

Chapter 8: Sicily

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Our voyage in the LCT was a grueling one. It had a flat bottom and the craft rolled, tipped, and banged the waves making a lot of guys sea sick. It was almost dark as we approached the steep cliffs guarding the harbor of Palermo. The city itself was nestled in a cove right behind the cliffs. The harbor itself was bombed heavily by the Allies. Ships of the Axis powers of all sizes and description had been sunk at anchor at the piers and throughout the harbor area. A small launch had to take us to the dock. As luck would have it, German bombers appeared. Darkness had enveloped the city and harbor. The planes dropped flares as they circled, lighting the whole harbor and city. Each launch had stopped among the sunken ships and our hearts were in our mouths. We could hear the bombs falling, which hit the docks, sending water and debris into the air. The terrific force of the explosions lifted our launch out of the water. No one was hurt, but our bodies ached from the pressure that was put on us. We were happy to be alive from the experience as the flares went out and we were once again in darkness.

Unknown to us, the city of Palermo had been taken by the swift maneuvers of the 3rd Division and the 1st Armored Division¹ just 24 hours prior to our arrival. The Italian General had surrendered his troops to General Patton. The Americans were only ten miles north² fighting in the Caroline Mountains. The airport just north of Palermo was in Allied hands also. A fire at the docks began leaping out of control into the dark night. The Italians with water hoses began spraying the fire with water sucked up from the harbor.³

In a column of twos, with our gear and rifles, we left the docks and entered into the city square. Although it was dark, the white columns of the buildings, statues and fountains could be seen. This street was the only wide street in the city. We marched north in the direction of the airfield, turning right into a narrow cobblestoned street. A short time later, we were directed into a large courtyard to spend the night among the olive trees. In the morning, after a breakfast of canned beans and cold soluble coffee, we marched again north along the same narrow street to the outskirts of the city. A convoy of trucks were waiting to take us in an eastern direction towards Gela. It was a beautiful day with the sun shining. The trucks had no canvas tops, which was to make our journey more pleasant as we traveled. Our view of the city of Palermo was great, as we were now above the city and harbor. On the back side of the cliffs, a winding road could be seen going to the top of the mountain. At the top was a huge building that looked like a hotel. It was said that the view from this mountain was indescribable because of the beauty that could be seen of the country side. We were on Highway 115 traveling through small farming areas and many villages. The civilians would always come out of the houses and wave to us as we rode by. Licata was another beautiful city. This city was full of activity, troops, tanks, and

¹ Actually the 2nd Armored Division, although much of its equipment was borrowed from the 1st, which remained in Africa and would participate in the Italian campaign, while the 2nd would move to England after the Sicilian campaign to support the Normandy invasion in 1944.

² Actually east.

³ Palermo surrendered on July 22, 1943. The fires that Olexa observed may have been started the day before, as the Italians had begun efforts to demolish the port facilities shortly before their surrender. Atkinson, *The Day of Battle* 133-135.

carriers moving in the direction of the front. The beaches east of Licata were filled with cargo and military supplies piled high along the beach. Gela was only 30 miles away and only 3 trucks with men from the 1st Division were to continue on. Unloading at the 26th Infantry Headquarters, we were hustled off to the mess tent for a bite to eat. We were hungry and tired from our trip. The 3rd Battalion was ten miles inland at the foothills of the Madone Mountains. Blankets were handed out to each of us near the tents to keep us warm throughout the night. As I lay on the cot, I recalled that 9 days had gone by since the landings and the success of our intriguing mission.⁴

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With my field glasses I spotted a rifle with a scope attached to it. The wood was finished in a very light oak color. It was lying on the ground just a short distance from the husky German who had carried it into battle. With hurried leaps down the slope to the prize, I picked up this beautiful weapon. Hasta was right on my heels looking to see what he could find. The rifle was a German Mauser with the caliber about the same size as our Garand M-1. The scope was Austrian made and more powerful than any I had ever seen. The gun handled well as it was brought to the shoulder in aiming. "Hasta," I shouted with glee, "we've got one of the Germans' sniper rifles. This weapon must be one of the latest from Germany. Holy Cow! I can't wait to fire this gun to see how accurate it is. I'd like to have this one hung above my fireplace Hasta! Army ordnance will want this gun, though." "Well, Sarge," Hasta interrupted, "stop your daydreaming, because it has to be turned in." "Yah, that is my luck, I wouldn't be able to keep a German spoon without signing papers in triplicate that I have one in my possession. The Old Man will be wondering about us on the ridge. I better get on down to the C.P. and report. Take all of the ammunition from the body for this gun Hasta." "Will do Sergeant." On the way to report, I showed the weapon to Sergeant Digle and a few others. Nearing the C.P., I stopped to see the Company Commander shaving and rinsing the razor in his helmet. "Lieutenant, look what I got," holding the rifle above my head for him to see. "A spankin' new one Lieutenant, fresh from Germany." "You're right, Sergeant," as the Lieutenant took the weapon from me. "It's light and handles well. Boy, that scope is powerful, too," as his aim pointed to a target to his front. "Bolt action, 6-shot, clip fed, not bad, not bad, Sergeant." "Can I keep it for a few days Lieutenant? I want to see how accurate this rifle is." "O.K. Sergeant, but you will have to turn it in." "I'd like to take it home with me Lieutenant, but that's 'verboden' as the German says." "How was everything on the ridge last night?" "O.K. Lieutenant, and the men fired well under the attack. We got four Germans and the one who had the gun was a paratrooper." "Do you want the bodies brought down Lieutenant?" "I'll have a detail pick those bodies up later, Sergeant." "How effective were our patrols last night, Lieutenant?" "They got mauled, too, some wounded and some dead." "I hate to send patrols because I worry myself sick till they get back. And when they get back, I'm sick to hear the report. We are losing more men than the replacements we get. Are you sure about that paratrooper Sergeant?" "He's not 15th Panzer, or Herman Goering, those are the one's we've been fighting. His uniform is different and he has the paratroop insignia, Lieutenant."⁵

⁴ Olexa's timeline here is a little off, as the initial landing took place on July 10 and Palermo fell on July 22.

⁵ The Hermann Goering Division was technically a parachute unit, and is the one that supported the Troina defenders. The German 1st Parachute Division was also in Sicily, but fought primarily in the British sector. Given that the Germans at this point were in the process of a phased withdraw, it is possible that Olexa's sniper was from

“O.K. I’ll call battalion and let them know we have a paratrooper. See any Italians?” “No, I haven’t, Lieutenant, the Germans are sure using the Italians as suckers and I think the Italians are catching on. Don’t tell the Colonel about the sniper’s rifle yet, Lieutenant, or I won’t be able to keep it.” “O.K. scouts honor, I won’t.” “Thanks Lieutenant. You’re one in a million.”

Back at the ridge, Hasta gave me the German rifle belt. Emptying the ammunition from the belt I put the clips in my magazine belt. I had about a hundred rounds for this new rifle. The gun proved to be one of the best I had ever fired. Sighting with the scope made dead center bulls-eye, an accurate gun. With an expert behind the sights this gun could take a great toll in lives. I prided myself in keeping this weapon in top shape. I fired it, cleaned it, and kept oil on the working parts for it was a wonderful rifle. Carrying two rifles was a chore, but to possess a sniper’s rifle was worth the burden. I surrendered the weapon to the battalion commander at the end of hostilities in Sicily.

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Most of us fighting in Sicily fought through the campaign with diarrhea. Little is said about this, but our outfit was put in last priority, being rundown and weary.⁶ When an outfit is labeled “Combat Ready” they are ‘priority one’. This outfit gets everything, no holds barred. All other units do without. As the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 26th Infantry moved on the towns of Petrolia and Gangia, shelling by the Germans and the Italians was heavy. The Germans were defending hill 937 with the 3rd Battalion moving around it in a pincer movement, cutting off the escape route. Air strikes were ordered to help relieve the pressure and pounding from the accurate mortar and artillery fire dropping on us. The 3rd Battalion managed to capture Hill 962 with the Germans on the eastern slope and the Americans on the west slope. The battle continued throughout the day with artillery commanding the hill top. Just after dark, L & K Companies moved around the hill, driving the Germans from their positions. The element of surprise caught the Germans with their pants down and they withdrew from the hill like a jackrabbit running from the hounds. The taking possession of this hill was a great loss to the Germans. The 1st Battalion had the task of cleaning up Hill 937, which was bypassed.⁷

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the 1st Division, but may also have been from a subunit of the Hermann Goering Division that wore a different uniform. Carlo D’Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily, 1943* (New York: William Collins, 1988) 353-356, 462.

⁶ The regiment’s chief medical officer issued an assessment of the health of the men on Aug. 10, 1943, shortly after the unit had been withdrawn from combat. He noted high levels of physical fatigue and exhaustion, and the prevalence of athlete’s foot, but tended to play down the effects of diarrhea, although he noted that there were more and worse cases in Olexa’s 3rd Battalion than in the other two. (MRC 301-INF(16)-0, 187-188). Despite the catalog code, this is a 26th Regiment document. Peter Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2003) 44-49, note the prevalence of dysentery in situations where clean water supplies and sanitation were poor or nonexistent, but Olexa is largely right about the lack of attention paid to diarrhea and dysentery in published histories of the campaign. Neither D’Este nor Atkinson mention it, and Wheeler, while including a brief note about malaria (244-245), does not mention other diseases.

⁷ This account corresponds well to Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 229-232. These events took place July 23-25, likely right before Olexa’s return to the unit, which accounts for the lack of detail provided here, compared with what follows.

The new German weapon brought into action against us was dubbed the “Screamin’ Mimi.” This weapon was a morale buster. It was also used against the Americans in Italy. Randazzo just northwest of Mt. Etna was the next allied objective. The British pushing from Aderno were almost in Bronte. The Germans kept up a skillful delay action, [while] the Allies moved at a slower pace, grouping for a final drive for the city of Messina. On orders from the High Brass, the 45th Division⁸ pushed through our lines for Randazzo. Simultaneously the British attacked from Bronte, overrunning the resistance of troops the Germans left behind. With this final push in progress, the 1st Division was phased out of action. On the West coast the 3rd Division broke through the German’s defenses and drove hard to keep them from regrouping. As pressure from the 3rd Division increased, the Germans began abandoning vehicles and tanks as they desperately retreated from the oncoming Americans. The Italians were the happiest as they stood in groups along the road surrendering to anyone who would talk to them. Not so with the Germans, you had to kill them and move on. Early in the morning of August 17, 1943 units of the 3rd Division entered the seaport of Messina. The city was deserted, and as the day progressed the civilians came out of hiding. The Germans were gone and the Italians and Americans began dancing in the streets. General Montgomery wanted to enter Messina first but the Americans beat him to it.⁹

Our stay near Bronte was for two days. Dysentery among us became acute. Our guts ached and we threw up everything we ate. Cramps from the diarrhea gave us much pain. We suffered less when we were fighting because our minds were occupied. Pills were sent up from the rear and given out. They didn’t help much, but the worst cases were sent to the hospital. On the morning of the third day a convoy of trucks arrived. Twenty-five men to a truck and standing as they started to move south. In our misery, it still was a relief to be on the move. When the cramps would hit us hard, we’d double up till it subsided. Stops were made along the route as we traveled with each man groaning in pain, hoping to reach our destination real soon. We were happy when the trucks began to descend into the plains of Gela. Coming to the junction of Highway 115, we turned west to Licata. The Ponto Olivo airfield came into view with our P-40 fighters dotting the field. We also could see a few C-47 cargo ships [aircraft] being unloaded near the terminal building. The convoy soon came to a halt with the men of the L Company still loaded on the trucks headed down a narrow road toward the sea. This was to be our area, guarding the airport. Each platoon was assigned a defense perimeter and we began to dig in. A truck with supplies and medical aid ambled in. A doctor from the Regimental Medical Unit began examining us and asking us questions. We must have been a sight, for all he could do was shake his head, giving us a liquid to stop our cramps.

The 1st Division was put on last priority by the Surgeon General in Sicily.¹⁰ We had to dig latrines and toilet paper was supplied, and new clothes were given out also. A mess tent was erected for the cooks and field gas stoves were placed inside. Pup tents were issued and put up under the almond trees. Later we all headed for the sea, a mile away, to wash and swim, and

⁸ Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 241, identifies the 9th Division as the unit that passed through the 1st.

⁹ The successful German escape from Messina was a source of great embarrassment to the Allied commanders, who had failed to realize the effectiveness of the barges that the Germans were able to use at night to evacuate their personnel. For a detailed account and analysis of the escape, see D’Este, *Bitter Victory*, 497-522.

¹⁰ Unit records do not corroborate this view, which is likely one that the soldiers came up with on their own, based on the poor conditions of the camp when they arrived.

carrying our clean clothes to put on later. Although we were sick, it was good to swim and lay on the sand. The clothes we had worn were thrown into a pile and burned. On our return the Medics had a tent up with 24-hour service to pass out any medicine we needed. Some of the fellows were coming down with malaria, and they were flown to Africa to recover. The cooks were preparing a hot meal, but none of us felt like eating. The homemade bread and cookies didn't look good to us either. Between the medical tent and the latrines there was a steady stream of men throughout the night. We had a surprise the next morning with the bugler, with the tune, "you got to get up! You gotta get up!" I hadn't heard a bugle since leaving England for Africa. It was a start of a beautiful day. The sun was peeping over the mountains and the haze began to rise in a rapid fashion. Fighter planes from the airfield began to take off and head North, for air-strikes were probably ordered. They zoomed out of sight climbing above the mountains. It took the allies 38 days to capture Sicily and plans were ready for the invasion of Italy. Duties in camp were few and far between. Working in the kitchen and getting supplies when available were the only essential details out. Writing letters home, eating almonds, gambling for matches, and swimming was our only activity. Within four days our appetites began to come back and the cramps and diarrhea were clearing up, so once again the color in our cheeks began to appear.

Out of nowhere, at our noon meal, stood two boys and girls, near the garbage pail where we washed our mess kits. The boys were about twelve and the girls about ten, holding pans against their bodies. As each soldier approached the garbage pail one would hold out the pan to receive anything that was to be thrown away. With their black pleading eyes looking at you, no one passed them up. As the last soldier washed his gear the kids slipped away quietly, returning each day thereafter till we left Sicily.

The weather took a change for the worse. The rain moved in and the red dirt became as a sea of mud clinging to your feet like a leech sucking blood from a wound. I thought the red clay in Georgia¹¹ was bad, but this stuff in Sicily had it beat. The mud clung to our shoes that it made us feel as if we were walking with snowshoes. Our tents leaked to make matters worse. All we did was bitch and gripe at the weather. We were to have movies shown but the rain took care of that. The picture to be shown was the 'Flying Tigers' with Anna Lee the leading lady. We were later entertained by this actress and good ole Adolph Menjou with a USO troupe, making us forget the war.¹²

In the early hours under the cover of darkness on September 3, 1943 the British shoved two Divisions across the straits of Messina on to the mainland of Italy. They encountered little resistance as they moved along broadening the bridge-head. Fighting in Italy was one of hardship and difficulty. The weather and road conditions, and the mountains, were obstacles that made the advances slow and costly. Plans and preparation for a landing in Salerno were in progress and troops from Africa and Sicily were on the high seas headed for the beaches. The 36th Division bore the brunt of the German counter measures holding the beach head. They proved themselves

¹¹ Presumably a reference to experiences at Fort Benning in May and June of 1942, which he commented on in a letter dated May 25, 1942.

¹² Olexa mentions this show in a letter dated Oct. 11. The regimental history describes a USO show featuring Bob Hope and Frances Langford presented to the regiment on Aug. 25 (MRC 301-INF(16): 0, 206), which Olexa mentions in a letter dated Aug. 30.

as fighters suffering heavy losses pushing on towards Naples and airfields at Foggia. These airfields were greatly needed to hit targets in central Europe. Rumors were floating around that we were to get some replacements that were due anytime. This meant that a training program would soon take place, giving us a chance to reach these recruits the art of war. News bulletins were posted as to the progress of the landings and fightings in Italy. It was hard for us to believe that we were now out of the action. We had heard rumors also that we were going back to England. "Hogwash," we said. As for the rest, new equipment and replacements would be sent to Italy.

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The Browning Automatic Rifle was a 30 caliber, magazine-fed and gas-operated [weapon], effective range up to 400 yards. In the three weeks of half-day classes, the men tore down the gun, naming each part and its function. A light coat of oil on each part kept the weapon in working order. A bipod at the end of the barrel kept the rifle in position for firing. In firing the weapon, a burst of two or three rounds at a time kept the rifle from overheating. To fire the weapon continuously would keyhole the barrel. The weapon had to be held firmly against the shoulder as it moved in a forward and backward motion. The magazine held twenty rounds of ammunition, with a button releasing the magazine when empty. To qualify as a marksman, a soldier has to fire a certain number of rounds in the kneeling, sitting and prone positions. A bulls-eye is 5 points, with the next outside ring 4 points and the larger ring 3 points. Out of 60 rounds fired, a possible 300 points could be scored. The men on the range did very well in qualifying, but 5 men had to have more instruction. One point, which we impressed the most, was the care and cleaning of the weapon, which would jam easily when sand got into the moving parts. The men soon learned the difference between a clean operating weapon and a dirty one.

Our days in Sicily were numbered, with only one event to happen. 'Blood and Guts' Patton was to come and give his apologies to the troops about the slapping incident. With the 26th Infantry Regiment assembling one hot sunny afternoon, 'Blood and Guts' came and gave us a speech which I shall never forget. I didn't hear one word about an apology, but that "us bastards hadn't seen any fighting yet, but when we got to Italy it would be much worse." Nothing complimentary, but a lot of degrading, vulgar language as to what was expected of us, even sacrificing our lives to push the God-damn Germans back to Germany. We were glad when 'Blood and Guts' stopped blowing his horn, hoping he would fall down off the steps to the platform, breaking a leg.¹³

The rumor of going back to England became a reality. Orders were received and posted that the 1st Division would embark from Sicily for England. We were jubilant over the good news, some of us thinking that maybe we would go back to the States. As the convoy of trucks

¹³ Patton addressed the entire division on Aug. 27. The regimental history describes the arrangements for the event, but glosses over much of the speech. There is no indication that Patton addressed the regiment separately to apologize for the slapping incident. MRC 301-INF(16)0, 217-219. D'Este, *Patton*, 541-543 notes that Patton visited each division in the 7th Army, with varying responses. The 1st Division responded to his speech in silence, which the division's new commander, Gen. Clarence Huebner, took to mean that the men accepted the apology and were ready to move on, while another officer noted that many men didn't understand what was going on or why he was there. Olexa, in a better position than many to understand why Patton was addressing them, was less charitable.

headed east on Highway 115 for the seaport of Syracuse, one's thoughts were prevalent. The fighting for the island of Sicily was fierce. It was well defended, with bastions and pockets of resistance slowing the advance of the Allies. The roads in the interior were poor and narrow, easily defended. There were steep inclines, sharp curves, winding roads into the towns that seemingly were placed on sheer cliffs. The roads were just a little wider than paths, built only for pedestrians, push carts and mules. The view from the mountains to the lowlands and plains towards the sea, were magnificent. Sicily has many historical cathedrals, palaces and temples which are loaded with ancient works of art. For centuries Sicily has been a battle field. They were conquered by the Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Goths, Normans and Spaniards. The ancient city of Syracuse was founded by the Greeks, bringing their culture to the island. The seaport of Syracuse was a stopping place for ships in biblical times on their voyage to Rome. Again, history has repeated itself with the Americans and the British invading the island in the 20th century. In the city of Ragusa, taken by the British, were rich oil fields and in the Catania plains were wheat fields, almond and olive groves which dotted the country side to the mountains in the north. On the eastern slopes of Mt. Etna and along the sea were fertile rolling hills with endless rows of grape vineyards, fruit farms and vegetables. The people regarded us as friends. No matter to whom we spoke, they would say that they had a brother, sister, an uncle or a relative in America. Boston, Providence, New York, Hartford and Buffalo were the cities mentioned. I wondered about the peasant farmer and his family who were buried near the stone wall in Bronte on the farm. Gazing about the truck, I saw the faces of men who had fought so gallantly. Some were to die on the continent of Europe. We talked of the good times, the sad times, about home, and what we would do in England.

As the convoy rumbled on, the latest news of the landings of Salerno in Italy were discussed. The Germans were pouring the best troops against the Americans, driving within two miles of the beach. The 36th Division was being hammered by artillery and heavy mortars relentlessly. Casualties were very heavy as the Germans hammered at them from the high ground. The men of the 36th Division were green, but they fought back with courage and determination. They were scared of death and feared the unknown as much as we did in our first engagement of battle. Men were being killed outright as fear creeps over you. You are petrified and unable to move which makes you a vulnerable target. With your mind in the state of hysteria, you are unable to move or help the casualties with their wounds. Recover, soldier, from your fears, recover, soldier, from your shock, and make a success of the situations that confront you. When this is done, you are a better soldier, cunning as the wolf in the North and a fast thinker, the key as to survival. The men beside you may die or be wounded. You may never see them again, but you will have a place in your heart for them. You suffer together and die together with those who make it, and are shocked to be alive. I have run this gauntlet many times in the past, frustrated, tormented and sick at heart for those who have been close to you, and who are gone. Becoming a veteran, you are scared, you are afraid, you have nerves of steel, reacting and overcoming fear instantly to face danger that may be imminent. War with its misery touches not only the soldier, but everyone, whether they want to be or not. Each one pays a price, some great, and some small.

The outskirts of Syracuse loomed in the distance, with many ships anchored in the bay. It was a beautiful sight; one could not help but admire the old buildings spread out along the coast. There were 25 ships that would make up the convoy to England. Eighteen ships to haul 3 British

divisions, the Fighting First Division, armored tanks, artillery units, cannon companies with halftracks, and the anti-aircraft outfits. We had 7 destroyers as our escort. The USS *Polly-Wog* with Commander Roosevelt in charge was the one I recognized. Submarines were very active in the Mediterranean and west of Gibraltar, preying on convoys. Seven divisions were being transferred from the Mediterranean theater of operations to England in preparation for the task of invading Europe. About half of these men were veterans of Libya, Egypt, Algiers, Tunisia and Sicily. As the convoys arrived with troops, they were loaded at the docks in launches and taken to the respective ships that were waiting in the bay. Convoys of troops kept arriving and unloading way into the night. The heavier equipment had been loaded onto the ships two days earlier. The trucks hauling the troops stayed behind and later went to Italy.

Under the cover of darkness, past the midnight hour, the ships weighed anchor, heading south along the African coast for the Straits of Gibraltar. As the convoy steamed on, the destroyers worked on both sides, ready to pursue any submarine that might be detected by radar. The October¹⁴ weather was clear, with sunshine, blue skies, and the water quite calm. As the convoy entered the Straits, I could not help but think of the night we sailed through with Spanish Morocco lit up with a Christmas tree and the Rock as dark as the ace of spades as we were headed for Oran. We were fortunate to have traveled a thousand miles without any trouble of being from the air or torpedoed by a sub. One day out of the Straits, we did run into trouble. A warning blast from the destroyers sent the ships into a zig-zag course as they traveled north by west towards England. Watching from the deck, we saw the USS *Polly-Wog* maneuver, dropping depth charges that made a mountain of water 40 feet high as they exploded. The other destroyers were zig-zagging in between the convoy trying to detect other subs that may be lying in wait as the ships passed by. The danger of being torpedoed was great, but we didn't realize this danger. The USS *Polly-Wog* was working like a beaver as charge after charge was sent overboard. Those sailors on the *Polly-Wog* worked with precision and were rewarded when a charge exploded, bringing up a black wave of water. The destroyer moved in for the kill, rolling charges overboard like a monkey eating peanuts. The sub surfaced and the Germans were jumping into the water like bed-bugs running from gasoline. We were unable to see the rescue of survivors or the fate of the sub because the *Polly-Wog* blocked our view. Victory for us this time instead of tragedy, beating the Germans in the battle of the sea. As the convoy journeyed on toward England, two British torpedo bombers appeared, circling the convoy and then disappearing out of sight in the direction they had come.

¹⁴ The division left Sicily on Oct. 23, and arrived in England on Nov. 5. (Wheeler, 245)