

BRITISH EVENINGNEWSPAPERS

Not to be broadcast before 0030 B.S.T., Monday, September 13, 1943

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On Salerno Road.
Saturday, Sept. 11.

Now we are really inside Italy - beginning to look through the tatters of Fascism left by Mussolini. One of the tatters is Salerno, a tram ride from Pompeii (every ten minutes in peace time) on the road to Naples.

I drove into Salerno, town of 42,000 people, yesterday. Troops who had landed on the north shore of the bay were still holding off the Germans there. Our infantry were working through the hills above to try to stop a possible German counter attack east of the town. To the south there was still hard fighting along the foothills for the railway and the landing grounds. But Salerno lay on the coast like a piece of wreckage left out of the battle.

Two months ago it was a quietly beautiful place to which you could drive out on a Sunday from Naples, or from which you could make steamer trips to Capri. Its old narrow streets - Lombard and Norman, and everything else since - climbed up the steep slopes to the cathedral and the castle.

At first when I drove in from the south I had a feeling of shock. Even when you are used to bomb damage this country is so beautiful that the ugly ruin left by air raids looks more repulsive by contrast. The damage was mainly at one end of the town - in the railway station and harbour area. The main part of the town was not damaged. It was dead. There it lay coloured like a child's picture book in the sunshine made gentle by the centuries, but for one arrogant Fascist town hall - and all stone dead.

We stopped in the middle of the main street, the mile long Corso Garibaldi, to eat bully beef and biscuits. But for the sky above we might have been eating in the catacombs. The shops were shuttered, the house windows blank. The town was empty. Or so it seemed at first. Then some Italian soldiers passed as we ate and stopped to watch gravely. They were ragged. Their boots hardly held together. Two small boys joined them, and of course said "Cigarette".

A civilian car passed, stopped, and out jumped a young pale-faced man, perspiring and unshaved, but good looking. He held out a hand and said, "I learn English school. Speak little. Fight you Africa 1942. Wounded". He looked unwell, but he was very anxious to be friendly - invited us to dinner, and when we had to refuse begged us wistfully to revisit Salerno "after war".

He had been a lieutenant in the Ariate Division, one of the better Italian divisions in Libya. You could see that he hated the Germans because of their unconcealed contempt for their Allies. Rommel, he said, mixing his genders was "a bitch". Now a small crowd was round us - idle soldiers and the poor of the town, who had nowhere to go.

Among them was a little, leathery, large nosed man, who said in a strong Brooklyn accent that his name was John Debella. He called Mussolini "Muzzy". The Germans, they're thick. They don't know when to stop fighting. Why don't you ask the big boss in this town to get the Italian soldiers to help you knock them off the hills."

Two months ago the first Allied bombers came to Salerno. Before that the Germans came to the Mayor of the town and said they wanted to put guns along the waterfront. The Mayor refused. That, he said, would bring the bombers. But they came all the same.

"We were glad when they came," said old John Debella, "because most of the people had gone out of the town, so we knew they'd hit the Germans. They had their headquarters in the best hotel, the Diana".

German diversions, in John Debella's opinion, are wine, women and wheels. The wheels impress him most - "They get wheels. They get around everywhere". So long, he thought, as they were getting around on the wheels to the wine and the women they were all right. You could get on with them.

"But if there was any trouble" he added, "they would start shooting". Under all this talk you could sense the main German mistake in Italy. You can sense it if you listen to the talk of Italians everywhere. Whatever other faults the Italians have, they are not arrogant. The Germans can never hide their contempt for 'inferior races'. That contempt has done as much as anything else to break up the Axis partnership.

"All the people want is peace", said John DeBella. "When we hear the news of the armistice we all start talking loud. Then we pinch each other and say 'shut up'. We think, maybe, the Germans won't hear it, and maybe they'll get caught."

I am not making John DeBella the spokesman for Italy, but his attitude seems to be fairly typical of this coast.

You do not meet any resentment at our invasion. The thought of the peasant seems to be that the war is over, and that if we have done anything to hasten that desirable end so much the better. There is even an innocent suggestion that now we are almost Allies. Of course there were a few who resisted at first, not having heard of the armistice, and there may have been some who would have liked to go on fighting, but I think the John DeBellas are the vast majority.

What kind of country or government they want when the war is over you cannot yet say. At the moment all they want is quiet, to come back to their shops and their houses and begin their family lives over again. The great majority that is. But there may be a fretful minority.

Fascist youth have had their minds chiselled through the years in Italy as well as in Germany - and for longer. It is only the other day since the blackshirt battalions disappeared. I am not sure that they have quite disappeared. Today, in Salerno, the new self assured looking young men in uniform whom I saw as distinct from the average unshaven lounging conscript were wearing a silver star on one lapel of their tunics.

That, I was told, is now the insignia of the Blackshirt battalions. They were disbanded or rather merged into the rest of the army when Mussolini and the Fascist party went, but they have kept this small sign on their uniforms to show who they are. Which shows that the ending of the Fascist Government does not mean the ending of the Fascist mentality in Italy. The re-birth of towns like Salerno may not be so simple.

Meanwhile the Germans have to be got rid of. If they go on fighting as hard as they are fighting now that may take some time. They have here all the conditions which made defence easy in Tunisia and Sicily. The stretch of coast and mountain is, in fact, rather easier to defend.

There is less room for an army to spread out than on the coast of Sicily. Enormous quantities of heavy equipment have to be driven from the beaches up very narrow one track sandy lanes between the orchards and tomato vines. Even when you push further into the Sele Plain bordering the Gulf of Salerno the country does not open out.

There are orchards everywhere, and narrow roads with deep ditches and high tree hedges on either side. It is as if you had taken all the narrowest Sussex and Kentish lanes and had jumbled them all together on one coastal strip. We have the main road, one of the wide smooth Fascist auto-strada as far as Salerno, and beyond, but there the mountain barrier rises between us and Naples.

The Germans are using every rise of ground to delay us. They do not have to pull back on to the higher mountains which ring this plain. If they did that it might be easier to shell them off those bare rocky slopes. Before you come to the steeper hills there is a gradually rising series of small foothills. As the Germans fall back they can place their 88 millimetre guns, machine guns and mortars behind each row of foothills in turn. There has to be a set battle for each fresh position, instead of a smooth advance.

On the first day of the landing, for instance, we captured an airfield. It lay alongside the main Salerno-Naples road and railway. It looked invitingly clear. A Spitfire short of fuel circled and landed. The pilot jumped out just in time. An 88 millimetre shell crashed into his Spitfire behind him. The Germans had withdrawn behind the nearest foothill, and were covering the airfield from there. The battle for the airfield had to begin again.

In case the word armistice has spread too peaceful a notion of this new campaign it should be remembered that our landing in the Gulf of Salerno was by all military rules one of the boldest landings ever made. We had deliberately chosen to land beyond the normal range of fighter aircraft against an enemy who was known to have strong fighter and bomber forces on many airfields within easy reach. By normal range I mean a range at which a Spitfire can stay an hour over the battlefield. Over this battlefield, as the enemy well knows, Spitfires flying from Sicily can only stay about twenty minutes. So we should have been bombed and strafed off the beaches and harried mercilessly from the air on every day since. Apart from a few uncomfortable moments each day and night nothing of the sort has happened. The reason may be that the day and night offensive against the railways and airfields of Italy by the Allied air forces which went on for weeks before the invasion has disorganised the Luftwaffe. All the same this campaign should not be expected to move fast until we have several airfields in working order. To get them our infantry have to fight the hard uphill way of Tunisia and Sicily.