armistice day.

German tiger tanks and self-propelled guns are covering one of the beaches on which we landed this morning. So are German machine-gun nests. A friend of mine who was making for that beach has just been stopped by a corporal with the polite enquiry "do you know where you're going sir?"

On the other beaches we are not merely firmly landed but have pushed well inland.

Our 25 pounder batteries are rending the air cool, even in the sunshine after Africa. I mention all this because although it is a passing phase and quite normal for an invasion, we feel that it is a little out of place on Armistice Day. Again and again from soldiers digging slit trenches, signallers fitting up wireless sets, engineers looking for mines, I hear the comic chorus "Armistice Day, bloody Armistice Day".

But although there seemed to be more opposition on our part of the coast, at least than on most of the Sicilian beaches there was something not quite normal about this invasion from the very beginning. It was partly the fact that the Italian coast defence guns did not fire though everything that could be manned by the Germans did. Had the Italians cut off the power supply for the searchlights on which the guns depend at night or were they just unmanned?

The feeling of oddity began the afternoon before as we sailed over the Tyrrhenian Sea in a flat calm after two days of sea sickness. The hot afternoon faded into a cool exquisite evening with a rising half moon. Under the moon a Focke Wulf 190 skimmed suddenly towards the convoy and was off again unharmed with a twist of his wings and a burst of red hot tracer chivvying his tail. "Off" we said to ourselves. "To bring back his friends from the Naples airfields or Sardinia."

At twilight, too, all the landing craft and warships behind us burst into fountains of red tracer bullets. Flares from enemy planes came dazzling over us. That made the American Flotilla Commander on our bridge cruise us up and down the miles of convoy, closing in on the square lumbering landing craft to shout through his megaphone "close up, close up", trying to prevent stragglers being cut off "like a bloody schoolmaster".

As he said, the American flotilla captain with the British brigadier on the bridge and the American sailors sharing their coffee with British soldiers below, were symbols of this invasion.

Never before has there been such a thoroughly intermixed Allied combined operation. We were the British part of the Fifth Army under Lieutenant General Mark Clark sailing towards Naples in American landing craft and escorted by British and American warships but a few flares was not all we had expected of the Luftwaffe. We were many miles beyond the usual range of our own fighter aircraft. Spitfires would not be able to stay long overhead. It should even by day have been a picnic for the Messerschmitts and Focke Wulfs. They are over us now as I type in this Italian apple orchard but over the sea they were remarkably absent.

Still, I owe to them my first real sniff of Italian soil.

We had crossed the beach and were filing up a sandy lane between lemon and almond and apple trees and tomato vines when the first Messerschmitt came snarling down. I found myself lying face downwards in a bed of wet mint, fresher and sweeter than anything in Africa.

That was after we had watched the light glow on the white town of Salerno under the hills where some building seemed to flame for hours; after we had seen the red and green points of light flicker out on the shore and glow steadily to tell us that our landing beach was held. Rockets should have followed - the success signal of the first landing parties but they were slow in coming. /The

The Brigade Major went ashore to find out what had happened. "Lines" they said, lines everywhere. And machine-gun nests behind them. No use throwing your guns and trucks into the beach before a lane had been cleared. We landed finally full in the eye of the rising sun zig-zagging in to the shingle with a few German shell bursts falling wide.

Landing ships were already lying like half stranded whales, nose on to the beach, disgorging 25 pounder guns and jeeps and Bren carriers and ammunition trucks. That was reassuring for the German 88 millimetre gun batteries were very active from the foothills further back. Evidently the enemy meant to use his old Tunisian trick of harassing us with mortar, machine-gun and anti-tank fire from hill positions until he could collect himself for a counter attack. He has tried to counter attack since.

As I type he is almost back on the beach at one point just south of us trying to cut us off from the next force. It is odd to hear machine-gun fire coming from alongside as well as from inland, but they tell me we are about to encircle the enemy on the beach. I hope so.

One small bunch of enemy ~~have~~ already been encircled. Perhaps I should not call them enemy. They were disarmed bedraggled Italian soldiers.

Late last night when the Italian people heard by wireless of the armistice the Germans came to the Italian troops on this coast. "They said to us 'You are traitors'" said one Italian soldier, "and they broke our rifles." We found the broken rifles dumped in a house near the beach.

What the rest of Italy thinks of the armistice I cannot yet say. This is a pocket of war. If it were not for the war it would be a very pleasant pocket, one of the things in Italy which are even creditable to Mussolini. One of his hobbies before he made the mistake of turning to war was the reclamation of marshland. This triangular plain of the River Sele, south of Salerno, was once marshland. Now it is rich with lemons, tomatoes, almonds, hops, apples and maize. That is not a passage out of the soldier's guide to Italy which has been handed round. It is a catalogue of the fruits I can see from where I sit.

As I walked between the treble vines to refresh myself (water being precious)

a few minutes ago a sergeant called me back. "We have three Bren guns trained on that field" he said. "Any movement there is presumed to be enemy." A captain in a famous regiment has just stopped to talk. "Bit rough up there" he said, pointing to the foothills. perhaps it is a little hard on armistice day.

I celebrated armistice night under a lemon tree. If I had not known about this temporary pocket of war into which we had run I might have thought it was a real armistice night. The moonlight was full of cracking and tappings and drummings and rumblings like a city using up all its fireworks to show its approval of peace.

I had just fallen asleep when I was wakened by the red skinning of tracer bullets and the white flash of shell bursts overhead.

Some German plane was taking a last wistful look at this part of the coast of Italy. The tracers floated up to the stars in that lazy way they have like tropical fish seen through an aquarium window.

As I fell asleep again a sergeant's voice said, "Your duties, Thomson, are to patrol this area. Remember that anyone on the move here at night is acting suspicious." Very proper. It might seem snug here under the lemon tree with Thomson at the ready, but our situation was a curious one for a force that had just completed a successful landing.

That counter attack by the enemy's Tiger tanks and panzer grenadiers down to the next beach had not yet been beaten back so that we were lying with a corridor of enemy only half a mile away between us and the next part of the Allied force.

Of course, the Germans could not stay there indefinitely. But which way would they try to break out? That armistice day battle on the beach was the roughest fight of the landing.

This morning it looks as if the beach had been cleared and the Germans were pulling back. Among other details that means that this report may now have a chance of starting its complicated journey home, <sup>at least</sup> as if the clearing of the Germans from Italy can now begin to go with a swing after the first day's hard tussle.

My own particular consolation is that the jeep carrying all our kit has just arrived. It was on a landing craft. Soon we shall have time to find out whether our spare shirts are covered in oil or not. Meanwhile there is first, breakfast - an anti-malaria pill and a gulp of water. This reclaimed marshland is as rich in malaria mosquitoes as in fruits. Never mind. The future holds promise for everybody. As an old soldier said to me when describing the Italian campaign of a quarter of a century ago "It were a lovely drop of war. Wine running down your tunic like Condy's fluid."

\*\*\*\*\*

MINISTRY OF INFORMATION