

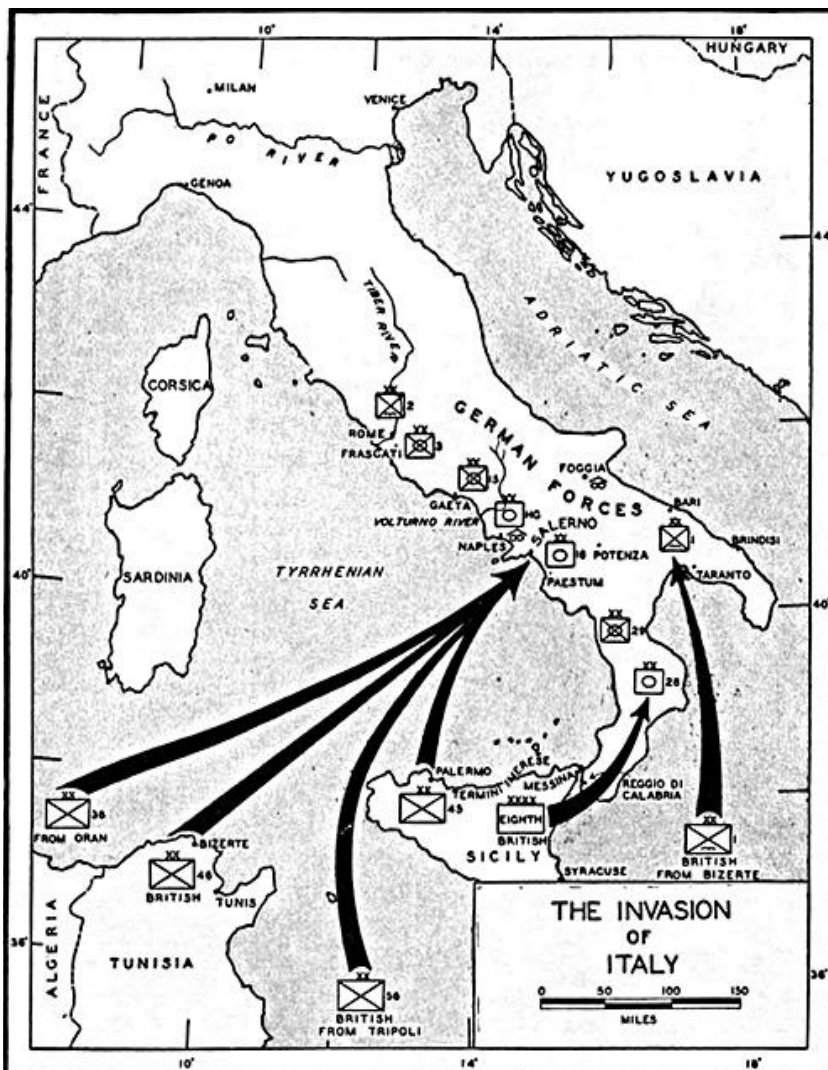
Henry Hayles Letter After The Assault on Salerno 1943

September 15th

Naval Party 874
c/o 6.P.O
London

My own precious ones.

Although at the moment, it is forbidden to write about our experiences in the assault on Salerno, I'm taking this opportunity to start the letter off. We just left Salerno, and I'm in a small landing craft on my way to Capri, so the three hours odd which we expect to take up in getting to that delectable Island can be best be taken up in starting off this book. I feel that it will be a book by the time I've finished as I have so much to tell you.



You already know about our journey by road from Algiers up to Bizerta, and how we camped in a field outside Bizerta waiting to embark on the great adventure. Well, one fine morning we received our marching orders, and all our vehicles moved off, in convoy down the road and, proceeded in through the Dockyard to where big LSTs were waiting to embark us. These LSTs are big ships, very much like a train ferry boat, and although they stand quite high out of the water, they have a shallow draught. In the bow two huge doors swing open and a long ramp comes down on to the jetty or beach to enable lorries and cars to run on or off. (Note1)

After a long wait in the heat and dust and tormented by flies, our turn came. We cautiously backed each vehicle up the ramp on to a lift, which ascended to the top deck where the vehicles were closely packed. It was quite a tricky business, as

I found from having to drive a truck myself! Anyhow, after several hours, we had stowed everything, and it was no end of a relief to go to the tiny wardroom and eat a meal off a table. Whilst we were parked in the field, we all had to join on the end of the American "Chow Line". When you came to the business end of the queue, you were given two tins of food which you just sat on the ground and ate, afterwards washing up your own crocks in the communal hot water can.

[Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945](#)

It looked quite strange to see quite senior Naval Officers doing this!

We lay in Bizerta harbour for two days, itching to get away and get on with the job. After the ease which we had landed in Sicily, we were quite sure this was going to be a walkover, and though we pondered a bit over our maps which were marked in very big letters “OUTSIDE FIGHTER RANGE”, we didn't worry much, but just thought, “oh well, the RAF will give us fighter cover somehow”. All of which was a shade optimistic, as we discovered later.

On the evening of the third day after embarking, we received orders to go and anchor out in the bay of Bizerta, so out we went. We had a good view of the bomb damage in the harbour as we went out, and its really amazing how such a big area could be laid so flat. Its just a desolate waste, with ships masts and funnels sticking up out of the water all around the harbour. As we passed out through the narrow entrance, we began to feel the swell, and our heavy laden flat-bottomed craft began to roll so heavily that within a few minutes quite a large number of the American soldiers were being very sick over the side! We carried quite a few American soldiers with these huge “Bulldozers” and other airfield making equipment, beside the very considerable number of lorries in the Naval convoy.

That night, just as we were turning in, a burst of gunfire sent most of us out on deck to see what was happening. We saw flares dropping all over the bay and harbour, whilst searchlights ashore were probing the sky, and an intense barrage was going up. No bombs fell near us, and we heard next day on the BBC News that 50 aircraft had come over, dropped two bombs, and lost twelve planes! Pretty expensive for them, eh?

Next morning, at dawn, we noticed the rumble of our engines, and discovered that we were off! Long lines of landing craft stretched ahead and astern as far as the eye could see, with smaller craft, and a few destroyers, hovering on the outside to protect us from attack by destroyers or submarines. Ahead of us were a few big ships, cruisers and such, as more powerful protection. Now, everyone began examining and cleaning arms. Rifles were oiled and polished, then carefully wrapped up as protection against sea water. I got out my Tommy-gun – yes, a real one, like those the American gangsters use – filled up all my ammunition clips, loaded my Colt revolver, and I must say, I felt pretty well armed with all that on me! All I lacked was a dagger between my teeth!

The day passed without incident, and so did the next. Everyone had been told by now what was in the wind. We had all had a good bath, changed our clothes and washed our others, not knowing when our next chance would come. Then on the evening before the assault, the first incident occurred. Without warning, one of the big ships ahead of us opened fire with their A.A. guns, and watching the exploding shells, we saw very high above us a German Junkers. He was having a jolly good look at us, alright, and we realized that now, there would be very little element of surprise when we landed. We were already heading in for Salerno Bay, and so close to the land that there could be no doubt where we were heading. But whilst all these things were flashing through our minds, the Junkers overhead suddenly dived out of the sun and, when he was about 500 feet above the sea, he released a huge bomb, propelled by a rocket. We could see the bomb as it streaked down at the cruiser, but it fell



During Operation Avalanche, a new weapon, the Henschel Hs-293 glider bomb was used with great effect by the German Luftwaffe. It was particularly successful against Allied shipping and damaged HMS WARSPITE among others.

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945

clear, with a tremendous explosion and column of water. It was close to sunset now, and the German aircraft made off and we were left to continue our way in peace.

The assault was fixed for 1 am (9th September 1943), and as our vehicles obviously wouldn't be landed until the beach had been taken, we dropped behind the assault craft as darkness fell. I took the chance of going to bed early, and wasn't too proud to pray for assistance in the job that lay ahead.

When I woke up, as dawn was breaking, I found the craft lay quite close in to a quiet shore. There was no noise of battle, and we thought this must have been another easy landing, like Sicily. We found out later how wrong we were! Anyhow, we lay around there all morning, with an occasional aircraft passing high overhead. Everything seemed very peaceful. About 3 o'clock, however, the afternoon quiet was shattered. Three Hun dive bombers suddenly screamed down out of the sun, dropped one huge bomb each on the beaches, and were gone. The blast from their bombs was terrific. Between then and sunset we were bombed at intervals, always when our own fighters had just disappeared. Then toward tea-time, we received the long awaited signal, to beach and put our vehicles ashore. As we crept in toward the beach, preceded by mine sweepers, our friends the dive bombers – the three Twerps, we called them – put in another attack on the beach just in front of us. It certainly is frightening this dive bombing. However, we were more concerned with getting ashore in the hour and half before sunset, as we had no desire to be a sitting target for the night bombers which, we knew, would surely put in a heavy attack just as soon as it was dark enough to protect them from our fighters. We had a few long-range fighters as air-cover, you see.

Well, the worst happened. We pushed our nose onto the beach, we got out the long ramp. And almost the first vehicle to go off, a “Bulldozer” of about ten tons, fell over sideways and blocked the way off. The sun was just setting then, so you can imagine our feelings. To get on to the sandy beach, you see, it was necessary to go down a ramp, at a very steep angle, into about 3 feet of water, then through about six yards of water onto the beach. This bloke had fallen over on entering the water! It got darker and darker, and then what we had been expecting, happened. Way out over the Bay, the first twinkling flare slowly fell to light up the ships laying there. More and more flares went down, followed soon by the heavy “crump” of bombs. Intense ack-ack greeted the attackers, as every ship in the small Armada assembled there, blazed away with all they had. The area of flares was spreading now, and began appearing on the beach on our



Salerno, September 9th 1943 British troops and vehicles from 128 Brigade, 46th Division are unloaded from LST.

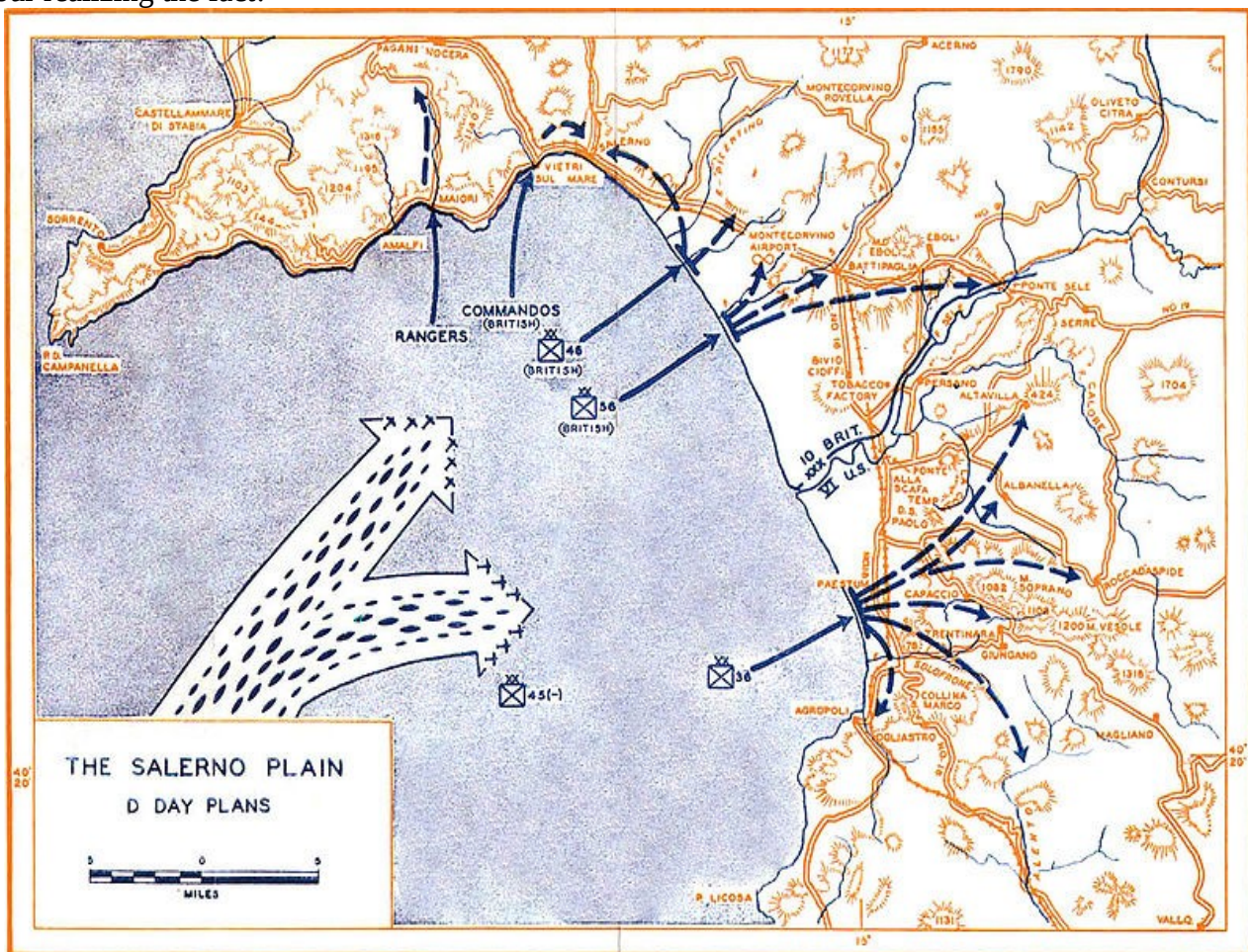
left. Nearer & nearer they came, and the bombs with them. Then suddenly, the flares died out, the shooting died down, and we were left in peace. About the same time came the glad news that the

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945

ramp was clear, and we tumbled into our cars with great rejoicing. I was one of the earliest to go down, and was one of the first Naval Officers to get ashore at Salerno. The truck, or car I was driving wasn't the type for this kind of job, and although I got through the water alright, I got stuck in the soft sand. By now, it was midnight, and car after car got stuck axle deep in the soft loose sand. However, we chased around and got a "Bulldozer" to haul us out onto a firmer road. Here again we got stuck, and at last, pretty well exhausted, we just stayed where we were and slept where we sat. In a way, it was a good job I didn't go tearing up the beach. Just one yard above the water mark on the beach, there was a mine field, and as I watched two American Jeeps, which will drive through anything, went just four feet above the water edge, hit land mines, and went up with a terrific bang. The occupants had miraculous escapes, although their cars were completely wrecked. It certainly put me right off land mines.

Dawn light woke us, and I went back to the beach to arrange for bulldozers to tow all my vehicles out onto the main road. I was just in time for the dawn bombing attack, and I buried myself in the sand for the first – but by no means the last-time. However, again we were lucky and no bombs fell near us.

By 8 am we had been towed out. I came out personally with each vehicle, making the return journey on the bulldozer. By the time I finished, I was caked with dust and sweat. It was sweltering hot, even by 8 am, although it became very cold in the early morning. We were directed to a field about half a mile up the road. Where weary troops had dug slit trenches and then tumbled into them and slept. It wasn't until after we left that we discovered the German positions less than ¼ mile away! We also had narrow escapes with our vehicles which straddled unexploded bombs, without our realizing the fact!



Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945

Back on the beach, early that morning I had been fascinated by looking at the footprints across the smooth sand, made by our Commandos in landing. You could track where they had leaped from their boats, thrown off their life jackets, run up the beach and cut the barb wire. Here and there, a confused patch of footprints showed where a man had been hit. Significant shallow holes, where the footprints stopped short, showed where someone had gambled with death once too often, and trod on a mine. Little bundles of equipment had been discarded by wounded men. It was possible to see, in the mind's eye, all that had gone on. Also it was evident the landing had been fiercely opposed, and the defences were extremely strong. We were aided, very often by our own mistakes. One force landed on the beach, and penetrated a mile inland before meeting any opposition. When daylight came, they discovered they had landed a mile further down than they had intended, and that where they should have landed was an absolute arsenal of big guns and machine posts. (Note2)

However to get back to our own adventures. We set out, about dinner-time, to go into a field further down the road toward Salerno. You see the landings took place on the beaches to the south of the town, to a distance of 20 miles, with the intention of advancing north, taking the town, and using the Port.

Just about the time we set out, there was another screaming, whistling noise, a pause, a tremendous explosion and the three Twerps had been and gone, leaving several dead men on the beaches.

We went down the road about a mile, toward Salerno, and pulled into an olive grove to await developments. A battery of our guns, down near the beaches, were sending shells screaming overhead. They made a kind of hoarse whistling noise as they passed. The Germans, in return, lobbed their 6" mortar shells over us on to the crowded beaches. These made an awful tired sighing noise as they passed, like a weary child. They exploded with a terrific explosion. We felt very much in the front line, between the opposing artillery. A few shells, bursting short, caused us to dive very quickly under our lorries, but without incident, I'm glad to say.

That night, we were bombed in earnest. An almost full moon, aided by hundreds of flares, lit the place like day. Lazy as I am, I had dug myself a slit trench, and believe me, I tumbled into it with a thankful heart as bombs whistled down on us from all sides. They let us alone toward dawn, and we scrambled a few hours sleep.

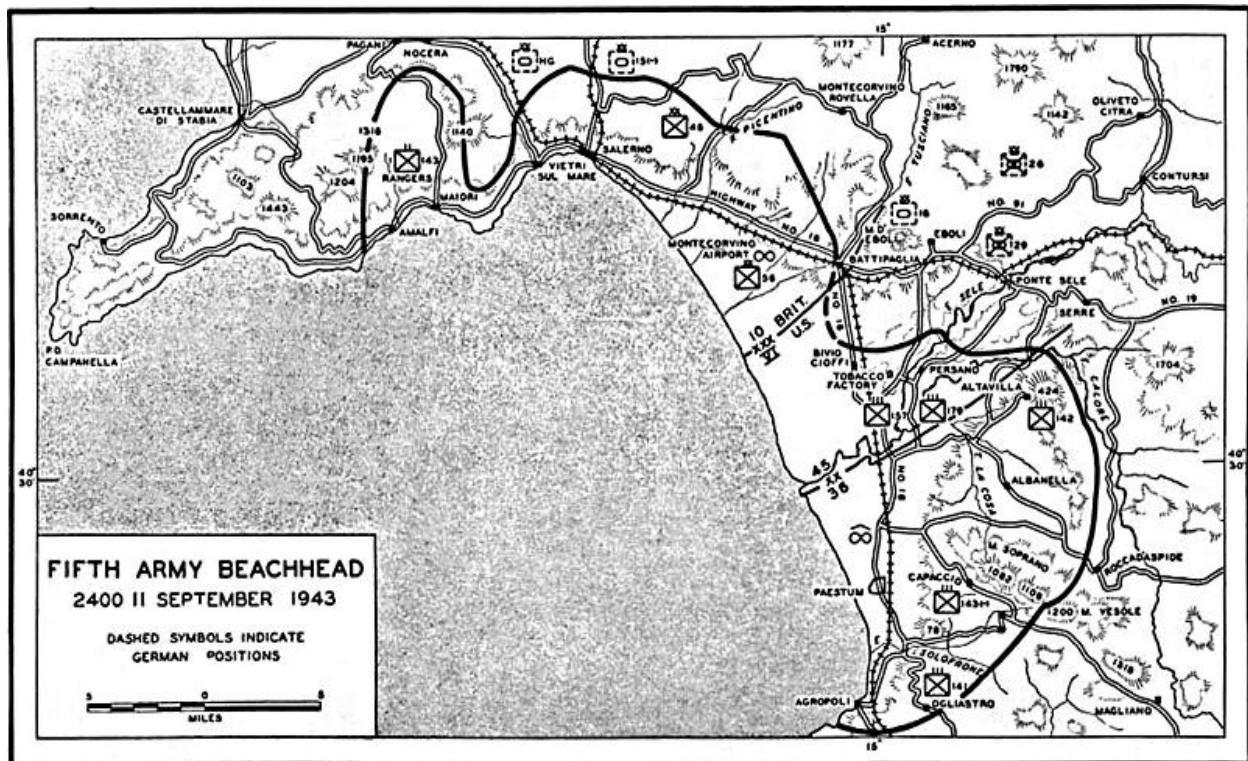
About noon next day, we heard the road into Salerno was open, so, hoping to be the first in, we pulled out of the field and set off down the road. Owing to various delays, it was not until 4pm that we got started, and lucky for us it was. When we got down the road a bit, we began passing American trucks, complete with infantry, and a little later, tanks fully ready for action and pulled in by the side of the road. It all looked very warlike, and when an American major stepped into the road a little later and told us the Huns were only 400 yards further down the road, we realized it was warlike – too much so for us – so we hurriedly turned around and went back to our olive grove. It was a narrow escape, for if we had gone through a couple of hours earlier, we should have been caught by the big Mark IV tanks of the 124th Panzer Division, which had counter-attacked and retaken the road.

[Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945](#)



A German PzKpfw IV tank knocked out at Pasanara, Salerno 9th September 1943.

After that, the shelling from each side grew worse, and the noise made by the shells passing overhead now didn't disturb us. We got used to it, although we jolly soon went face down in the ditch when one whined a bit too close! That night I slept in my clothes, as the Huns had made a further attack and were getting very close. That night again we were bombed and shelled without pause, but our chaps gave back more than they received. The heavy warships out in the Bay were now bombarding with a vengeance, and when they opened fire with their big guns, the noise was terrific!



[See more from Griffin Turton](#)

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945

Next day, the third after the assault, word came in early that during the night, the Huns had been pushed back a bit, blowing up two bridges as they went. Accordingly, it was decided that a guide should take me, with a lorry full of wireless equipment, into Salerno to set up the wireless station. I loaded up my Tommy gun, put my revolver on my knee, sat by the driver of the lorry, and off we went. We were told that there were pockets of Germans all over the country we were to pass through, and we should probably be fired on. So off we went, and it took us hours, casting up and down the rivers, questioning Italians as we went, to find a way through. Eventually we found one, and about noon, having passed out of the American beach area, through no-man's-land, through the advanced British lines, we arrived in Salerno.

There, I was surprised to find my Signal Officer, who had landed direct into the town from an L.C.I the previous evening. He, anyhow, was delighted to see me, and we at once got on with the job of fixing up the wireless station. We were in the late fascist Headquarters, and my gosh! You should of seen the stuff they had in there! It was a marvellous building, finished completely regardless of the cost. No wonder the ordinary Italian man in the street is so desperately poor. The fascists forced contributions out of them, and used the money to put up these grandiose buildings in every town throughout the country. The basement was stocked to the ceiling with little uniforms and small soldiers hats for the fascist children, or Balilla, as they call them, to wear in the processions. It was a crime, all that clothing laying there, and kids outside running round with hardly a rag on their backs. We soon served some of it out, however. I took a fair number of the innumerable badges the fascists used to wear. I'll send them home to you, in case they may amuse the kids. (Note3)



Boys in the Balilla, Italian Fascist Youth Group

Well, we soon got the radio station fixed up and working, but at times it was very unpleasant. The town lies in a little bay, with the mountains climbing steeply all round it. The Huns had batteries of guns only a mile away in the hills, and were steadily shelling the town, harbour and beaches. As we were nearly on the beach, these shells would pass not more than a few feet over our heads as we worked on the high tower on the roof. Its an awful noise they make – not a rushing, roaring sound, but just like a gentle sigh, very penetrating. We ducked at first but could not be bothered after a few hours of it. After some days of it, we took little notice, excepting when they began to fall only 100 yards away, with their usual terrific bang and column of smoke.

After two days of this, however it became evident that instead of us having to put up with a little shelling until the Hun batteries were dislodged, the shelling was becoming heavier and closer. On the night of the second day we were in Salerno, the shelling became really bad. Salvo after salvo fell extremely close to us, and everyone evacuated to the safe side of the building, and slept fully clothed. The Huns were obviously putting in a heavy counter-attack, and getting very close to us. About three in the morning, therefore, it came as no surprise when the Signal Officer came along, and shook me. He said he intended to stay, with a handful of volunteers, till the last minute, and I was to take charge of the remaining staff and all our vehicles, and evacuate the town. Well, I didn't feel particularly heroic, but I protested at being chucked out, and asked to be allowed to stay. However, they decided that it was necessary for me to go along in charge of the evacuation party, and so we got ready. Eventually however it was decided to wait till daylight, and then we pulled

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945

back out of the town. The first place we parked in, however, an Army Officer said the German patrols came down past the place every night, so we moved on. We eventually finished in an orange grove, where apples, figs, oranges and walnuts grew in profusion. It was a godsend, so much fruit being available, although unfortunately, half the mosquitoes in Italy were there to share them with us! We found a stream, about two inches deep and a couple of feet wide, in which we washed ourselves with great gusto. The water situation is always bad near the front, what with poison, demolition, shells and bombs, but here we found our water-supply laid on for us. Of course, we couldn't drink it! I remember the first bath I had in the stream. It was such a luxury to feel water on my body that I splashed around very leisurely, until I suddenly realised I couldn't see the bank for mosquitoes! I was jolly soon out of it then, but not before I was a mass of bites. The skeetes here are nearly all malarial, too, but we take pills, and get inoculated regularly against it.

On our first day in the Orange Grove, just as we thought we had settled down, we had a further alarm. Salerno, we heard was being hurriedly evacuated. We were ordered to move off again, this time to the beach, ready to re-embark in a landing craft. The prospect didn't appeal to us, as it had been evident all day from the shells whistling over our heads, that the beaches were being heavily blitzed. However, off we went again with all our lorries and cars, and presently arrived on some flat, marshy ground near the sea. We were in a place that the Germans had heavily fortified, and looking around near our parking place, I found a deep, narrow slit-trench. So backing my car up against it, I put my bed down near it in readiness, as the sun was just setting. No sooner had I done so, that a penetrating whistle overhead, followed a second later by a great crash and column of smoke, showed that the Hun had spotted us and was opening up on us. Well I went go into the details of that night. We were shelled repeatedly; a Hun aircraft that machine gunned us hit a dump of some kind, and the whole place was illuminated as if it were daylight. Bombers followed him, and the flares they sent down were soon followed by bombs. An almost full moon came up, but the pall of smoke from the burning dump gave us a little shelter. I buried myself so deeply in that sandy German slit-trench, that even now my pockets are full of sand. The shelling went on, the shells got closer, but never quite reached us. It was the worst night I've ever had, I think, although it was also so breath-taking that I honestly never had time to be scared.

Next morning, we found that the situation in Salerno had improved. The Hun hadn't quite got into the town and now he was being held. However, it wasn't considered advisable to send us back into the town, so we went back to the Orange Grove again. We were left pretty well in peace, and gosh, we felt we needed it after the previous evening. What activity there was, appeared to be on our side all day long, large numbers of our bombers, in big formations, went over us, and the sound of the bombs going down on the German lines almost made me feel sorry for the Huns.

The next day, that was the sixth day after the landing, I found a way had been opened again back to the southern beaches where my vehicles had been left. So armed to the teeth, I set off with a lorry and riding a motorcycle myself. At every crossroad, we found a Military Policeman, who directed us. We went by devious routes, very soon leaving the main road, and going along dusty,



Troops coming ashore at Salerno, September 10th, with the mountains in the distance.

[Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945](#)

narrow tracks which soon became mere tracks across farmlands. After nearly two hours of this painful progress, we began again to approach the scene of action. We passed American gun positions in action – and what a crack their guns have – and could see their shells exploding in a wood in front of us. We began to feel a bit uneasy when we saw that our road led directly through this wood. However, off we went, with me in the lead on my motor-bike. The shells began falling very close to us – we could see the flash and smoke of the explosion – and with a terrific roar, the Liberators



German Pak-75 Anti-Tank gun and crew, Italy, September 1943.

which were over us bombed the Hun positions. Perhaps it was this other distraction that allowed us to creep pass only a few hundred yards away. Well, I say “creep”, but I've never driven so fast over rocky roads, and behind me, my lorry was bumping and bouncing all over the road, trying to keep up with me.

Well after that it was pretty plain sailing. We picked up our other transport, snatched a quick meal under the trees, and set off back. We duly ran the gauntlet a second time, and got back to our Orange Grove about tea-time. We were all weary from our long ride, and I was white with dust, which duly came off in the stream. There was intense air bombing of the Huns just then, with the ships sending their shells screaming over our heads at the same time. Someone switched on the radio, and there was Vera Lynn singing “the last all clear”. We had to laugh! Just about that time, Jerry began firing shells set to explode a few feet above the ground. Some of these exploded overhead, and a few of our men were wounded by shrapnel. You should have seen us get off the mark into our slit-trenches, or under a lorry, when the whine of the shell was heard!

The next day, we had no end of a surprise. We got orders to go to Capri, certain of us. So once again we packed up our gear and got down to the beach. This time it was much more peaceful, and whilst waiting for our boat, we went in for a swim. It was glorious. Eventually we embarked, but as it was nearly dark, we went out in the bay to anchor for the night. No sooner had we anchored than a long burst of ack-ack fire took us up on deck of our tiny craft. Flares were falling all around us – in fact, we were bang in the middle of them. They were so close that two of them fell into the water less than six feet from the side. I'm sure it was only the midget size of us that decided the Hun we weren't worth a bomb. Some however fell so close that shrapnel came aboard, and the concussion was terrific. This went on for several hours, and before dawn they had us up with another long and fierce attack. However, at dawn we sailed. It was a perfect summer day, and the trip was delightful. Capri is a lovely island, and the sea around it is as clear and blue as any I've ever seen. I looked forward to seeing the island. I had my motor bike with me, you see.

We got fixed up in – wait for it! – Ciano's Villa !! You see, when we go to Capri, we do things in style. It really is a marvellous place, from the terrace, you have an uninterrupted view of the whole Bay of Naples, with Naples itself and Mount Vesuvius plainly in view only about 15

[See more from Griffin Turton](#)

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945

miles away. You can imagine, therefore our feelings as we watched, day by day, huge sheets of flame and columns of black smoke pour up from the town as the Hun began burning and blowing up everything of any possible use to us. At night, the fires glowed and burned like the camp fires of an army, and smoke hung all day over the burning city. It was a terrible sight. Refugees who had managed to get away brought dreadful stories of the state of the people in Naples. Disease is rampant, and water, gas, fuel, electricity, sanitation, food, all non-existent. But to get back to the Ciano Villa, from an armchair in whose lounge I am writing you this letter. It is beautifully and tastefully furnished, and the height of comfort. Edda Mussolini's bedroom is a marvellous place, and her bedroom has to be seen to be believed. There is a glorious view from the windows and the loggia outside. Count Ciano's quarters are equally splendid. No wonder the Italian people are poor! However I'm thoroughly enjoying the period of rest and quiet after the somewhat noisy and distracting time we had on the Salerno beaches and in the town! My room here is decorated in white and orange and yellow. There is a single bed, extremely comfortable. I have my own bathroom, with green and cream tiles, and "all the usual offices"! Opening the shutters on two sides of my room, I walk out onto a green tiled balcony, with a breath taking view. The mountain falls sheer down, almost into the sea, a thousand feet below, where the water gleams with that lovely deep blue only ever seen in the sunny Mediterranean. It's glorious! I'd love a house like this. (Note 4)

(The final three paragraphs are personal and have been omitted -GJT)

Transcription Notes by Griffin Turton

Henry Hayles was born 1910 at Cowes on the Isle of Wight and joined the Royal Navy in 1926 as a boy seaman. His first ship was HMS Iron Duke (which was Beatty's flagship at Jutland). Next he joined HMS Crusader and became the senior signals rating, later he was personal telegraphist to Lord Louis Mountbatten with whom he wrote the RN radio handbook. In the early 1930s he joined the Mediterranean Fleet and about this time was promoted to Warrant Officer.

At the outbreak of the Second World War he was on HMS Ramillies which was on escort duty covering the transport of troops from Australia and New Zealand, later moving to the Mediterranean. There Ramillies took part in the Malta convoys and was involved in the preliminary operations prior to HMS Illustrious' attack on Taranto on the 11th of November 1940. Then later at the battle of Cape Spartivento on the 27th of November 1940 she was able to fire a few salvos.

From 1941 through to March 1942 Ramillies was on North Atlantic convoy escort duty. On the 8th of February whilst escorting convoy HX-106, the Ramillies deterred an attack by the German battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau and on May 24th 1941 she was sent alone to intercept the Bismark being the only 'capital' ship available.

In 1942 Henry Hayles was transferred to Combined Operations where he played a role organising the communications for the St Nazaire Raid (28th March 1942) before being sent back to



HMS Ramillies 21st December 1939

[See more from Griffin Turton](#)

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942-1945

the Mediterranean to carry out similar roles to that he had for the landings at Salerno.

For his actions at Salerno he was Mentioned in Despatches and later in the war he was commissioned.

Naval Party 874, appears to have been a Combined Operations communications unit attached to a higher echelon headquarters.

This transcription was made from a scanned copy of Henry Hayle's original letter, **copyright of the letter and all rights are reserved by the Hayles family©**.

The maps and pictures that have been added by myself and are from the public domain.

Specific Notes

1)LST was the commonly used abbreviation used for Landing Ship Tank.

2)Henry is probably using 'Commandos' as a generic term for assault troops as the British Commando and American Ranger units that landed at Salerno were much further north, the men whose tracks in the sand he describes were probably regular American troops tasked with being in the first wave.

3)LCI was the abbreviation used for Landing Craft Infantry, a small steel sea-going amphibious assault ship that could land around 200 troops directly on to a beach.

4)Count Ciano (1903-44) was the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Benito Mussolini's son in law.