

# WHEN THE INVADER CAME ASHORE

A SHORT STORY, written for "The Listener" by "ETAOIN"

*It can hardly be necessary to say that this story is fiction and not history.—Ed.*

THE invader came ashore at 11.46 a.m. New Zealand Summer Time on Wednesday. I can be as exact as that because I looked at my watch the moment the first of them touched ground and I know the time was correct because we had all checked our watches just a few hours before. It was rather an important moment for me—quite apart from the fact that it was my first sight of the enemy—because then I felt quite sure, for the first time, that we were going to win this confounded war. Maybe it seems defeatist to suggest that I wasn't sure before, but who was? We all hoped we'd win and we all knew we deserved to win and what would happen to the world if we didn't win wouldn't bear thinking about, but I for one lacked just that slight leavening of certainty that makes all the difference. Even now I can't say that the change from 99 to 100 per cent. certainty was a rational one—I just knew that everything was going to be all right, and I was convinced at 11.46 a.m. last Wednesday.

WE had been at our battle stations for about 36 hours before then and it's just as well we were. But the General Staff were able (as they had assured us they would be) to give plenty of warning of the approach of the invasion fleet, and we were all called up by radio on the Monday afternoon. It was a wild scramble but we had paraded and drawn ammunition and equipment before tea-time and then it was only a matter of a half-hour's run in three commandeered buses and a couple of trucks to get the entire company into stations.

The job we had been given was the defence of a small bay which it was thought might be used by assault barges, since it was fairly close to a good road and there was also a fairly strong coast-wise drift thereabouts, setting in towards the bay, which would assist the boats in making a landing. However, to compensate for that the position was fairly defensible. The beach, which was about 800 yards long, swung in a shallow arc between two small headlands and on each of these we established a battery of four light mortars. Don't ask me where they came from. I don't know. They just arrived like pennies from Heaven along with a truck-load of ammunition and we got them tucked away in deep emplacements as fast as we could in case anyone should discover they had been sent to us by mistake.

THERE wasn't much we could do the first night except put sentries out and make ourselves as comfortable as possible.

We hadn't any tents, but it's surprising what you can do with manuka to make things snug, and I for one slept like a dormouse until about half-past three in the morning when 'planes began to move overhead and we all had to stand-to. They kept roaring round above us, but as far as we could judge, when daylight came, they were all our 'planes. Certainly all the 'planes in formation were racing out seawards like skeins of geese in May. Medium bombers were roaring north-west in scores with their grids of fighters above them or pelting back at five-minute intervals in ones and twos, flying low.

However, we hadn't too much time to spare for watching the Air Force, and after posting anti-aircraft lookouts we turned to improving our positions. The sun came up yellow as a lemon and there wasn't much warmth in the air, but we sweated as we drove the picks into the heavy clay and threw up the parapets until each of the heads was pocked with weapon-pits and crawl-trenches, lined and thatched with manuka. By mid-day the skipper was satisfied that nothing short of a naval bombardment or dive-bombers could shift us while our ammunition lasted, so we decided on the strength of that to have dinner. Most of us had been too excited the day before to eat much, but now, after a scratch breakfast and a full morning's hard work, we'd have eaten our webbing if there had been nothing else.

We squatted in the manuka out of the wind and ate sausages in our fingers and swigged hot tea and told one another there was no need to worry about the wife and kids because the Japs hadn't come all this way to waste ammunition on non-combatants. I was lying on my back in a sheltered corner, trying to absorb as much as I could of the thin autumn sunshine and listening with half an ear to the talk going on around me, when I noticed another flight of our bombers, travelling high and seawards. And these ones weren't moving north-west. They were going straight out, and almost due west. That seemed to argue that the curtain might go up any minute and, sure enough, within the next half-hour we began to hear the thunder of heavy bombing apparently just over the rim of the horizon. We manned our positions again and waited. You could feel the tension that we had worked out of our systems during the morning growing up again. There wasn't much talk and when you did say anything you felt you had to whisper it. Somebody on my right, in the next pit, tripped over a pick and I could hear him cursing quietly. Here and there a rifle-bolt clicked and in the emplacements behind us I could hear the mortar-crews talking as they checked over their ammunition. Four light bombers came skimming in

and disappeared over the hill behind us, the port engine of one smoking heavily. Twenty thousand feet about us the relieving shift slid seaward in arrowhead.

AT three o'clock or thereabouts we saw smoke on the horizon to the westward and in the next half-hour we counted seventeen squadrons of our 'planes travelling in that direction. The mutter of the bombing, though still softened by distance, seemed to be coming nearer. The smear of smoke grew.

Suddenly one of our n.c.o.'s who was watching through a pair of glasses gave a yell. He had seen a big enemy transport racing up over the edge of the horizon. It was smoking like a volcano. We couldn't see the attacking 'planes, of course, but even at that distance we could see the white water that fountained up from the near misses. For perhaps two minutes the ship raced along almost parallel with our front and then it was obliterated. One second it was there, snoring along with a bone in its teeth, the next nothing was left but a blot of black smoke which seemed to jerk outwards with the concussion before slowly boiling up for two thousand feet into the air. Seconds ebbed past and then we felt rather than heard the thud of the explosion. Two more smoke palls rose from beyond the horizon to the north of the first and still the bombers passed and re-passed above us.

WE ate our tea in what the communications would call a spirit of reserved optimism. We reminded one another that we had seen no enemy aircraft and that we knew one enemy ship at least, and we hoped possibly two others, had been blown up. Headquarters had not had any news of enemy landings and we felt we had due ourselves in pretty snugly. As long as the dive-bombers were elsewhere we would be content. But we doubled our sentries that night and slept alongside our weapons and no fires were lit for billy-boiling while the darkness lasted.

It was clammy and cold when we stood to just before dawn and there was a raw mist in the air. Below us the tide crawled in white crescents up the beach and a handful of gulls drifted over the sand like flecks of grey ash. There was no sound but the skirl of a sea-bird, the hush of the surf, the occasional stamp of a man trying to drive the cir-

culation back into his feet. The rest was silence. In the vault of the sky, now lightening behind us, no aircraft moved, to seaward nothing stirred.

The daylight waxed and soon we could hear the cooks moving around the fires. Fat began to crackle in the pans and the blessed odour of frying steak came down the lines.

Most of us shaved after breakfast that morning. There was little to do and it was a matter of habit for most of us rather than a gesture. At any rate, we weren't thinking about the Greeks at Thermopylae when we did it. After we had tidied ourselves up, the weapons were inspected and about mid-morning the Battalion commander came round and gave our dispositions the once-over. At eleven o'clock our section paraded for out-post duty and relieved the chaps in No. 1 outpost in the sandhills at the north end of the beach. They had nothing to report and after posting a sentry—I was one of them—the rest of the section curled up among the marram grass and dozed off in the forenoon sun. Beyond the lip of the trench there was nothing to suggest battle, murder, or sudden death. The slight swell curled up the beach, broke with a soft hiss and retreated. A few black-backed gulls were quarrelling over a dead fish, there were a few patches of what seemed to be kelp drifting in the bay. I began to feel sleepy. It was warm in the sun...

I SUPPOSE I'd have committed the unpardonable sin of sleeping on sentry-go if it hadn't been for the gulls. There had been only a dozen or two of them around a few minutes ago, now there seemed to be hundreds screaming and swooping around us, diving low over the edge of the water. And then I saw a black shape poised in a breaking roller. The top of the wave crumpled suddenly, and tossed it on to the wet sand, leaving it sprawling helplessly, arms outflung, the short, white-gaitered legs lying anyhow like those of a rag-doll. I yelled to wake up the post and looked at my watch. It was 11.46.

On the head above us I could hear whistles cheeping and then the company came winding down the slope in single file. They had left their rifles behind them but they were carrying their shovels at the slope. And along the crescent of the beach the little blue and white figures drifted in to form a dark line along the sand.

Then we began to dig.

