

WITH THE FIFTH ARMYBy Basil Gingell, Representing the Combined British PressWith the 5th Army, Sept.17th

There were indications last night that the German forces facing the Allied troops in the southern-most portion of the Salerno bridgehead were withdrawing their forces northward. At the same time, probably with the object of providing a diversion, enemy troops around Salerno became more active. Throughout the day Germans shelled the coast road leading from the south to Salerno and actually landed shells at a road junction at Pontecagnano where the road from one of the original landing beaches joins the main Salerno thoroughfare. Three ex-Italian soldiers serving as medical orderlies with the Allies were killed by a shell as they stood on the pavement. Transport for several miles along the road were under fire, and warning notices told drivers to keep a certain distance apart, adding cryptically "use your head or you may lose it". In another area where a strong force of German troops had been holding the road junction the enemy, after heavy bombing and bombardment, has now pulled out. There was a particularly strong pocket of resistance here in a tobacco factory which had been strongly defended with machine guns.

This town was an obvious position for the enemy to try and hold, although on the day of the initial landing they came near to losing it when patrols forced their way into the town. The Germans counter-attacked, drove off the patrols, and seemed determined to hold the position if at all possible while they brought up troops from the south.

The attack in the hills around Salerno centres chiefly at four points, Whitecross Hill, Crucifix Hill, The Snout and The Pimple. The Snout is the name given to any elevated road position which winds around to make the form of a somewhat pronounced Roman nose on the map. At the centre of the bulge a commanding view is gained over the surrounding countryside.

All these positions lie due east of the road and have provided the centre of the fighting for the past two or three days, although they had not been officially christened by the troops until yesterday. There was a strong pocket of enemy on the summit of The Pimple, in an attack on which Commandos took 147 prisoners, including the Battalion Commander.

From the prisoners taken it appears that a certain amount of reorganisation and re-grouping has been going on in German units. The Germans were using a certain number of tanks yesterday and four or five more were knocked out.

The gun batteries in the British-held sector of the line were extremely active throughout the day and there were more "shoots" than at any time since the landing. Heavy and medium guns hidden in the orchards and among the grape vines blasted the hill positions of the Germans all day. Some of their shooting met with remarkable success, not the least against transport bringing up reinforcements and supplies.

On the coast road to Naples there was no change in the position, the enemy still shelling or mortaring the hold we have established. Although it was not until yesterday that the Germans did any really serious shelling of the road into Salerno, it is clear that they have been in a position to do so for some time. One explanation of their failure to do so is believed to be their desire to conserve ammunition, with which they are not over-supplied in areas where the supply problem is very difficult. While British and American troops are holding stubbornly to their bridgehead the Eighth Army moves nearer and reinforcements are now pouring into the area with fresh troops. The German radio has announced that ships have arrived in Salerno Gulf to take off the troops that landed there. If they really think that, they are destined for a big surprise. For these ships of which they speak have brought more supplies and more troops. If the Germans are withdrawing, as appears likely from present indications, despite the activity which is now taking place on the sector where I am now working, it would seem that their most likely line to defend would be somewhere north. One can then regard the present actions as designed to hold Allied forces while preparations are made for such an operation. The fact that the Germans have offered so little opposition to the Eighth Army in their northward drive indicates that they do not, apparently, intend to fight to hold the whole of Italy, but will employ the natural barriers of the north as a bastion against Allied attacks. From my observations I believe that the next two or three days will give a clear indication of his intentions.