

DETAILS OF

SALERNO LANDINGS

EXCLUSIVE!

The following ship-by-ship account of how the landing at Salerno was accomplished is told here for the first time, based on information supplied by both the British Royal Navy and the United States Navy.—Editor.



THE story of the battle of Salerno which followed a few weeks after the capture of Sicily is now history, but this is the first full revelation of the Naval details. Without the support of the Allied Navies Salerno would never have fallen to our hands and it is more than likely that the Fifth and Eighth Armies would still be way down in the heel of Italy. For security reasons the whole story of Salerno had to be delayed till long after the objective was achieved; but it was the first occasion in which the American and British Navies were in action together against the enemy in full force and in a new type of warfare. The perfect co-operation and harmony of the Allied Navies in that very severe test speaks well for the cause of the Allies in the Pacific. It should be enough to make the Japs prepare for the worst.

Salerno was not a Naval battle; it was a combined operation in which the Allied armies gained their final victory through the exceptionally heavy support which was given to them by the Allied Navies from the sea and in the air.

The task of the Allied Navies did not end with transporting the Army safely to its destination. The entire force had to be covered against possible attack from surface vessels and submarines and most of the fighter protection in the air had to be given by the Fleet Air Arm from aircraft carriers at sea. The assault was ordered to be "pressed home, regardless of loss or difficulty," and it was emphasized that the attack did not end with the arrival of the assault wave and the capture of the beaches. It was upon the rapid follow up of reserves and the swift landing of supplies by the Allied Navies that the Army relied to

sustain the attack and give it complete success.

The Naval operations were composed of two main forces—the Western Task Force, and Force "H." The Western Task Force was divided into two—the Northern Attack Force and the Southern Attack Force (See plan page 14). The Northern Attack Force was under Commodore G. N. Oliver, R.N. in HMS HILARY. The Southern Attack Force was under Rear Admiral John L. Hall, Jr. U.S.N. in USS SAMUEL CHASE. Force "H" was under Vice Admiral Sir Algernon Willis, R.N. in HMS NELSON; and Rear Admiral Sir Philip Vian, R.N. in Force "H," commanded the carriers which gave most of the fighter cover over ships and beaches at the beginning of the assault. Rear Admiral Richard L. Conolly, U.S.N. in USS BISCAINE, volunteered to serve under Commodore Oliver as a Task Group Commander, though actually his senior in rank.

THE object of the Western Task Force was to land enough forces in the Gulf of Salerno to capture a bridgehead for Naples and to secure the neighboring airdromes. Between Salerno and Agropoli, about twenty miles south, the

ground is fairly flat and the river Sele runs roughly half way between the two. The Northern Attack Force landed British troops and supplies from the north bank of the River Sele to a point ten miles further north and about three miles south east of Salerno. The Southern Attack Force landed United States troops and supplies along the beaches from the south bank of the river Sele as far as Agropoli, eight miles further south. Concurrently with these two main landings two smaller landings were made along the coast west of Salerno for the purpose of seizing important military objectives. One at Maiori, six miles west of Salerno, consisting of United States Ranger battalions; and the other at Vietri sul Mare, about one mile west of Salerno. Force "H" consisted of a large covering force of battle ships, aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers. A Task Group, partly United States, partly British, and including the gunboats SOEMBA and FLORES of the Royal Netherlands Navy was assigned the duty of occupying the islands off the Gulf of Naples—Ventotene, Ponza, Procida, Ischia and Capri. This Task Group was under Captain Andrews, U.S.N. in the US Destroyer KNIGHT. A Picket Group of sixteen United States P.T.'s under





Rear Admiral Sir Philip L. Vian



Admiral Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham,
Britain's first sea lord.



Vice Admiral Sir Algernon U. Willis



Captain G. N. Oliver, RN

Lieutenant Commander Barnes, U.S.N. was assigned the duty of screening the vessels of the Western Task Force against attack by enemy "E" boats and other surface craft.

Allied warships had also to provide the covering fire before the Assault, and the supporting fire after the first waves of troops were landed. They had to afford the necessary anti-aircraft fire over ships and beaches; while the anchorages and water ahead of the ships and craft landing troops and equipment had to be swept clear of mines. The minesweepers, indeed, accompanied by destroyers and other escorting craft, were in the very van of the assault.

Behind the actual assault were months of patient planning and the accumulated wisdom of previous amphibious operations. So minute was the final product that the numbers and locations of vehicles in each hatch of every ship had been worked out. Also the sequence in the discharge of these vehicles from the hatches. An intricate and delicate timetable had to be

evolved by which the hundreds of ships would move

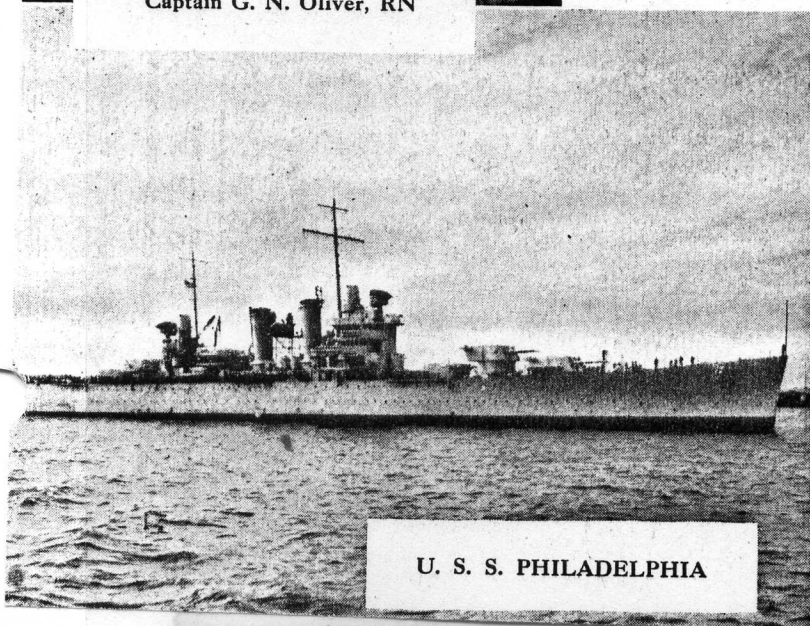
from their appointed ports to the rendezvous and then launch the assault waves upon the correctly designated beaches at Salerno.

Logistics, that all important phase of any operation, also had to be worked out in detail. The question of fueling the warships and transports engaged in the operation, of food and munitions—even to, in some instances supplies of portable water, all had to be worked out in advance.

It is still impossible to compile a chronological narrative of the work of the Allied Navies at Salerno. All that can be attempted now is to give a series of semi-connected facts dealing with the naval side of the operation.

In both the Northern and Southern Attack Force areas the first waves of landing craft, preceded by minesweepers escorted by destroyers touched down on the beaches before 4.00 a.m. on September 9th. Extensive minefields had been laid in both areas, and we incurred casualties. Many mines exploded in the sweeps. Frequently under heavy gunfire, the minesweepers did their work with their habitual skill and gallantry. In the Northern area the sweepers swept or exploded 20 mines during the assault and 135 in the first four days.

U. S. Destroyers closed the southern



U. S. S. PHILADELPHIA



H. M. S. DIDO



Vice Admiral Henry K. Hewitt, USN.



Captain R. W. Cary, USN.



Commander W. L. Messmer, USN

beaches in the face of alarming reports concerning the danger of mines and they operated in unswept areas. Commander A. H. Richards, U.S.N. Commanding the Mine Sweeping Group, was specially commended for operating in these extremely dangerous waters on navigational data which had to be obtained during the hours of darkness.

There was moderate enemy air activity, with stiff enemy resistance and heavy artillery and mortar fire on all beaches. But in spite of casualties in ships and craft and naval beach personnel, the work of disembarkation continued. The orders that the assault was "to be pressed home with relentless vigour, regardless of loss or difficulty," was obeyed to the letter. The beaches were seized and held, in spite of the enemy gunfire and counter-attacks.

ABOUT five hours after the first landing it was reported from the southern beaches that the bombarding ships were having difficulty in locating enemy batteries. Nevertheless their fire was extremely effective as may be judged from a message from a United States General Officer on shore to the Commander of the Fire Support Unit—"Thank God for the Blue Belly Navy Ships. Probably could not have stuck

it out on blue and yellow beaches. Stout fellows. Please tell them so." From other sources we hear of the "magnificent support" given by the Royal Navy to the assault on the northern beaches, particularly when the Germans counterattacked. These ships were all destroyers and they engaged the shore batteries at point-blank range. One strongly sited battery was knocked out at eight hundred yards.

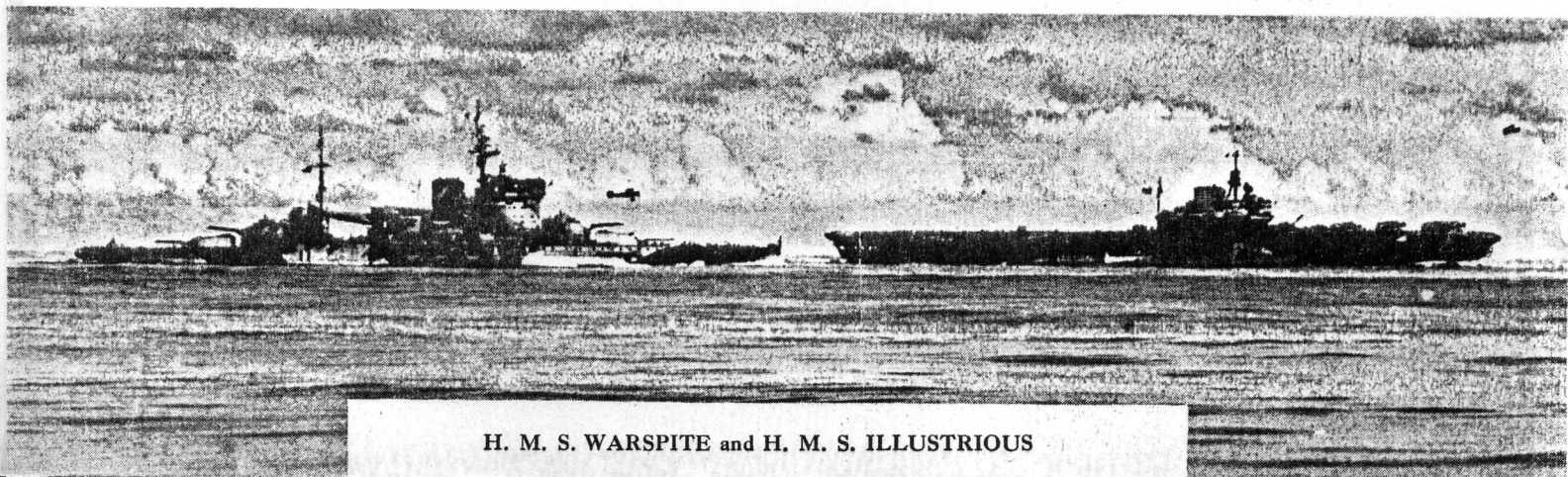
The figures which are quoted in a later paragraph convey little impression of the intensity of the bombardment from the sea, or its deadly accuracy. But the covering and supporting gunfire from the warships played an immense part in the eventual success of the operation, for at times the troops ashore were held up and unable to advance in the face of the strong German resistance from carefully prepared and sited positions. The ships were deliberately risked in mined waters where they were also liable to air attack. Minesweepers and fighter cover were both provided; but they could not guarantee 100% immunity. The Allied Navies suffered casualties; but the risks taken were eminently justified. The casualties were more than made up for by the result achieved—the successful landing of the Army on the mainland of Italy in the face of de-

termined opposition by superior forces of the enemy. History and the experts alone can truly evaluate the contribution provided by the covering and supporting gunfire from the sea, and tell us whether or not it definitely tipped the scale in our favor.

What resistance was encountered on the beaches can be judged from the reports of the young Ensigns who comprised the Boat Group Commanders, and Beach Officers of the Attack Force. Ensign S.S. Linton, U.S.N.R., reported that he went ashore in the third wave.

The beach party and shore engineers were shelled about daylight and took cover in foxholes. There they remained while snipers made the air hot above them until about 1500. That same morning three German tanks came within 200 yards of their foxholes and shelled the transport area. They tried to get a boat from Yellow Beach to evacuate casualties but it was sunk by enemy fire. Andrew Allardi, Seaman 1st Class, U.S.N., took off his clothing and swam to the craft to help the wounded of the crew.

Ensign R. E. Fitzgerald, U.S.N.R., a boat group commander, went in with the tank lighters. In the next lighter was an American Navy Coxswain, named McMahon. They encountered



H. M. S. WARSPITE and H. M. S. ILLUSTRIOUS

enemy machine-gun nests, one of them about 40 yards away. "I kept both my 50 calibre machine-guns pointed right at him," Fitzgerald reported, "but didn't fire because I didn't care to give away our position to him or others."

McMahon's craft let down her ramp and a halftrack rolling off struck a land mine. Three men were killed and four wounded. As Fitzgerald's was the only boat left he brought back the wounded.

Lieutenant R. I. A. McKenzie, United States Coast Guard Reserve, commanding an LCI, reported that one of three Me. 109s peeled off and flew over at low altitude strafing his craft and another in line of fire about 150 yards to port. McKenzie's guns opened up, and fire from his No. 3 gun was seen to knock off the plane's "Green-house" and strike the engine. It fell fifteen yards off the starboard quarter. Six men on the next boat were wounded by the strafing.

An example of the manner in which this timing was followed out even down to the actual assault craft themselves can be found in the report of Ensign R. R. Groves, U.S.N.R., a boat group commander in the Southern Attack Force. On D-Day, Groves reported, he took an LCS at 4.30 a.m. and departed for the rendezvous with the first and second assault waves. At the time of departure, his craft took the first wave

A vivid diagram showing how the landing at Salerno was carried out and the disposition of the various task forces. Map by George Sixta, SP-(P)2C.

through a curtain of enemy fire to within 500 yards of the beach. The wave was landed on the designated beach three minutes early.

THE landings at Salerno called for the same joint and meticulous planning as the assault upon Sicily. Above all, with Americans commanding British, and British commanding Americans, the operations provided one of the finest examples of the complete cooperation and unity of purpose of the British and United States Navies fighting side by side in action.

It may be early to form an opinion; but Salerno will pass down to history as a triumph for the seamen, both naval and mercantile, of the two great English-speaking nations.

THE following is a list of commanding officers and ships in action at Salerno between September 8th and September 29th, 1943:

Other Flag Officers engaged in the operations, apart from those already mentioned, with their respective flagships were:

Rear Admiral Lyal A. Davidson, U.S.N.—USS PHILADELPHIA. Captain P. Hendron, U.S.N.

Rear Admiral Clement Moody—HMS ILLUSTRIOUS. Captain R. L. B. Cunliffe, R.N.

Rear Admiral C. H. J. Harcourt—HMS MAURITIUS. Captain W. W. Davis, R.N.

Commodore W. G. Agnew—HMS AURORA.

THE SOUTHERN ATTACK FORCE

Apart from transports and landing ships and craft, included the following warships:

The U. S. cruisers PHILADELPHIA—Captain P. Hendron, U.S.N. Flagship of Rear Admiral Davidson; SAVANNAH, Captain Robert Cary, U.S.N.; BOISE, Captain L. H. Thebaud, U.S.N. The U. S. destroyers present were the PLUNKETT, NIBLACK, BENSON, CLEAVES, MAYO, WAINWRIGHT, TRIPPE, RHIND, ROWAN, KNIGHT, WOOLSEY, LUDLOW, EDISON, NICHOLSON, BRISTOL, COLI, BERNADOU, and DALLAS. Captain C. Wellborn, Jr., and Commanders G. L. Menocal and E. R. Durgin were in command of the Destroyer Divisions.

The Southern Attack Force Minesweepers, which had the difficult and dangerous duty of sweeping the approaches to the beaches and the anchorages and areas to be occupied by transports and bombarding units, were U.S.S.'s STRIVE—Commander Messmer, U.S.N., SEER, SKILL, SPEED, STEADY, SUSTAIN, SYMBOL PILOT—Commander A. H. Richards, U.S.N., and PREVAIL, together with 15 Y.M.S. ("Yard" minesweepers for work in coastal waters somewhat similar to the British motor minesweepers).

Working with the Southern Attack Force were the tugs USS's HOPI and MORENO.

The following ships of the Royal Navy worked with the Southern Attack Force:

HMS ABERCROMBIE—Captain G. V. B. Faulkner

HMS ULSTER QUEEN—Captain M. H. J. Bennett, R.N.R.

HMS PALOMARES—Captain J. H. Jauncey

HMS DELHI—Captain A. T. G. C. Peachey, together with H.M. Ships OAKLEY, HAMBLEDON, DERWENTDALE, EMPIRE, CHARMIAN, BOXER, BRUISER, and THRUSTER.

THE NORTHERN ATTACK FORCE

Apart from transports and landing ships and craft, consisted of the following:

HMS HILARY — Broad Pendant of Commodore Oliver.

USS BISCAYNE — Flag of Rear Admiral Richard L. Conolly, U.S.N., as Headquarters ships.

(Cont'd on page 51)

Shipmate.

