

First Day's Casualties Light: Munro Finds It Difficult Job Keeping Up With the Canadians

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Assault Troops From Dominion Advance Swiftly —Over-Run Pachino Peninsula—Establish Bridgehead in 24 Hours

Editor's Note—The following detailed eyewitness story by Ross Munro, Canadian Press War Correspondent, of the Canadian assault in southeastern Sicily covers the period up to July 11, when the Canadians sliced through Italian coastal defences after their landings the morning before.

(By Ross Munro, Canadian Press War Correspondent)

An Allied Force Command Post, July 11.—(Delayed)—(CP Cable)—Canadian assault troops with a crack British formation on their right flank overran Pachino peninsula, on Sicily, within 24 hours after their landing had established an invasion bridgehead. It has been one success after another in this Canadian-British sector as the greatest combined operation in history is developing.

Advance Into Hilly Country

Canadians now have advanced into hilly country northwest and west of the fishing town of Pachino and major engagements are expected with probably more determined resistance than that put up by the Italian coastal defenders who staged only a mild fight when the Canadian and British forces first landed on the Pachino peninsula, which is tipped by Cape Passero.

The last night and day have been one incredible series of incidents.

I landed alongside the first wave of assault companies of a famous Canadian regiment on a sandy beach at Costa Dell Ambra, four miles southwest of Pachino, at 5.15 Saturday morning.

The Canadian troops have been rushing ahead ever since. It is a tough job keeping up with them on two feet.

Casualties for the first day were very light. A colonel who heads divisional medical service said that less than 40 casualties had been reported to him so far. During my trip around the battle zone I saw only three wounded soldiers who had been hit while cleaning out a pillbox just before the beach defence collapsed.

There is a British hospital ship in our convoy now. It is lighted up at night.

(Allied headquarters in North Africa reported Monday that a lighted British hospital ship had been sunk by enemy bombers, but dropped flares. The raid lasted only about 30 minutes and was not effective. Our ack-ack from ships and shore was terrific, filling the sky with red balls of tracer.)

The Italian beach defences, which folded up like a concertina, were merely barbed wire and some machine-gun posts which fired a few bursts and then gave up. On our beach the enemy was evidently counting on a sandbar 15 feet off shore as a natural defence. But the Canadians surprised them completely by coming in in heavy surf and battling ashore through water to the waist.

Coastal Batteries Erratic

Coastal batteries shelled the landing boats, but the fire was erratic. The Canadians went through the beach defences in a matter of minutes and struck inland, mopping up groups of Italians en route. More than 700 prisoners, including 15 officers, have been captured already by the Canadians.

All day columns of prisoners poured down from the front, a happy-looking crowd, guarded by one or two soldiers.

The Royal Navy has been giving the troops magnificent gun support, and big and small warships lying close in to shore bombard their targets with thundering salvos which shake the peninsula.

During the day we saw no enemy aircraft. It seemed eerie not having any about.

The beach looked like a big

traffic jam, with tanks, guns and trucks ploughing through the sand to roads leading inland. It was almost unbelievable to Canadians that this first stage could be so easy. But once the Axis army gets reorganized to try to cope with this surprise descent on the coasts, there may be stubborn fighting.

There are some German formations in Sicily and the enemy has some tanks. The Canadians realize they met poorer Italian soldiers on the beaches and around Pachino—men of a coastal defence division—and they are not being misled that the road ahead will be easy. But every one keeps asking themselves: "Where are the Italian navy and air force?"

I started this story of the first day in a slit trench on my clifftop position and it is being finished now in the early morning aboard a headquarters ship. This is the story now of my trip onto the beaches, the assault and the follow-up.

Ack-Ack Terrific

Last night bombers attacked the troops near the beach and tried to hit our ships under the glare of lighted British hospital ship. The raid lasted only about 30 minutes and was not effective. Our ack-ack from ships and shore was terrific, filling the sky with red balls of tracer.

The troops were well dug in ashore and the bombers could not touch them except by direct hits. I watched the raid from the clifftop overlooking the bay, lying in a slit trench under a fiery curtain of flak.

The R.A.F. has been giving us fighter protection and you could hear the drone of Spitfires practically all the time during the day. Our ships have their barrage balloons up and look like part of the London scene.

Thousands upon thousands of troops poured on the bridgehead after the successful assault and vehicles, guns, stores and ammunition have been rushed to the beaches.

This attack was the stuff the men had prepared for in intensive combined-operations training in Britain. Immediately after the exercises the convoy carrying assault troops sailed for the Mediterranean and they went right to these Sicilian beaches without being attacked by aircraft.

The entire 2,000-mile trip was made without any trouble—fantastic considering that we sailed in daylight right through the Sicilian channel and the Malta channel towards Pachino peninsula with the whole invasion armada concentrated in one gigantic convoy.

Keyed to High Pitch

The day before the attack we



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landing

started to head in the general direction of Sicily and every one was keyed to a high pitch. In the morning the wind started to kick up whitecaps on the Mediterranean which, up till then, had been as calm as a millpond.

The wind rose steadily until by afternoon it was of gale proportions. By that time we could see Malta. Our spirits sank for we thought the operation would have to be postponed. Our small boats could not live in that sea. Some of the waves were 15 feet high and a heavy swell was running. But there was bright, burning sunshine—and no message came telling us the job was off.

A colonel told us the attack was to go on. At last we were definitely on our way. There was quite a strong surface swell, though, and it wasn't going to be any sinecure landing on what every one knew to be a tough beach with a sandbar stretched across the face of it.

During the evening (Friday, July 9) we learned from the headquarters ship that the Pachino airfield had been plowed up. Some thought perhaps the Italians had got wind of our attack. But security had been maintained 100 per cent. The attack was definitely a tactical surprise, according to headquarters staff officers.

Down in the mess decks the Canadians were preparing for their landing. They got their kit together, dabbed a little more oil on their weapons, sorted out grenades and loaded up with ammunition. They were having a whale of a time. In the sergeant's mess some N.C.O.'s were playing cards and drinking soda pop—our ship was "dry" all the way. In the officers' lounge a British Tommy played a piano expertly—playing some lively tunes and a few melancholy ones.

The officers met in the lounge and were addressed by their colonel. Similar meetings were held aboard the other ships as the zero hour approached.

"We are on the eve of a night in history that will never be forgotten," said the colonel. "We will look back on this night, and our children will. We will look back on it as the night we started to put the skids to the enemy."

Say Lord's Prayer

Then every one repeated the Lord's prayer and shook hands all around.

The meeting broke up. I went on deck and watched our convoy in the moonlight.

There was still no air attack. Unbelievable! At midnight we saw the great flashes in the distance where Sicily lay. Our bombers were hitting their targets. Tracers reached into the sky. There were some coastal searchlights playing over the sea. We were too far out to be bothered by them.

Earlier we had all been getting a little jumpy, for it looked like suicide to try to land in the will sea. We had the evening meal and were becoming reconciled to possible postponement. But when darkness fell we were still heading

for the southeast tip of Sicily.

Hundreds of Ships

Hundreds upon hundreds of other ships and warships were around us—the greatest convoy ever to sail to the attack. There were ships as far as you could see. About 10 p.m. the wind suddenly dropped and the whitecaps disappeared. The gale had been one of those queer storms they get in the Mediterranean during the summer. Sometimes they do not last long, and this one didn't.

The high command gambled on the wind falling—undoubtedly it had the weather "taped"—and won. Then the big convoy broke up. The Americans headed off for the Gela beaches. We sailed right ahead under a first-quarter moon that gilded the ocean. The sky was clear and crowded with stars. It was a Mediterranean night of fiction and peacetime cruises.

I could hear our bombers droning over towards Italy. Some flares shot up from the shore. They were unnerving and lingering. I was going in with the naval commander in a naval motor launch which was to guide the assault troops to the right beaches.

At 1 a.m. we went down the side of our ship in an assault landing craft and hit the swell which lifted us high in the air. We rocked about and moved among the ships which now were anchored a number of miles off Pachino peninsula. Finally we located our motor launch and clambered aboard. My trouble was I had my typewriter, waterproofed with adhesive tape for the plunge from the sandbar to the beach. Slowly the assault landing craft gathered around us for the run in. There were scores of these 40-foot craft bouncing about on the swell. Many of the troops were seasick in them.

Aim at Battery

Through a megaphone, our commander on our little, leaping motor launch told the flotillas destined for our beach to follow him, and we started off. Other flotillas sped off noiselessly for other beaches. British commandos were on the Canadian left flank and another British formation on the right.

Crack units were to land first and destroy a coastal battery. Ahead of us we could see a glare in the sky. The air attack and naval bombardment had set Pachino ablaze. Wooden buildings in the town of 15,000 population were burning.

To the left I saw tracer bullets and could hear the bang of machine-guns. Troops were landing. We crept in closer until we could see the low, dark coastline of Sicily in the shadows. It was a thrilling moment, but a tendency towards seasickness took a lot of the edge off it for many of the men. Some red flares shot up, lingered and snuffed out. The enemy was doing some kind of signalling. Tremendous explosions boomed out in the night. I think it must have been bombing far in-

land. We could see gigantic flashes.

Warships in Action

On our right there were more flashes, but this time from seaward. Warships of the Mediterranean fleet were shelling positions on the peninsula. The noise was ear-splitting, though the ships were miles away. When the flashes occurred, you could see the gleaming gun barrels lit up even at that distance. Tracers started to criss-cross our beaches.

Some Royal Canadian Engineers from Nova Scotia and two companies of an Ontario regiment were touching down ahead of us. There were spurts of machine-gun bullets at their boats. Then I heard our Bren guns. The Brens have a distinctive knocking sound like a stick striking an oak door.

Canadians were in action.

Too Close for Comfort

Dawn was creeping up as I transferred from the motor launch to a landing craft for beaching. The typewriter was still tagging along somehow. Just then tank landing craft bringing up the first wave of an Ontario regiment came up and in we went. Naval craft were laying a smoke screen for us, and gunfire from destroyers, a cruiser and a monitor dinned in our ears.

Some beach defences were still pegging away with their final shots before being wiped out. A coastal battery halfway between the beach and Pachino was firing with six-inch guns. Shells crashed in the sea around us. They were too close for comfort but did not hit a thing.

Canadians were swarming over the beach and our craft leaped through the surf in smoke, confusion and noise. The landing craft hit the sandbar and stopped short. We piled over the side and plunged into four feet of water. My typewriter was dunked. I suddenly thought of Dieppe and wondered who would be writing this story for it looked plenty hot here.

No Enemy Machine-Guns

But we waded frantically through the breakers and ran onto the beach. Troops swarmed off their craft and went through a gap in the wire defences which had been cut by sappers a few minutes before. In-

fantrymen were already spreading out in the sand dunes on the other side of the wire.

Not an enemy beach machine-gun was in action right here. More gaps were cut through the wire which stretched the whole length of the beach, which was sandy and 50 yards wide from the sea to the dunes where the wire was located.

Canadians were firing to the right and left and an occasional burst of enemy fire was heard from several hundred yards inland. The Canadians went for them. Beach organization now was being set up, with navy and army personnel working speedily.

I cleared off down the beach

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with one thought in mind—digging in for dive-bombing which, on the basis of a past disagreeable experience, I thought was certain to come. I had no spade so I scooped out sand with my hands and my tin cup.

Miserable Farm Land

The sun now was up. Infantrymen with fixed bayonets were prodding bushes in the dunes. The first prisoner had been taken—a soldier in a pillbox. Apparently his commander had run for it.

Canadians moved up a hill to the right of the beach and occupied it. Others scouted north and west. There was some firing from farm-houses among the vineyards on gently-rising land. There were stone walls around most of the fields. It was miserable farm land, though, with many rocks.

For half an hour we waited tensely for enemy planes, but they never showed up. The beach was organized now, and special British beach groups had the whole situation in hand.

Burned to a Crisp

Canadian infantry were racing up the road leading to Maucini, a mile and a half from the beach. Maucini is an old monastery on a hilltop and served as an Italian barracks and ammunition dump. The troops surprised nearly 200 Italian soldiers there and captured the lot of them. Then infantrymen went on to a coastal battery a mile farther north on the same road. This was the one that blasted at us on the way in.

Attacking with grenades, the Canadians stormed the gun positions and knocked the battery out, taking more prisoners. Troops of an Ontario regiment by now were also about three miles inland and pushing ahead at top speed. The R.C.E. and British sappers were going through fields with mine detectors. They located several large mine fields and dug up scores of the latest model German mines. On the right flank a British formation had equal success in landing and taking out beach defences. They occupied the tip of the peninsula and then, I believe, captured Pachino town. (The capture of Pachino was confirmed Monday, some hours after Munro wrote this dispatch, and was unofficially credited to British and Canadian forces.)

At any rate, Pachino, burned to a crisp, fell during the morning.

Similar success was achieved on the beach adjoining on the left, where the Vancouver and Winnipeg Regiments assaulted.

They practically walked in standing up and infiltrated inland, cleaning out pockets of resistance and occupying high ground with British troops on their left.

Sees First Prisoners

After half an hour on the beach I began to trudge up the Maucini road. At the first turn I met a batch of Canadians who had done the initial assault and they told me the first civilian they ran into was a Sicilian who had lived in Toronto for seven years. I went to his hovel among knee-high grape vines and confirmed this. He clam-

ed he could speak very good English, but would not tell me his name.

Bren-gun carriers were ashore now and they clattered along hard, dusty roads up gentle hills on the way to the Pachino area. Long columns of troops marched along, following up the assault infantry. The beach was a conglomeration of soldiers, vehicles, landing craft, wireless sets and hand carts of supplies.

Just behind our beach were two salt marshes. They had dried out a little, but the surface was still slimy. Here mosquitoes bred and

we remembered our anti-malaria precautions. Four hundred yards from the beach I went around a sharp turn in the road and saw the first prisoners. They were six short, swarthy Italians dressed in soft forage caps and flimsy gray uniforms. One carried a satchel with food and wine in it. He seemed to have been prepared for capture. They looked anything but good soldiers and when the Canucks gave them the odd cigarette to see what happened their faces lit up.

All Quite Content

They were evidently quite content with their lot and as we passed they grinned, said hello in Italian and gave us a Fascist salute. There were also two horse-drawn Italian army ammunition carts, filled with ammunition, and the Canadians took them over immediately to carry mortar bombs to the forward troops.

There were still a few snipers around and we walked along the road cautiously. Bren carriers passed us at top speed. At Maucini a handful of Canadians were in charge. Outside the courtyard of the white stucco building were piles of Italian steel helmets, ammunition pouches, rifles and machine guns.

The area around Maucini was quiet, but ahead there was firing of small arms and we heard the deep crump of mortar bombs. The advancing troops had met some opposition. Two hundred Italians taken at Maucini were marching down the road with three Canadians escorting them. The guards were having no trouble at all. One Canadian commandeered an Italian army car and, after fumbling with the gears, got it rolling and rushed his section to the front. Between Maucini and Pachino I passed two Italian dead lying by the roadside.

Attacking Airfield

It was now 8 a.m. and I was three miles into Sicily already, pursuing the forward infantry. I stopped then with Press Relations Officer Dave McLellan, of Halifax, who was with me all the time, to make a cup of tea. We sat under an olive tree in a grove and settled down to breakfast, such as it was. The Canadians were attacking the Pachino airfield a mile ahead of us by now and the sound of furious firing reached us.

On a hill 500 yards from our olive range enemy mortar fire banged

down. It was off range.

Just as I was about to sip the first mouthful of tea I looked across into the next field and there were three tanks. They were moving in our direction. Dropping the tea, I yelled "German tanks"—they looked like Mark IV's at that distance—and scooted for cover.

Miserable Country

Mac crouched with a tommy-gun. Then I got out by binoculars and identified them as British. They were with the British forces on our right. With relief we went back to our cold tea and we had scarcely started properly into the breakfast of biscuits when we heard the crack of a rifle. It went off twice and seemed close. Some sniper perhaps had spotted us.

So at this stage we left the olive grove, walking back to the beach

and passing hundreds of Canadians going forward.

This is inhospitable-looking countryside here on the undulating ground about Pachino. Tenant farmers are poor and live in miserable shacks, scraping a living somehow from the rocky soil.

Vineyards predominate and melons are getting ripe. With water one of our big problems in this dry part of Sicily, the troops picked and ate them by the roadside during breathers in their march.

The tanks which had given us a scare crawled up the slope where mortar bombs were bursting and fired down into the valley beyond. They then disappeared in the direction of the airfield. Bren guns were firing at a dozen points as the regiment I went in with captured the airport and an Ontario regiment pressed north.

Advance Seems Unreal

Canadian and British troops, in their tropical kit and wearing shorts, looked like veterans by noon, all covered with white dust. A frequent comment to us as we passed them was, "Say, where is the war." This whole advance seemed so unreal and it was nothing like what the troops had expected.

While the Canadian intelligence had the thing doped out exactly right, there was a tendency during the voyage out to expect far more trouble than there was. But the boys were not kicking that the assault had been a soft touch.

They had got over the first hurdle in good style. Many had been in action and they were feeling like the kings of Sicily. The prisoners they saw going down the line did not give them a very high impression of the Italian army.

By noon the heat was hard to take. I went back to the beach, looked for brigade headquarters. I never found it. Then I watched other units come ashore.

Ontario Regiment Lands

An Ontario regiment came in with pipers playing.

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Brunswick and French-Canadian regiments landed and moved into position up the line.

A western light infantry support group was away up front after landing close behind assault troops. A Quebec tank regiment landed. British artillery also got into position with us. Canadian anti-tank guns and blunt-nosed vehicles poured up the roads.

Troops in the beach area were saying "something is queer about this"—because there was no air attack. "Perhaps Italy is going to pack up," said one British officer.

Impressive Support

During the morning Royal Navy ships poured shells on inland targets. They stood off about half a mile from shore and cannonaded Italian concentrations. Artillery officers with the front-line infantry were giving targets by wireless.

Naval support all day was most impressive.

In the evening I climbed to a slit trench I had dug with an Italian shovel on the cliff east of the main beach. As the red sun went down I watched the country where the Canadians were fighting. To the north and west vehicles and guns were streaming to the front, kicking up white billows of dust.

With their initial success behind them now, and some blood on their bayonets, Canadian were prepared to go into really tough battles.

But they know they hit a soft spot in the Sicilian defences. As I got ready to return to shore to try to get to one of the battles which might be developing, an officer on our headquarter ship came over and said, "You should have seen what I saw; there's a corporal on deck reading a western thriller." And the headquarters ship was barely half a mile off the beaches with the battleground beyond.

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