

## Chapter 9: England Again

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Our convoy continued northwest from the straits another day and a half, then entering the Irish Sea. The incident with the German sub was the only encounter we had of enemy action after leaving Sicily. Our destination we learned was the city of Glasgow.<sup>1</sup> This city is one of the best ship-building centers in the world. It is the largest city in Scotland, with miles of docks on the Clyde River. The shipyards and docks were bombed by the Germans relentlessly. The oldest ancient building in Glasgow is a cathedral dating back to the 1100's. As the convoy steamed into the harbor, whistles blew announcing our arrival. Barrage balloons by the hundreds were hanging in the sky above the city. Men and women on the hulls of new ships waved, giving us a grand welcome. We were amazed that the whole convoy was able to dock without waiting for a place at the piers to unload. The men operating the tugs did a wonderful job pushing the ships up to the pier. It was mid-day when the gang planks were lowered.

As we left the ship, a Red Cross worker greeted us with a "Welcome to Scotland." "Where did you come from, boys?" she asked. "From the States," we replied, chiding her. "You boys must be from Africa because every one of you has a tan." "Where's the coffee and donuts?" "Haven't any because you boys are leaving shortly," she said. It was only a short way from the docks to the rail yards where we boarded the coaches for our journey south. Our train pulled out immediately and we settled down in the seats to enjoy the scenery. We followed the seacoast, gradually working inland as the train gained momentum for the steep grades that lay ahead. The scenery of Scotland is still the most beautiful, with moors, lakes and rivers. The mountains and the central lowlands show the beauty of this rugged country. Just before dark, we were scheduled for a twenty-minute stop at an isolated rail station. Pulling into the station, we could see the women from the canteen service setting sandwiches and meat pies on tables for us to take. We were told to take our canteen cups for tea. Each car was served promptly, with the men getting back into the coach to eat the refreshments. The women were very gracious, and I believe Uncle Sam paid the bill. We had no sleeping quarters, but the seats were comfortable enough to sleep sitting up. Twelve men could be seated in a section. The coach was divided into five sections. A passageway on the opposite side of the coach permitted us to walk into the other coaches without any difficulty. We had no idea of our destination as the train traveled on. England's landscape varies from one part to another. It has mountains, marshes, lowlands and rugged cliffs. The English love tradition, ceremony, humor, independence and good manners. They love boiled meat and vegetables, and tea for their favorite drink. Their hobby is flowers. Cricket is the top sport with soccer, rugby, and rowing other favorites. Although the English were 'war weary,' their morale and their patriotism were beyond definition. The 'Bloody Jerries' were their enemies and that was that. Traveling in a coach two days and two nights made us weary and tired.

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<sup>1</sup> Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 245, states that the whole division landed at Liverpool, but divisional records indicate that the convoy from Sicily split into two groups, with one landing at Liverpool, and the other in Scotland. MRC 301-3: G-3 Operations Reports, June 43-March 44, 279.

A line of trucks was awaiting our arrival, taking us three miles out of town to a wooded area large enough to accommodate the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. Quonset huts were scattered among the trees throughout the area. It was a hilly place with paths shooting in every direction connecting the buildings. L Company was the first to unload, taking [the] first ten huts. It was an ideal place. The latrines and showers were centrally located. The mess hall and company headquarters were near the road. In each hut were six homemade bunk beds spaced evenly against the walls. A gun rack sat in one corner to store our rifles. Each man chose a bunk, placing his gear on it and filling his bag with straw. Blankets were issued later, and before supper the huts were in perfect order. Guard duty. K.P., work details and charge of quarters would become routine as an everyday event. Our training in the field would be hard, gearing us for the days that lay ahead.

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Our weapons had to be cleaned and oiled each day because of the dampness. When a man had a dirty or rusty rifle, I made sure that no passes were given. It was the only way to impress upon the men the importance of a well-functioning and operating rifle. Plans by the “High Brass” for the invasion of Europe had been in progress a long time. The code name for the operation was ‘Overlord’. General Eisenhower was chosen as the supreme commander by Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt. The organization of command and staff for such a project as this boggles the mind. Such an undertaking would require massive leadership to achieve the goals for the success of the allied nations. An undertaking such as this would require equipment, man power, supplies and leadership. Air, land and sea power would have to be coordinated for such an undertaking. With General Eisenhower as the supreme commander of the Allied forces, the largest mass of men, materiel and supplies ever known the history of the world were gathered together to launch the final assault on the fortress of Europe,

Ships of every description began to choke the harbors, inlets and ports that would be used in the invasion. Cloudy skies in southern England kept the Germans from taking aerial pictures. Every available field and clump of woods was filled with war material and supplies. This portion of England was sealed off by the British government to all traffic.

Embarkation plans for the assault troops and departures and routes to the beaches had to be agreed upon for the initial landings. The day and hour to cross the channel would be General Eisenhower’s decision. Stalin was screaming for a second front while General DeGaulle insisted that he alone would give the orders for the French people to co-operate with the Allies. Pressures such as this did not help the war effort and created some problems unexpectedly. DeGaulle was not an easy man to negotiate with, as experienced in the Africa operations. We were glad that he did not get his way. History proves his stubbornness.<sup>2</sup>

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Thanksgiving came and went, with turkey and all the trimmings. Christmas arrived and it was cold with a few snow flurries to make us think of home. Packages from home were arriving, and each man shared his goodies. For some it would be the last Christmas, while others would enjoy

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<sup>2</sup> History indeed has no quarrel with this assessment. For some colorful depictions of DeGaulle in this period, see Rick Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944-1945* (New York: Henry Holt, 2013) 34-35, 102-103, 172-185.

more to come. New Year's arrived and the men quietly shared a few drinks together. It was mid-January when the 1<sup>st</sup> Division was considered 'combat ready'. We had first priority on all supplies and war materials. Morale was high once again, with our training becoming more vigorous as the days flew by.

D-Day was on the horizon as we prepared for the landings. Field Marshal Rommel (the Desert Fox) was put in Command of the defenses along the coast of France, Belgium, and Holland. On his inspection of the beaches and the strongholds, he expressed his concern of the many weaknesses that were prevalent and outstanding, which had to be strengthened. While in the Normandy area, Rommel reported that the very beaches we picked would be the area for the landings. His superiors did not believe him to our good fortune. The German high command beefed-up the other areas but Normandy stayed the same.<sup>3</sup> The English Channel would be a great challenge because destructive storms could appear without notice to hamper the landings. Large seaports had to be captured.

In April our stay in the Blandford area ended, with us moving into the coastal town of Swanage. The city was in a cove nestled in the hills, which reminded me of the city of Pittsburgh. It was a beautiful place and we were billeted in a series of homes linked together above the harbor. Our training area was 5 miles from the city of Swanage in the low rolling hills. We hiked the distance to and from the area, having training exercises among the hedgerows. The 'High Brass' in the meantime were making an effort to visit as many of the troops as possible to help boost the morale. General Eisenhower came to Swanage and every veteran who fought in the African theater was invited to meet him. The Grosvenor Hotel was the meeting place. We had coffee, sandwiches and cake to eat. The General gave us a good pep talk and praised us for fighting in the Mediterranean. In the General's closing remarks he stated that he needed and depended on each veteran to lead the way so that others would have the courage to follow. "Victory would not be easy," he said, "and some of you will die, for which I apologize." With these last remarks, the General stood, shaking our hands as we left the conference room. A week later the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment went to the city of Weymouth to meet the General Viscount Montgomery. As we stood in formation to pass in review in full battle dress the General expressed his appreciation of our fighting abilities and the 'jolly good job' of driving the Germans out of Africa. The General removed his beret in a salute to us wishing us good luck in the coming invasion. "Co-ordination and co-operation among the Allies are essential to bring about victory," he said.

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<sup>3</sup> The Germans did not substantially reinforce the Normandy sector, but Rommel did strengthen the beach defenses significantly. Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (New York: Collins, 1983), 108-109.