

FANTASY

(By John Redfern representing the Combined British Press)

With the Fifth Army in Italy

Allied Beachhead Forces, April 12

It is quiet today on the beachhead.

The hot and thumping noise of artillery coming through the sun-drenched air does not seem as vicious as usual. For a couple of hours there has not been a shellburst in the glaring blue water slapping against the dirty beach below the gashed and crippled houses stretching from Anzio to Nettuno.

A few naked soldiers are out on the water in float-boats which were popular with day trippers who used to come here.

At headquarters they talk about the enemy's "night activity, continuous and aggressive" but they have nothing to tell us about the fighting today. There is not even an air raid to shake out our drowsy thoughts.

Yet I will not forget this day because of three faces I saw. There was the young soldier inside a warm tent, with whitewashed boards up the sides to increase the illumination. The young soldier was pink-cheeked and moist about the temples. With the butter-coloured lighting this young man from Wessex looked very well.

I wondered what he was doing on an operating table. The surgical team were ready, their mouths and the pile of their noses covered with white squares of cloth. The Anaesthetist was bending near the soldier's left ear - like a priest hearing a battle-field confession. He whispered, "Now just breathe deeply. That's it. That's good".

The patient obeyed. He was looking in a strained way at something beyond the tent-cover, beyond belief when you're young and strong, beyond description. "In the last war this man would have been dead by now", said one of the surgeons. "He was wounded fourteen hours ago. A shell. Just one of those odd ones as far as I can make out."

The soldier did not hear this. His eyes had closed as I watched. A fence of darkness held pain and knowledge from him. They lifted the lower end of the blankets. That disclosed the stumps, stumps ending above the knees. They were swathed in white dressings. Deftly the dressings were removed. The soldier slept with a waif of a smile on his sweating face.

"He does not know about his legs yet", whispered one of the surgeons.

The second face belonged to the nursing sister in the surgical team. She was a little thing, about seven stones, and she somehow looked really slight because she was wearing trousers. She was not pretty and she was not plain. My guess - of course, I couldn't check it - was, she is a parson's daughter.

/She looked

She looked the kind of woman who in normal times might be liable to be timid about life and scared of death. But she was the member of the team who got busy when the bloody dressings were removed.

It was she who first dealt with the smashed and stinking stumps. There was a glistening bead of sweat on her now as she bent over the ruined, once goodly limbs. That drop of sweat did not strike anyone as comic although it was near the tip of her nose just where the mask fitted over.

I looked on it as a badge of duty.

The third face was an enemy face. It was youthful, good looking, dusty and glum. The prisoner of war had been in our hands only a few hours.

He had made quite a little speech when interrogated in a small farmhouse on the side of the Anzio-Rome road. Germany would win of course. The beachhead was a great failure for us. Then as he talked he caught sight of some queer contraptions on the road.

Everywhere ducks!

The German had never seen ducks before. He was silent as they went by. His eyes really did protrude. "Good God! What are those", he muttered.

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