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THE RETURN TO EUROPE

Despatch from Italy from M. Halton, representing the Canadian
Broadcasting Corporation

Now Dunkirk has been avenged, only three years and two months after our world seemed crumbling about our shoulders, we have landed on another beach and established a bridgehead on the Continent of Europe. Three years ago the world trembled before the German power, and most of the world decided that this power was invincible, and that one of the few great turning points in history has been reached.

Now we return to Europe surely people will know now that though we often withdraw we always at the last come back. It is fitting and historic justice that the British army which landed in Italy included units which had fought at Dunkirk and the Canadian Division which was the bulwark of the defences of Britain in that summer of almost three years ago. Three years ago we had to borrow shot-guns to defend ourselves, and now we have such enormous firepower that the enemy could not oppose our landing in Europe. As our assault forces sailed in the dark from Sicily we had a gun along every ten yards of that coast tearing our target to pieces and during the previous days we had had I wish I could tell you how many squadrons of fighters wheeling and diving over the Straits like sparrow-hawks to protect the bombers, and now, as I speak on a hillside in Italy, our forces are seeking battle, and I can see our thousands of war machines and war vehicles clanking along the roads.

/We

We are in Italy, unhappy Italy, that old clay made for sorrow, and the assault landing cost us only two men wounded during the actual landing. Not a single shot disturbed us, but later in the day the enemy dropped a few shells on the beaches, and a few bombs. Listeners may have heard them during my talk, and two men were wounded. That was our only entrance fee into the European theatre. It took the British forces only seventeen days after the fall of Messina to mount the invasion of Europe.

This is a prodigious effort and prodigious organisation. Think of the tens of thousands of vehicles needed to carry the vast supplies and assemble them as secretly as possible on the beaches from which the assault forces disembark. Think of the thousands of landing craft of all kinds - the infantry landing craft, the motor landing craft, and all the rest moving forward at the appointed hour from dozens of different ports in Africa and Malta and Sicily, and think of the perfect timing and co-ordination needed to have every vehicle and every ship at exactly the right place at exactly the right time. Think of the number of men and machines and ships which are needed to put one fighting company of less than a hundred men into battle across a stretch of water and then think of what is needed to put many thousands of men into battle.

/It was

It was indeed a prodigious effort to mount in seventeen days, and the only thing that went wrong out of all that was that three of our landing craft touched down on the beaches of Italy two hundred yards from the place arranged. On the previous afternoon General Simonds called us in and briefed those of us who were going in with the assault brigade of the Canadian Division. The role of the Eighth Army was to make a bridgehead on the Continent of Europe and clear the Straits of Messina. The role of our assault brigade was to storm the beaches and wipe out the enemy machine-gun positions and gun batteries on the heights.

We looked up as the General talked and saw our target seven miles away across the classic Straits, the Straits which armies with banners have crossed so many times in history. There was Reggio, there was the twin-peaked hill we called Fort Hill, where the main German guns were; there was the pleasant beach where we were to land and even if things went as well as we expected surely there would be a storm of fire on that beach.

/With

With our young C.B.C. engineer, Paul Johnson, I joined the assault brigade when night fell in the little Sicilian village. Johnson and I were as anxious as any that night that the landing should go well because we had to go ashore with our portable radio equipment, which weighs one hundred and seventy pounds. I cannot say we were happy about this prospect. If we met fire on the beaches, and we were sure there would be some opposition at best, it would be hard enough to land and run forward empty-handed, let alone with a hundred and seventy pounds of equipment. What was worse there was a good chance that we should have to make a wet landing under fire. That is that the landing craft would touch down some distance from the shore. So we waterproofed our equipment and my typewriter, and tied life-belts round it so that if necessary we could float it to the shore. But as I say were not exactly as happy as if we had been drinking a chocolate milk shake in Edmonton, Alberta.

We sat with the troops under the orange trees. It is always a gripping thing to watch soldiers waiting for a zero hour. A man thinks this is it. This is my time. There is no going back. Now some of the men lay on the ground trying to sleep, their heads on their packs. One little group was bravely singing, singing the old songs about springtime in the Rockies, and there's a long long trail awinding. Tins of food were opened, and some found it hard to eat. I watched them a long time, young men from all the far off Canadian provinces, now sitting at the foot of Mount Etna as the clock ticked for their hour. If the Germans had guessed they could easily have lit the Straits like, say, by flares dropped from aircraft, and shelled us as we moved. There was that to fear after midnight. Numbers were called and each little party filed aboard its allotted assault landing craft, and just after three o'clock we were under way. There was no sound, but that of our chunking engines. We eased our heavy packs from our shoulders and stood crowded together in the dark waiting for the barrage we knew was coming.

When it came, an hour before we were to land in Italy, it was a splendid thing, but almost frightening though it was ours. Perhaps you have seen the film "Desert Victory". It was like that. It was one of the half dozen most terrific shows of the war. The island we had left was a continuous, terrible rippling of gun flashes. We were half-deafened by the ceaseless cracking thunder and the tens of thousands of shells went over us with tens of thousands of rushing sounds like maddened wings.

We peered through the dark at Italy, we saw the shells burst, saw the fires break out, saw occasional awful belches of flame as something inflammable was hit.

"If we had only had something like this at Dieppe" said a Canadian officer, and indeed as our General had told us this was more like a river crossing than a combined operation across a dividing sea, and our great guns were actually blowing the tops off the peaks and ridges of Calabria.

At half past four, when it was still dark, we were there, and still there were no enemy flares to light us up, still no enemy shells dropping among us, and in the dark the landing craft of our first battalion ran in and touched down on the beaches of Italy. Our own little ship went back and forth along the shore.

Waiting, we listened as intently as a few of us had never listened before, listening for a sound of battle, and we crowded round our radio waiting for the first report. It came. There was no opposition. Yet we were jubilant with hope, and then just at first light it was our turn to go. "We're going in," called our Canadian skipper, and the craft touched down as lightly as a rowboat. The ramp was lowered, and we stepped on to the soil of Italy.

There was not a shot. We laboured through the soft sand to the shelter of a railway embankment, and Paul Johnson and I, sweating, put down our heavy equipment. We were happy enough now. It was a climatic moment in history, and in our lives, our good men not falling on the beaches, and the bridgehead into Europe was made.

The fog of the smoke and drifting cordite fumes from our thousands of shells made our beaches unreal, and through this mist we saw a memorable enough sight. Italian soldiers were coming up to us to shake hands and be made prisoner.

/Sappers

Sappers were hurrying up the slopes with their brooms, looking for mines, soldiers were going forward at the double through the soft sand, craft after craft touched down, and out of the mouths of the ships came the fantastic miscellany of war - the armed men and machine-guns, and then great bulldozers.

I found myself astonished at the details and the equipment that had been thought of. Apparently there is nothing we don't know about a combined operation, nothing we had forgotten, even to big mats of steel mesh to unroll in the sand so the vehicles wouldn't be stuck, as if they were rolling out the carpets for a triumphal entry.

Every unit worked and moved like a clock, and not a second was wasted, for there was still a chance that the enemy was just waiting until the beaches were a mass of men and equipment before pouring out a hail of shells and bullets from the heights, but before the sun rose high on that morning of September the third we knew that the enemy was gone, unable to fire one single shot in defence of his country.

Either we had surprised the enemy by doing the obvious thing and attacking directly across the Straits of Messina or else, which is more likely, he had decided not to try to hold the southern tip of Italy. I heard one of our soldiers shout to another: "These assault landings get easier ever time." But we have no illusions about the battle for Italy being over, and yet it is not an exaggeration to say that our troops are boiling over for contact with the enemy.

We are pursuing him hard. There will be many demolitions and many repairing jobs to be done by the engineers under fire before our debouch into the plains.

As the assault troops were still landing I walked down the road into the town. The havoc caused by our shells a few hours before was everywhere - trees torn to pieces or uprooted, almost every building damaged. The town seemed deserted, and in fact almost all the people had gone, but an old man and an old woman, too stubborn or serene to be moved out of their homes by war, came out of a house smiling, and called "Good Morning."

/Down

Down each street came files of Italian soldiers. One whole battalion came along surrendering, led by their Colonel. I went into another house and found an old man frying a meal of herbs over a wood fire. He said this was all he had to eat for two weeks, and he was unbelieving when I gave him a tin of meat and vegetables and some tea. "Questa maladetta guerra" he said - "This awful war."

Every Italian we see spits out the name Mussolini, and then makes the motion of cutting a throat. This is not an obsequiousness done for our benefit. It is the feeling of the Italian people. They know we are their friends, and I remember thinking, as I walked along a street and suddenly realized that I was walking unarmed in an enemy town ten minutes after landing. What German could walk down the street of a conquered land and not think of the possibility of some one shooting him.

Army officials tell me that the Italians here are even more friendly and co-operative than the Sicilians. It is plain that though there is still a Government in Rome the Italian people are out of the war. Poor Italy. She is now climbing the Scala Santa step by step. The curse of Garibaldi has fallen on her, and as was prophesied she is weeping tears of blood.

The British and the Canadians, the men of the Eighth Army. It was the army of the Nile, and the army of those terrible Libyan days, and the army of Tunisia, and now it is the army of Italy. Just over a year ago it was fighting for its life and for the whole Middle East at Alamein. Now with the proud Crusader crest of the Eighth Army on the shoulders of the British, and the already honoured proud red badge on the shoulders of the Canadians, we push north through the mountains of Calabria toward the victory.

MINISTRY OF INFORMATION