Man of the House

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Clarence’s War: The Occupation of Sicily

“War is long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.” When Clarence Clark sat down to write a letter to Evelyn Corrie on August 26th, 1943, he was exemplifying this old saying. The terror of the allied campaign to conquer Sicily had ended just nine days previously. Taking advantage of the lull in combat, Clarence wrote to his friend to stave off the boredom that was to punctuate this decisive World War II battle. To better understand Clarence’s letter, the reader must first look at the goals and rhetorical methods by which he writes to Evelyn. Secondly, the modern reader must also understand how Clarence’s life in the army and the overall Allied strategy towards winning the Second World War molded the content of Clarence’s letter.

A rhetorical analysis of the letter helps the reader infer what, why, and how Clarence wanted to achieve as he sat down to write to Evelyn that day. As he puts it, “There hasn’t been much going on lately in the way of news [...] Haven’t heard any of the latest news from around the hometown as I haven’t gotten any new mail for some time.” This tells us that not only is Clarence’s unit uninformed on current events, but that the Army mail also hasn’t had a chance to catch up to them, either. By writing to Evelyn, and mentioning these things early on, it seems as if he wants Evelyn to write back telling him news about war headlines. On a more personal level he also wants to know the hometown gossip going around Carlisle, Iowa, where he met Evelyn met as she was teaching third grade there before the war. Additionally, he asks about her vacation, something that he’s sure has been made difficult with gasoline rationing in effect. Now that
the battle for Sicily is over and he is “taking it easy,” as he assures her, he now has the time to finally write to her and find out about things are going at home so he can pass the boredom of occupation duty in Sicily. To the right is an image of Evelyn and Clarence pictured together in Chicago after the war. Clarence wears the Combat Infantry Badge and a Staff Sergeant’s stripes, awards he earned for his combat service.

Clarence had another motivation for writing to Evelyn: he had feelings for her. According to Evelyn, the feeling was not mutual, but she wrote back anyways because she knew that Clarence needed a friend to keep his morale up. Perhaps knowing that Evelyn didn’t see him as anything but a friend, Clarence still wanted their correspondence to go on. By using humor to make her laugh, he secures their friendship. His humor is fairly simple; he describes having to wash his clothes in a barrel, the flies “driving him nuts,” and the locals trying to make a quick buck off of GIs foolhardy with their money. While not exactly being what you would call stand-up comedy, these cheerful anecdotes would have still had the effect of letting Evelyn know that Clarence is well and that it is worth continuing their friendship.

Clarence’s anecdotes reflect on mutual values he, Evelyn, and Americans at the time held about morality and society, showing us how Clarence’s letter fits into the historical big picture. In describing the Sicilian countryside, he pays special detail to the rocky soil and irrigation system, which he criticizes for failing during the hot summer months. As an Iowan from the more economically-developed American heartland, he seems shocked at the poverty
and crudeness of Sicilian agriculture. Clarence writes mocking filthy cottages and children begging for cigarettes, implying that Americans at the time had higher standards for sanitation and public health than poorer parts of the world, to the point of being xenophobic towards other cultures. These views were only reinforced by *The Soldier’s Guide to Sicily*, a pamphlet distributed to Allied soldiers who participated in the campaign. Clarence seems to have ignored the sections describing the local language and culture. “I still don’t know hardly word one of this lingo and I’m making no effort to learn it,” Clarence writes stubbornly. Instead, his prejudices against the locals seem to have been confirmed by the pamphlet’s descriptions of “venereal disease” and “gangsterism” running rampant in the local population (“Liberation,” 2014).

Clarence doesn’t allow himself to get too negative when describing Sicily, though, nor is he able to send any of the pictures that he has taken. This is because Army mail was heavily censored during the war, meaning that demoralizing statements would be blacked out so as to keep defeatism from spreading on the home front. To the right is an image of the cover of the informational pamphlet given to Allied soldiers deployed to Sicily.

Clarence mentions seeing King George VI and Winston Churchill in the months before the Allies landed on Sicily, which frames the shift towards increased Allied cooperation at this stage in World War II. The royal visit, made to boost the morale of British and American troops stationed in northern Africa, also showed the two leaders that Allied troops were ready for the invasion of Sicily. This coordinated effort of American and Commonwealth troops would be the first of many cooperative
operations that made up the overall allied strategy to winning the war. The victory at Sicily paved the way for future cooperative operations such as the invasion of the Italian peninsula, the D-Day landings, and Operation Market Garden. By crippling the Italian Army, the Allied victory in Sicily forced the German Wehrmacht to divert sorely needed troops from their campaign in the USSR to shore up Axis defenses in the Mediterranean. This set them up for a major defeat at the Kursk at the hands of the Soviet Red Army that same summer, a defeat that would put the Germans on the defensive for the rest of the war. It can therefore be said that the allied invasion of Sicily was a turning point in the struggle to destroy the Third Reich. To the left is an image of an abandoned German Panzer III tank in northern Africa. The heavy losses sustained by German armored divisions in Tunisia, Sicily, and Kursk in the summer of 1943 would keep the Axis on the defensive for the rest of the war.

Written by: Patrick Taffe

Reference List
