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8 Beach Landing

The Allied landings at Salerno on 9 September 1943 constituted the first large scale opposed landing on the continent of Europe in World War II. Despite the fact that disaster threatened in the first few days, the operation was successful and many lessons were learned and eventually put into practice in the Normandy landings.

With a twelve-mile trip ahead of the assault craft, the first flight were swung overboard and dropped down the davits on to the calm waters. On board the Prince Albert bells rang and lights flashed calling the Commandos up from the mess decks, where they had been waiting. Their rubber-soled boots made hardly a sound on the steel-plated decks. Each man bore an enormous variety of gear, weighing on an average over half a hundredweight. Personal armament consisted of either a rifle or a Tommy-gun; one or two grenades stuffed in the pockets of the camouflage smocks, an anti-tank mine tied round the neck, spare magazines for Brens and sub-machine-guns. Others carried prepared demolition charges, looking like cheeses tied to their persons. The 3-inch mortar team and the machine-gun teams were burdened with heavy loads, well in excess of one hundredweight each.

Meanwhile, tiny scout landing craft were edging their way shorewards quietly to take up positions in front of the landing beaches. They anchored a few hundred yards off the coast and then shone the appropriate coloured lights directly out to sea, where they were picked up by the assault-craft convoys.

Commanding the scout craft off the American beaches—Red, Green, Yellow and Blue—were mostly very young officers or ensigns, on whose shoulders lay a heavy responsibility, as it was of vital importance that they be located in the exact spot. They had sailed through mined waters, leading the minesweepers on the correct path. Ensign George Anderson, USN, only recently
BEACH LANDING

graduated from officers' school, took in his boat to a point 400 yards off Red beach and at 0230 hours started blinking a red light. Nearby, Lieutenant Grady Holloway, U.S.N., took up position in front of Green beach by taking a fix on the ancient medieval watchtower at Paestum, which could be seen standing up dimly through the dark. Along the thirty-six-mile stretch of the Salerno Gulf boats and men were silently performing similar hazardous tasks. Many of the craft were so close inshore that they could distinguish German lorries moving, hear an occasional shout and see the odd flicker of light, as a negligent German sentry lit a cigarette. Yet close they were—and they had to sit there for hours—not one was discovered. The sailors had orders to wear rope-soled or rubber shoes, all hatches and doorways were carefully opened and closed, and not a chink of light was allowed to escape.

Tank-landing craft Number 637 housed a group of troops from 9th Battalion Royal Fusiliers, cheerful cockneys of London's own regiment. It had been an uncomfortable journey for these land-lubbers. The vast hold of the ship was crammed with vehicles of all shapes and sizes. Up at the blunt bow, almost touching the huge ramp, was an enormous Matador lorry complete with trailer and loaded with massive rolls of wire mesh intended for laying a temporary road up the beach. Behind it was a White scout car, with a large metal roller on the front, crewed by Royal Engineers and loaded with Bangalore torpedoes and Teller mines.

Filling the rest of the space were three Bren carriers, bearing the 3-inch mortar crews of the battalion, and several command jeeps.

Other troops of the same battalion travelled on the Polish ship SS Sobieski, from whose mast flew an enormous homemade regimental flag. When the time came they clambered down nets into assault craft that bobbed gently along beside the hull. Men cursed as they slipped or as pieces of equipment got caught in the netting. Thirty-five men to each vessel; on one of these a young sixteen-year-old Navy boy was quietly crying from a bad attack of nerves.

The columns of assault craft steadily approached the beaches, the helmsmen keeping station by the red lights in the stern of each vessel. The roar of their engines intermingled with exploding mines and the crash of bombs from planes, which had now switched to shore targets. But from the supporting battleships came not a shot, not a sound. On shore the Germans were getting edgy; they knew it could not be long. They held their fire and awaited the orders. In the northern sector, the American Rangers under Colonel Bill Darby, and the British Commandos under 'Lucky' Laycock, were fast approaching Maiori and Vietri. Their object was to capture the high ground overlooking Salerno and deny it to the German artillery observers. They were also to take and hold the narrow passes leading into the Naples plain.

At 0135 hours a battery of coastal guns opened up on the craft carrying the Commando force; Commodore Oliver aboard HMS Hilary noted in his log: It was realised that any prospect of even local surprise had been lost. In the south, however, the Germans remained quiet and the American ships could still not get permission to open up.

The first hostile shells from the coastal batteries, taken over from the Italians by the 16th Panzer Division a few hours beforehand, struck well on target with some losses. The American tank-landing ship Number 537, carrying Rangers, received a direct hit, killing many of the troops and crew, as well as holing the vessel in several places. The Navy was at last relieved of their 'No fire' order. USS Biscayne immediately set off a smoke screen, whilst guns of the British destroyers HMS Brecon and Blankney were soon belching forth clouds of smoke and rocking to the recoil; firing from 5,300 yards, they quickly ranged on the battery and silenced it. Other guns opened up from behind the beaches, shortly to be assaulted by the 56th and 46th British Divisions, but the Navy gladly took on these targets as they appeared. Yet it was not easy locating them; they were largely using flashless ammunition, which made it very difficult for the observers, but wherever one was spotted it was soon put out of action by the deadly accuracy of the Royal Navy gunners.

H-Hour was only a short time ahead. No alterations could now be made to the plan; the dice was cast and the players were about to learn in whose favour it was loaded.

HUGH POND Salerno
Notes

2 flight: group of boats (also used of aircraft).
3 davits: pair of curved metal arms for raising and lowering boats on a ship.
4 Commandos: (ko'məndəz), specially trained British assault troops. The name is now given to certain Royal Marine units.
5 mess decks: the floors of the ship containing rooms for eating. In some ships, the crews are divided into messes or groups.
6 bore: (infinite bear), carried, in hands, on shoulders, or in pockets.
7 gear: equipment.
8 stuffed: pushed tightly.
9 camouflage smocks: jackets coloured with irregular patterns of brown, green and yellow, to help disguise the wearer and make him difficult to see.
10 magazine(s): that part of a weapon which houses the ammunition. It also denotes a storage place for ammunition, especially in ships.
11 demolition charges: specially prepared quantities of explosive which, when fixed to structures and exploded, achieve destruction.
12 mortar team: group of men responsible for a mortar, mortar crew.
13 well: greatly.
14 Meanwhile: While the things previously mentioned were happening, scout landing craft: boats used as scouts or pathfinders for the main force.
15 convoys: number of ships (or vehicles) travelling together for protection.
16 it was of vital importance that they be located: this is a common construction with adjectives like necessary, important, essential, urgent. The use of should is optional: 'It was essential that they (should) be located'.
17 mined waters: area sown with sea mines.
18 minesweepers: naval vessels specially equipped to clear the sea of mines.
19 blinking: flashing, turning on and off quickly.
20 taking a fix on: establishing their position in relation to.
21 thirty-six-mile: normally written thirty-six-mile (compare line 61, thirty-five). See exercise 10, and note on units of measure in compound adjectives in 1.33.
22 odd: occasional.

BEACH LANDING

37 close as they were: although they were very close. See exercise 4.
39 hatches: openings to areas below decks.
40 chink: the smallest amount (such as could be seen through a chink, a very narrow crack).
42 housed: (hauzd), accommodated.
43 cockneys: men from the East End of London. The term is often applied to any Londoner whose manner of speech broadly resembles that of cockneys.
45 land-lubbers: a sailor's term for persons not accustomed to the sea and ships.
46 hold: part of the ship below decks where cargo is stored.
47 bow: the forward end of a vessel.
48 ramp: sloping way to enable vehicles to be driven down from the ship or up into it.
49 wire mesh: especially strong and heavy wire netting.
50 White scout car: an armoured car used by the British in World War II.
51 bangalore torpedoes: metal tubes filled with explosive and used to blow gaps in barbed wire fences.
52 Teller mines: mines of German origin. A number of these mines and other equipment were captured and used against Axis forces.
55 jeeps: small quarter-ton vehicles of U.S. origin.
57 SS: Steamship.
58 clambered: climbed with difficulty.
59 bobbed: moved up and down.
60 hull: the frame of a ship (or tank).
61 Thirty-five men to each vessel: i.e. There were thirty-five men in each assault craft. If people or things are divided into groups and then assigned to particular places, we use 'to' as often as 'in'.
62 helmsmen: the men steering the boat (the men at the helm).
63 keeping station: maintaining their position or course.
64 stern: the rear end of a vessel.
66 getting edgy: becoming nervously irritable (compare 'to be on edge').
70 held their fire: refrained from firing, didn't fire yet.
75 deny it to: prevent it from being used by.
78 battery: a number of guns, a sub-unit of artillery. See also note on 11.39.
BEACH LANDING

The Navy was at last relieved of their ‘No fire’ order: See note to exercise 6 in No. 18. The sentence should read either ‘The Navy were relieved of their . . .’, or ‘The Navy was relieved of its . . .’.

USS: United States Ship.

HMS: Her Majesty’s Ship.

bellowing forth: sending out.

recoil: backward movement of a weapon, caused by firing.

ranged on: found the correct range at which to fire on.

H-Hour: the time at which a military operation begins (compare D-Day, No. 10). Planning is based on H, plus or minus a number of minutes; e.g. if H-Hour is 2020, then H — 10 is 2010, and H + 30 is 2050.

the dice was cast: the course of action was determined and could not now be changed. The idiom should read ‘The die was cast’. Dice is the plural of die, a small cube of wood or bone, marked with spots and used in games of chance. Loaded dice (see line 103) give an unfair advantage to the player using them.

Exercises

1 Answer these questions, basing your answers on information in the text.

a At what stage did the troops begin boarding the assault craft?

b What was the function of the scout landing craft?

c What orders were given to the men on the scout landing craft to prevent discovery from the shore?

d How did the men get from SS Sobieski into the assault craft?

e What colours were the different lights flashed by the scout landing craft, and why were different colours used?

f What objectives were assigned to Colonel Darby and ‘Lucky’ Laycock?

g ‘It was realised that any prospect of even local surprise had been lost.’ (lines 80-81) If local surprise was the least they had hoped for, what greater surprise could they have hoped to achieve?

h At what stage were the Navy given permission to begin firing?

i What made it difficult to locate some of the defending artillery?

2 Join the sentences in two different ways: first by using which or whose in a prepositional construction, and paying special attention to punctuation.

a Tiny scout landing craft were edging their way shorewards quietly to take up positions in front of the landing beaches. They anchored near the landing beaches.

b Commanding the scout craft off the American beaches were mostly very young officers or ensigns. A heavy responsibility lay on their shoulders.

c Troops from 9th Battalion Royal Fusiliers were housed in tank-landing craft Number 637. The vast hold of this ship was crammed with vehicles of all shapes and sizes.

d Other troops of the same battalion travelled on the Polish ship SS Sobieski. An enormous home-made regimental flag flew from its mast.

e There were thirty-five men to each assault craft. On one of these a young sixteen-year-old Navy boy was quietly crying from a bad attack of nerves.

f Steadily approaching the beaches were columns of assault craft. The roar of their engines intermingled with the noise of exploding mines and the crash of bombs from planes.

Ensign George Anderson took in his boat, which dropped anchor at a point 400 yards off Red Beach.

ii. Ensign George Anderson took in his boat, dropping anchor at a point 400 yards off Red Beach.

a Each man bore an enormous variety of gear. This weighed on an average over half a hundredweight.

b Some carried prepared demolition charges. These looked like cheeses tied to their persons.

c At the bow of a tank-landing craft was an enormous Matador lorry. It almost touched the huge ramp.

d The rest of the space was filled by three Bren carriers. These bore the 3-inch mortar crews of the battalion.

e When the time came, the men clambered down nets into the assault craft. These bobbed gently alongside the hull of SS Sobieski.

f The object of the American Rangers under Darby and the British Commandos under Laycock was to capture the high ground. This high ground overlooked Salerno.

g They were also to take and hold the narrow passes. These passes led into the Naples plain.

h The defenders were largely using flashless ammunition. This made it very difficult for the observers.

66
Reconstruct the sentences without changing the meaning, beginning with the words in italics, and making any other necessary changes.

E.g. Although the situation was very serious, the men never gave up hope.

Serious as the situation was, the men never gave up hope.

A. Although the scout craft officers were very young, they were expected to carry a heavy responsibility.
B. Although the scout craft were very close to the shore, not one was discovered.
C. Although it had been a very uncomfortable journey, the 9th Battalion Royal Fusiliers remained cheerful.
D. Although they would much have liked to make a surprise attack, they had to admit that they had lost any prospect of doing so.
E. Although it was difficult for the observers to locate the defending batteries, the defenders’ guns were silenced one by one.

Rewrite the sentences, putting the words in italics at the beginning, and inverting the subject and the verb.

E.g. A sound of firing came from the shore.

From the shore came a sound of firing.

A. The Commandos came up from the mess-decks.
B. A heavy responsibility lay on the shoulders of very young officers.
C. An enormous home-made regimental flag flew from the mast of SS Sobieski.
D. Other troops of the same battalion travelled on the Polish ship SS Sobieski.
E. An enormous Matador lorry stood at the blunt bow of the ship.
F. Not a shot, not a sound, came from the supporting battleships.

When you have completed the exercise, rewrite your answers, inserting there before the verb.

E.g. From the shore came a sound of firing.

From the shore there came a sound of firing.

Complete the sentences with the adverb derived from the words in parenthesis.

A. They heard the Germans shouting (occasional).
B. There was a lull in the battle (temporary).
C. Assault craft bobbed (gentle) in the water.
D. The columns of assault craft (steady) approached the beaches.
E. USS Biscayne (immediate) set off a smoke screen.
F. The shore batteries were not (easy) located, since they were (large) using flashless ammunition.

Replace the words in italics by the verbs in parenthesis together with an adverbial particle, without changing the meaning.

E.g. Tiny scout landing craft proceeded to occupy positions in front of the landing beaches.

Tiny scout landing craft took up positions in front of the landing beaches.

The scout landing craft anchored near the coast and then shone the appropriate coloured lights directly out to sea, where they were spotted by the assault-craft convoys.

Three Bren carriers filled the rest of the space on the tank-landing craft.

At 0135 hours, a battery of coastal guns began firing on the craft carrying the commando force.

When a battery of coastal guns opened up, Commodore Oliver realized that they had to abandon any prospect of achieving even local surprise.

The first hostile shells from the coastal batteries, which the 16th Panzer Division had assumed control of a few hours beforehand, struck well on target with some losses.

As soon as the Navy was relieved of its ‘No fire’ order, USS Biscayne started making a smoke screen.

The Navy gladly engaged other shore targets as they appeared.

With _________ twelve-mile trip ahead of _________ assault craft, _________ first flight were swung overboard and dropped down _________ davits on to _________ calm waters. On _________ board _________ Prince Albert _________ bells rang and _________ lights flashed calling _________ Commandos up from _________ mess decks, where they had been waiting. Their rubber-soled boots made hardly _________ sound on _________ steel-plated decks. Each man bore _________ enormous variety of _________ gear, weighing on _________ average over half _________ hundredweight. _________ personal armament consisted of either _________ rifle or _________ Tommy-gun; one or two grenades stuffed in _________ pockets of _________ camouflage smocks, _________ anti-tank mine tied round _________ neck, _________ spare magazines for _________ Brens and _________ sub-machine-guns.

Rewrite the sentences, choosing the correct word from the pair in parenthesis.

A. Personal armament (comprised, consisted) of either a rifle or a Tommy-gun.
B. Personal armament (comprised, consisted) either a rifle or a Tommy-gun.
C. The scout landing craft anchored within a few hundred yards (off, of) the coast.
The scout landing craft anchored a few hundred yards (off, of) the coast.
The assault craft had a twelve-mile (travel, journey) ahead of them.
On (beach, shore) the Germans were getting edgy.
The (object, objective) of the American Rangers and the British Commandos was to capture the high ground overlooking Salerno.
The (object, objective) of the American Rangers and the British Commandos was the high ground overlooking Salerno.

Replace the words in italics by a compound adjective, as in the examples.
e.g. i. The paratroops wore coats lined with fur.
    The paratroops wore fur-lined coats.
    ii. They had a wait of three hours.
    They had a three-hour wait.

There was a trip of twelve miles ahead of the assault craft.
Their boots with soles of rubber made hardly a sound on the decks plated with steel.
Men were silently performing hazardous tasks along the stretch of thirty-six miles of the Salerno Gulf.
The men were taken ashore in landing craft with flat bottoms.
The sailors had orders to wear shoes with rope soles.
The men carried mortars of a calibre of three inches.
A young Navy boy sixteen years old was quietly crying from a bad attack of nerves.
The batteries based on land were silent as yet.

Lecture: The problems that must be considered in the preparation of a beach landing and in the building up of a bridgehead.

Essay: State the problems of liaison that would arise between services, and describe the sort of liaison that would need to be carried out between services, to ensure the success of a combined operation like that described in the extract.