

SALERNO:

from STEWART JALL, Representing Combined British Press

Salerno Front, Saturday

Fleeing from Salerno before the British advance the Germans left a stripped and battered city where civilians are straggling back from the hills to wait for the food and water Amgot are already striving to provide. I entered the city early this morning a few hours after the noise of battle on the outskirts of the town had died away.

Warships in the blue bay are shelling the German positions and British troops and artillery are moving in by sea and air. Outside the town the Italians were fighting the Germans. Inside, Carabinieri with new armlets with the English words "Civil Police" helped the Allied authorities in their stupendous task of restoring order and services to the town.

Such was the fantastic pass to which Mussolini had brought this once beautiful and thriving place. Now his ^{were} torn portrait lay unregarded in the gutter. His name and Fascist slogan upon walls/overdaubed with paint. Salerno once had a population of 77,220 people. Now only a few hundred are there. In the long shuttered streets of the town's centre little groups of civilians stand helplessly but plainly glad to see British troops come in. In the outskirts where the damage is worse the men of the town help the soldiers to clear away the rubbish from the streets.

These people are shyly smiling or saluting in the English way and look towards us with hope. For days the Germans terrorised the place shooting, beating and looting everything down to sheets from beds, and last night their bombers came over to spread more ruin through the town. The Union Jack and Stars and Stripes floated over the Town Hall where a young American captain, one of the first party of Amgot officials, struggled to bring Salerno back to life. With him was the town's water engineer who listened eagerly to the instructions and gave the Fascist salute from habit. He was then overcome by confusion and held up his fingers for the victory sign. A captain of Carabinieri in olive uniform and medals took his orders and purposefully departed with a heel-click and bow. "We told them all this Fascist stuff was out" he said, "but they ^{have} got into the way of it. It doesn't mean anything anymore". They are on our side. They have been almost embarrassingly helpful at times, but things are not easy. The Germans cleared the place right out taking food, wine, olive oil, clothing, even bedclothes. They didn't leave a thing. They even blew hydro-electric plant. There isn't any transport. Some of these people have not had a real meal for three days.

For a week or so the Germans here have been very jumpy. When they saw the way things were going they raided houses looking for arms, shot men they thought would join up with us and beat up others. I heard one or two cases of rape. The Germans shut up the Carabinieri in barracks and trained machine-guns on the entrance.

Nearly all civilians fled to the hills where they were caught up in the German retreat. Now they are gradually returning. The Germans pulled out yesterday. I came in soon after. Not long before I heard Italians fighting for us. Only one room in the Town Hall is now used as an office. The remainder of that imposing building with its marble and mahogany staircase and grand painted hall and municipal theatre is empty save for small parties of soldiers sitting on the stairs eating pack rations.

The Salerno Fascists did themselves well. Party headquarters are built in the same magnificent style as the Town Hall and stuffed with goods. Cellars like a West-End store stacked with skis, boxing gloves, uniforms, drums, flags, dresses for Fascist women and clothing for Fascist infants. But the last Fascist had vanished. In the main office a British soldier lolled negligently in a chair with feet on the desk and a black Fascist cap with a long tassel on the back of his head.

Rows of empty chairs were drawn up in the meeting hall under a big picture of be-medalled Mussolini. A crack ran right across the glass.

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In the street I met an elderly Italian who had lived many years in Chicago. "I am very glad to see you, dear boy" he said. "We had a terrible time. We were foodless. I had no boots. One of your soldiers gave me these slippers. I am sorry I ever came back from America. I could not get work because I did not belong to the party. Look", he held out the waistband of his trousers showing how his girth had declined. Half a dozen men and women gathered round. They smiled in a friendly way. One woman pointed to a Union Jack on the Town Hall and clapped her hands.

During the day there came small signs that Salerno was recovering. A chemist opened his store for two hours. Along the roads leading towards the town through orchards and vineyards came civilians from the hills carrying bundles or driving donkeycarts. And all the time British troops were moving in.

MINISTRY OF INFORMATION