

Collier's

SEPTEMBER 25, 1943

WITH
EISENHOWER
IN SICILY

BY JOHN GUNTHER



Commander and Commander in Chief meet in Palermo
—Generals Patton and Eisenhower.

A famous correspondent here describes a historic moment and appraises the man who made it possible, as Ike Eisenhower sets foot on the soil of Axis Europe for the first time

IT GAVE me an odd feeling to be the third American to set foot on this part of Sicily. The first was General Eisenhower, the second his naval aide, Commander Harry Butcher, U.S.N. It happened that I was right behind them. I was the only American newspaperman in a party of eleven that made the trip.

The place was a secluded beach near the southeastern tip of Sicily off Cape Passero, the time was 10:24 A. M., Monday, July 12th. I hoped Eisenhower would say something in the Stanley-Livingstone tradition—for instance, "My name is Eisenhower."

What the Commander in Chief did say was good enough. There was no warning whatever that he was arriving. He walked up to the British officer we saw, a colonel with a long, dusty mustache, and said, "Good morning. I'm General Eisenhower." The colonel almost passed out with surprise.

Our trip began the night before. A lovely lopsided moon dappled the shining water. We assembled near a blacked-out pier. A car with quadruple dimmed headlights slithered around a dark corner, and a brisk gray-haired officer in white uniform stepped out, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, CINC, Mediterranean Fleet. A moment later came Eisenhower's car. Eisenhower and Cunningham talked a moment, then shook hands. We all stepped into the admiral's barge.

Cunningham said, "Good luck, General."

Eisenhower replied, "Thanks, sir."

Eisenhower glanced at the barge. "I'd trade you a lot for this," he grinned.

Cunningham, a salty fellow replied, "Wait till your dinner starts to go up and down."

The destroyer loaned us by the Royal Navy looked sleek and powerful as we drew close. We climbed up a joggling rope ladder, and Eisenhower chuckled, "I never know what to do when they pipe me on." Of eleven in our party two were American generals, one was a British gen-



eral on Eisenhower's staff, others included a British commodore, representing the Navy, a young American parachute officer, and my colleague, E. J. Gilling, who represented the British press, as I represented the American. We were all working for the common pool.

Our generals, except Eisenhower, were in full regalia—steel helmets, knapsacks on their backs, canteens and torches in their belts. Butcher, Gilling and I had toothbrushes, nothing much else. I inspected with admiration the neatness and efficiency of American equipment. All their harnesses fit so perfectly even though I myself can never make them work. But our generals seemed embarrassed by the plenitude of their kit, especially the helmets. One general apologized, "General Patton won't let anyone ashore without one."

Most of us went to sleep in the wardroom as the destroyer slipped out of the harbor. A young ensign loaned me a bedroll. I stretched out on the floor. This destroyer had picked up four German aviators from the water the night before and brought them in. They had been on a life raft ninety hours. A British lieutenant, naked to the waist and with shaggy black beard, said, "They were pretty pooped. We almost chucked one of them over."

Later the Germans were brought up on the deck of the destroyer and shown the prodigious display of warships steaming past. One German said, "I don't believe it. It can't be true." He had swallowed whole the Nazi propaganda that the British Mediterranean Fleet had been sunk.

Next morning we were called at five. By the time I got to the bridge about 5:30, Eisenhower and Butcher were already there and Sicily was in sight. Its purple shore was outlined against a rosy dawn streaked with fast-moving light clouds. Aircraft were overhead, and someone remarked jovially, "Hope you don't shoot down our own by mistake."

Then we approached our first destination and transferred from the destroyer to a small squat boat. The swell was high and glossy, and we landlubbers tumbled awkwardly down the rope, bouncing into the new craft.

We slithered across rollers, reached

Eisenhower in Sicily

General Patton's headquarters ship and climbed aboard.

Then suddenly the urgency and dramatic quality of this mission became manifest. We were invading the continent of Europe. For the first time we were about to set foot on Axis territory, Europe itself. The first landings had taken place only forty-eight hours before, others were still going on. We had little information as to the progress of the fighting. And soon it became very clear that the war was very close.

An American cruiser was about a mile offshore. It began to bark. First a flash, then a crack, then a whish of shell, finally the echo plunging back from the drear Sicilian hills. We watched the floating cloud of smoke, first white, then gray, then yellowish at its edges.

A naval officer said dryly, "When it makes yellow smoke it's called smokeless. I don't know why."

The rate of firing increased, and another officer, American, said, "They must be on target now."

We saw fires quite near. I asked an officer when the Luftwaffe had been over this harbor. He replied, "Constantly."

There were 180 Nazi sorties yesterday and they did some damage. I walked up to an officer in khaki with three stars but I didn't notice he wore a black tie, showing he was Navy, not Army. I said, "Good morning, General."

He replied, "Hell, I'm an admiral." Indeed he was—he was Vice-Admiral Henry K. Hewitt, Commander of U. S. Naval Forces in the Mediterranean.

A Heroic Exhaustion

Another officer came up, leaned over to light a cigarette, fumbled and put his mouth over the match instead of the cigarette. He said, "I am captain of this ship. I haven't had any sleep and, God, I'm tired." Finally he got the match to the cigarette and added, "Guess I can't see straight yet."

The harbor was jammed with shipping. Every kind of craft was busy rushing to shore, unloading, returning, reloading. I counted more than a hundred ships. Our cruiser continued to bark angrily, but there was no sign of the Luftwaffe.

The admiral said, "The devils sneak in from those hills. Their spotters squirt information to them by radio, and they skip low through ravines before our boys can spot them, then dash away before our craft can get here. The lads on the beach who have been machine-gunned a lot have nervous triggers by this time. Sometimes they let go at our own planes. It's hard to tell ours from Messerschmitts at ten thousand feet."

Another admiral said, "We felt kind of helpless last night. The Luftwaffe came, dropped flares, bombed us to hell and left undisturbed. We haven't any night fighters yet."

Meantime, Eisenhower was having breakfast with Patton. Soon we took leave. The steel-helmeted Patton stood at the edge of the rope ladder looking like a Roman emperor carved in brown stone. He waved goodbye. We bounced back to our destroyer and started to coast along the beach—if coast is the proper word to describe a speed of almost forty miles an hour. Eisenhower talked with the captain on the bridge. Butcher sat in a wooden chair, high above, and the rest of us clus-

Eisenhower in Sicily

tered around.

The Villages Were Deserted

At about nine we approached an American squadron, and Eisenhower ordered a message sent to all ships, "Best wishes and good luck." By this time we were becoming aware how spectacularly successful our landings had been all along the shore. Cunningham said the American admiral's work was as good as any seamanship he'd ever seen. Blinkers flashed, conveying a message over smooth water. All of us, meantime, were closely watching the Sicilian beaches. Most of the villages, as far as we could tell through our glasses, seemed deserted. We passed a lighthouse roughly at the point marking the American right flank. The country seemed deserted. Eisenhower walked to and fro on the deck.

At 9:45 I was standing with the general and a sharp call came suddenly: "Action stations." The crews jumped up and manned our big gun aft. They stood in line, rough towels or rags on their heads, making them look like pirates, and began to feed long sharp shells forward. But another gun pointed in a different direction. We heard the snort of gunfire and saw splashes. We were being fired on by a German battery hidden in the groves behind the beach. I felt a tremendous thrill of excitement at this and wondered what would happen next.

Someone told Eisenhower to take cover. Eisenhower instead passed around cotton for our ears. Our guns now trained on the hidden enemy. We awaited the order to fire.

Someone rushed out with a couple of steel helmets and asked Eisenhower to put one on. He tried to do so but the strap came just under his nose. He laughed and said, "If I use this I'll need two men to hold it on."

Eventually we walked forward and took shelter. Eisenhower bantered, "It seems I'm the bird in the gilded cage." Then he added, "The last time I was shelled near Pantelleria the shots fell three hundred yards away, but now they're missing by four hundred. I guess we're doing better."

Eisenhower wanted to visit Sicily as soon as possible after the invasion, for several reasons: to confer with Hewitt, Patton and his other officers, to see for himself how things were going, and particularly to salute the Canadians who were associated with the British and Americans in a big-scale operation for the first time. He stood on the deck and watched the shore flow along beside us and in conversation he constantly stressed the Allied nature of this tremendous operation, expressing his appreciation in the warmest terms of the "exquisite" co-ordination achieved by all. He talked about how Cunningham, Alexander and Tedder, each working perfectly in his own sphere, assembled the whole machine into action with consummate efficiency while he was only "Chairman of the Board."

Before this, I'd met Eisenhower two or three times, attended several of his press conferences, and been extremely impressed by this officer (only a lieutenant colonel a couple of years ago) who was now in supreme charge of one of the greatest, most complex operations in military history.

He is a solidly built man of medium

Eisenhower in Sicily

height, with sandy hair, big forehead and freckled face. He has one of the widest, most mobile grins imaginable. His manner is direct, simple, friendly.

You get the sense from him that he's very sure of himself and knows his own worth. But his informality and his modesty are intensely genuine. He's the least stuffed-shirted general I ever met. All his colleagues admire his enormous tact. He had never had concrete battle experience in the field till last November, yet found himself appointed superior to veterans like Alexander and Montgomery.

But he quickly proved himself a real strategist with the final victory in Tunisia. Now he has won not only the respect of his subordinates but their affection. Though he likes to call himself chairman of the board, he is much more than that. He is a perfect co-ordinator, capable of vigorous, decisive action. He is very shrewd, as anyone can tell on listening to his conversation, despite his tremendous modesty. He tries to keep in the background as much as possible, always stresses his responsibility to Washington and London, and even refuses to let correspondents date-line anything as from "General Eisenhower's Headquarters." He insists they use the term "Allied Headquarters."

He is Master of the Colloquial

At one press conference, he listened to a highly technical discussion about communications routes, etc. It was quite refreshing to hear the generalissimo say, "Maybe I'm dumb but I didn't get that. Repeat it, please." He will listen to anyone who knows his stuff. I have heard a young American captain argue with him stubbornly.

At his desk, Eisenhower likes to sit back in his chair and rock. He says to newspapermen, "Now, listen. I want to co-operate with you fellows and I want you to co-operate with me." He can certainly be severe if necessary, but most of the time, his informality, his use of homely language is disarming.

On the first day of operations, I heard him say, "By golly, we've done it again! By golly, I wouldn't have believed it!" Meaning the surprise of landing really turned out to be a surprise. And he added, "This is the period when you fellows want to know everything, but military folks are scared to death just now. Darn it, I can't tell you anything! After all, I'm the man responsible." But he never loses a nice healthy dignity. And don't think he lacks force.

As we rounded the bend of the Sicilian shore, Eisenhower watched with aware attention and talked cheerfully, casually, between glances. He said any military man, any general, had to believe in his own luck in the game of war, otherwise the awful strain would get him down. He added, grinning, "Of course anybody can draw a bad card sometimes." When he is tired and he wants to slump after a hard day, he knows his friend Butcher will cheer him up.

They Called Him "Alarmist Ike"

Eisenhower went to the Philippines with MacArthur in February, 1935. He returned to the United States in January, 1940. He was certain war was coming, but thought it would strike us from Eu-

Eisenhower in Sicily

rope first. Friends kidded him, called him "Alarmist Ike." He went to work in the Third Army at San Antonio. He said he had never been so busy in all his life as during that period. On Pearl Harbor day, worn out, he took a nap and left word that no one should disturb him under any circumstances.

Then an aide got news of the Jap attack, consulted other aides who said, "He'll murder us if we don't wake him." And they did.

Eisenhower said, "Well, boys, it's come." A few days later Major General W. B. Smith, then secretary to the Chief of Staff, phoned him and said, "Ike, the Chief says hop a plane and come to Washington." Smith is now Eisenhower's own Chief of Staff.

Eisenhower has enormous respect and admiration for General Marshall. The night before the attack on Sicily, he watched our aircraft go overhead. A sudden wind came up and grew in violence. Eisenhower, who is a plainsman Westerner, knows how to gauge weather. He saw near-by windmills whirring and he knew the wind had reached forty miles an hour or more, which might be ruinous to some phases of the operation. When he returned to Headquarters, he found a message from Marshall in Washington. It said, "Is it (meaning the operation) on or off and what do you think?" Marshall asked for an answer within four hours. Eisenhower had fifteen minutes wherein to reply. He answered, "It's on. There's a high wind, but I think we're going to be able to report success in the morning."

Eisenhower is as sound as can be on the essential strategy of war and speaks from experience of the comparative danger from the Germans and the Japanese. He knows we must beat Germany first for the most elemental reasons, and he is absolutely firm for Anglo-American solidarity. He has worked wonders impressing everybody in his command that it is truly an Allied show.

Just after ten, we approached the beach near Correnti. Again the bustle of shipping in the crowded harbor, again the pulsating beat of our aircraft overhead. We slid down the ladder and this time boarded a strange-looking craft, a remarkable amphibious creature known as a duck, a water wagon that looks like a truck and navigates on land as well as water. I did not realize the duck was a duck and, to my utter astonishment, suddenly we found ourselves well up on the beach, dry-shod. Eisenhower leaped out, and then came the colloquy with the officer, which I have described.

Greeting the Canadians

Eisenhower carried no flag or identification. He said, "I want to talk to the senior Canadian officer of this beachhead."

The reply came, "This is a Canadian beachhead, sir, but Headquarters is some distance inland."

Eisenhower went on, "I don't care if it's a second lieutenant, I want to talk to some Canadian officer."

All around us, troops were busy. Some swimming in the creamy surf, some unloading ducks and barges, some laying down roads, some cooking, erecting green pup tents, building signal boxes, watch-towers. Eisenhower determined to go inland to find the Canadians.

Eisenhower in Sicily

He explained, "I want to welcome Canada to the Allied Command." He borrowed a jeep and we followed in our duck.

I tried to take pictures as we bounced forward. That duck may have had a rough passage in some waters, but it never could have been rougher than it was up and down those narrow, twisting, dusty Sicilian lanes. We bumped along, tried to keep up with the general's jeep, got stalled in other traffic, and lost it. We ground through tall reeds and prodded into thickets. We heard snipers had been busy in this vicinity before. But the first Sicilian I actually laid eyes on was a kid about fourteen riding a bicycle. He smiled, waved and asked us to take his picture.

We went back to the beach. Eisenhower and the jeep returned a bit later. He had found a junior Canadian officer, Captain J. E. Moore, of Vancouver, and his mission was accomplished.

Our return was, as they say, uneventful. Eisenhower pointed to the duck and said, "Is the flagship ready?" "Aye, aye, sir, if you are prepared." "Set sail," replied the general, and we mounted the weird thing and were off. Two minutes later we slipped from land into water and rode smoothly to the headquarters ship of the British admiral.

We'd just sat down to drinks when the captain, whom I had known in New York, said, "As I'm captain of this ship and that's the red signal, I'm afraid I'll have to leave you." A red signal meant an air-raid alert, and before we had finished our drinks there was another. But nothing happened.

Then we discovered Eisenhower had already left the headquarters ship for our destroyer. Great commotion as Butcher and I thought—not very seriously—we might be left behind. The admiral, who is known as a tiger man who fought fiercely at Narvik and got more convoys through the Mediterranean than any other officer, said in one of the most vigorous tones of command I have ever heard, "My barge. Superspeed." So the barge drew up and in a miraculously short interval we were aboard our destroyer once again. Then began the trip back to the home port. The American generalissimo of the Allied Armies of Liberation had set foot on occupied Europe for the first time.

Collier's