

## *Invasion of Sicily*

*Landing on beaches, pimps, lack of planes, crashing Spitfire*

### **July 1943 to Sep 1943**

As we left the L.S.T., we found that a reasonable area had been cleared for us to park after getting ashore. The Military Police soon advised us of our route and we found that slow progress had been made inland on “D day” plus 2 and as we set off, enemy shells were flying overhead as we made our way to Syracuse. I was surprised at the hostile reception we were getting from the local population until I realised that we were no longer the good guys, but the enemy who had been told by their German allies, that we would be burning their homes, taking their food and raping their women. In North Africa, we were the defenders of their country, and anyway, they didn’t care much who was around as long as they could still sell their wares.

The sight of the gliders crashing on top of each other, made me realise just how difficult the initial landings had been, Although the front line troops were making some headway, we were still a long way from our destination at Lentini, and as we passed the Primisole Bridge, we could see the terrible battle that had taken place to secure this vital route. Many gliders had landed in the minefield surrounding the bridge and as the troops got out they were blown up, their bodies still lying on the ground until the mines had been cleared. Some parachutists were hanging by their risers that had become entangled in the trees as they descended and were sitting ducks for the German soldiers to shoot. Other gliders had made a hard landing and the guns and Jeeps inside had broken loose and shot forward, killing the crew.

On the other side of the bridge, there was an Allied Sherman tank facing a German Tiger tank about fifty yards apart, and they had both caught fire. The tanks were still very hot when we touched them, and the burnt bodies were still inside. I could imagine the battle that had taken place between them at such short range. We had to wait there for an hour or so, to enable the built up traffic to clear, and the shells were flying

overhead to the beaches. I was thankful that I was in the R.A.F. and not up amongst the action just a few miles away.

## Lentini

We were about 3 days behind the front line troops who were progressing slowly inland, and we were still being strafed by the German fighters. We finally reached our landing strip that was situated on the top of hill above the town of Lentini and as we were setting up our camp, our Mustangs were landing. The ground crews quickly re-armed and re-fuelled the planes and they were back in the air again for the next recce.

Our tents erected, the slit trenches dug, we all made our way to the various mess tents for the first decent meal for seven days. The Sergeants and Officers shared the same mess tent and we were able to get a lot of information about the campaign. The Americans were making progress on the west front, the New Zealanders were doing well and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army were making headway on the difficult sector. During the first few days of the invasion, we had lost three aircraft and two pilots which shows that Tactical reconnaissance is much more dangerous than Strategic.

We had no breakdowns with the lorries, but we had three Brockhouse trailers that broke torsion bars on practically every move. The suspension is made of single bars of spring steel, about five feet long, connected to a suspension arm at one end and the chassis at the other and the spring action is made by twisting the steel bar. Although this is a very smooth suspension system, it is unsuitable for rough countryside, so I decided to lower the suspension by three inches all round, thereby reducing the amount the bar could twist before being limited by the rubber stops. It would wear out these rubber stops more quickly, but it would be quicker to replace and much cheaper than a new bar. I had modified one of the trailers in North Africa, and this was the only one to survive, so priority was given to the others.

The site was on the side of an orange and peach grove, which sloped down to the valley below and a very small brook about four feet wide ran down inside the hedge separating our site from the grove. At various intervals, wooden dams were fitted in order to allow water to drain down between the orange and peach trees in the different parts of the grove. We found that by making a dam of the stones, we had made ourselves a

very handy bathroom and we were able to have a good freshwater bath, albeit cold water, but with temperature in the nineties, no-one cared. It was a refreshing change from having a bath in the sea and using salt-water soap. Coming out of the bathroom one day, I saw several of our drivers walking back to the site so I asked them where they had been. I was told that they had just wandered down to see what was at the bottom of the grove, so I didn't enquire any further.

Several days later, there was a serious lack of staff at the M.T. dept, and thinking that they were having an extra bath session, I decided to look for them in that direction. Seeing no one, I walked further down the path until I saw the huts used by the previous owners to weigh and pack their fruit. I then saw all of my absent staff sitting around the huts and suddenly a man came out with several girls and he asked the men to come along. It was the local 'Pimp' who had brought five girls along and he had set himself up as the local Brothel keeper. I told my staff to get back to work, and if they wanted the girls, they would have to do it in their time and not in mine. I kept a wary eye on them in future.

As time passed, the war had moved further north of the island, and as long as our vehicles were Serviceable and ready to move at four hours notice, we had very little to do. 'Liberty' wagons were arranged to take a fifth of the staff into Lentini every afternoon without upsetting the routine of the unit. When I made my visit to the town, I was looking around the shops and I saw some 'bolts' of dress material and because I was getting married as soon as I returned from my overseas service, I bought ten metres of white silk material, and five metres of lemon silk material for my future brides wedding dress and for the two junior bridesmaids dresses. All dress material and clothing was on 'coupons' in those times back in the U.K. so this would certainly save some coupons. I later bought several lengths of multi-coloured silk for day dresses and sent them home with our special 'Green label' privilege parcels. Duty had to be paid for in the U.K. but it was worth it to save the coupons.

On my next visit to town, I wandered around the town and had some meals, but I do not like Italian dishes, I was able to get something that satisfied me. By now, the locals realised that we were not the ogres we were supposed to be and they were quite willing to sell us their goods. It was another strange culture for me to get used to.

Our main branch had joined up with us and there were quite a few repairs to be carried out on their lorries. Unfortunately, we never had as many drivers as vehicles so that it meant taking men from other trades to drive when the unit moved. Some of these drivers had probably learnt to drive on the 'dodgems' at the fair.

## **Spitfires and Mustangs**

Our aircraft had been taking a lot of punishment, and the Americans were no longer prepared to release any more Mustangs to our unit. We were down to our last six Mustangs, so Spitfires were brought into fill the gap, but when one Mustang and One Spitfire went on a recce, the difference in speed proved to be unsatisfactory, so it was agreed to put two Mustangs or two Spitfires together.

One of the Spitfires developed a fault in the propeller variable 'pitch' mechanism. For no apparent reason, it would go into fine pitch and the engine would race but the speed would drop. The pilot was lucky enough to be able to make an emergency landing. Hydraulic fluid was found around the variable pitch mechanism, so all of the hydraulic seals were replaced and the pilot told to take off and land several times and to have the mechanism checked. He took off again after being checked and decided to do some aerobatics and as he came out of a loop, the propeller went into fine pitch and the engine raced away again.

Being in the wrong place at this time, he decided to try for the landing strip at Lentini, but he just didn't make it and finished up in a haystack and caught fire. The pilot lived for three weeks but his burns were so severe that he stood no chance of recovery. He was a very popular pilot and was greatly missed. At the enquiry, it was found there were some very fine cracks in the casing of the variable pitch mechanism, and when the oil became heated, the crack would open and the oil would be lost

With the Axis Forces leaving northern Sicily, we were advised that we would be taking part in the Invasion of Italy in the very near future, and we had to prepare our vehicles for 'wet' approach. Again the same personnel would be taking part so all material of use to the enemy had to be disposed of. Lord Haw-Haw was again telling us to surrender, because they were just drawing us into their net. We now treat his broadcasts as a joke.