

WITH THE FIFTH ARMY

From Frank Gillard, representing the Combined British Press

With the Fifth Army,
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I have just spent some time in an Italian hayloft. It was one of the battered buildings on a lonely farm on this coastal strip around Salerno Gulf. To reach it we had driven with batteries of British guns pumping shells over our heads from concealed positions. Just occasionally we had seen signs of enemy artillery - in fact, one German shell had exploded right in front of us on the road only fifty yards away and two Italian Red Cross orderlies had been killed before our eyes. Now, in this loft, we had reached one of the control points of our artillery barrage. It was the operations room of the Field Artillery Regiment. A large cheerful English Major, second in command of the regiment was leaning back on a rickety kitchen chair dealing like a Hollywood executive with four or five telephones at once. One came from the forward observation post. One went to the adjutant. Others went to field batteries. The major waved his hand at us. "Sit down, there", he said, pointing to more chairs as wobbly as his own. "Just watch what's going on. We are having the time of our lives this morning. I've been here for six hours and I've just been yelling 'fire! fire!' into these damned telephone all the time. We've just been stoncking the Hun all over the place." Then the telephones started ringing again. From the observation post an officer reported an enemy force of four SP guns and three troop carriers were approaching certain crossroads. He gave the map reference. Our major quickly turned to his own map. It was overlaid with a diagram of the day's defensive fire tasks. Various strategic points were picked out and marked.

These German guns and carriers were right on the spot. Without hesitation the major seized a telephone and ordered a concentration of fire to be laid down on the sector. "Just wait," he said, "we will soon tickle up that little party." Almost immediately, we heard the guns in the distance blaring out and it seemed a short time before the telephone from the observation point rang again and reported that the targets had turned round and made off up the road like mad. The major suggested laying down more fire by the roadside to discourage them from returning but the distant observer said he thought it wasn't necessary.

Almost immediately, new targets were suggested. One was a house where enemy troops were believed to be hiding. It was duly stoncked, several direct hits were registered, and an excited observer yelled into his telephone that the Germans were scuttling out of it and racing off in every direction. Some motor transport was seen - probably given away by the rising dust - along a distant road. They got a taste of our shells and a prompt report was that seven were burning merrily. It was most exciting. "We haven't had a shoot like this for ages," the major said. "What a ----- fool the Bosche must be to let us get him like this." "That tickles them up alright. By gad," he added with great enthusiasm, "I wouldn't be anything but a gunner for all the tea in China."

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