

From BASIL GINGELL, Representing the Combined British Press

With the Fifth Army  
October 4

From a forward observation post some miles north of Naples today, I saw the battlefield of tomorrow. Standing on the roof of the highest building in the district, a great plain stretched out before my gaze to where the Volturno winds its way to the sea, and where there is every indication that the retreating Germans are preparing to fight a strong delaying action. To reach this lofty eyrie to obtain a bird's eye view of the battlefront, it had been necessary to drive through miles of roads that had been blocked by the enemy and which sappers were still in process of rendering fit for that mass of traffic necessary to a modern army. Mines which had been dug up had been placed by the roadside. Bridges which had been blown up, so that they ended halfway across a gorge, were completed with bridging sections, while earthworks and concrete obstructions were cleared by pneumatic drills and explosive charges.

A little way out of Afragola, where an avenue of plane trees provides a picturesque and shady drive, twenty huge trees, ten on either side of the road, had demolition charges fitted. These charges were about three feet long and a foot in diameter. Fortunately, the enemy had not had an opportunity of exploding them, and when I passed sappers had not had time to deal with them, being more concerned with more pressing problems.

Later in the day, I saw other places where trees had been felled in this way, so that great trunks had been sent crashing down across the highway, blocking the road until the inevitable bull-dozer forced a way for oncoming traffic through the obstruction.

From the observation post I saw some of these demolitions carried out. There would be a crash, and then a huge belch of smoke which hung in the still air for an incredibly long time. Gunnery officers who were at the post and who are trained to recognise what kind of demolitions are taking place told me that those we witnessed were houses being blown up by the use of mines and petrol. This has been a common practice in the area, and is most effective as a means of delaying progress.

From Salerno to the Cava Valley, our troops had not encountered any large quantities of mines, but in the area in which we are now engaged there are mines everywhere.

There was a theory earlier that the Germans were short of mines around Salerno, and that their hurried rush to mine the beaches when they learned of the Italian armistice used most of those that were available. As they fall back it may well be that they are able to use the supply dumps that they have to provide them with these weapons.

From the observation post as I watched, I saw a formation of our medium bombers fly over and bomb a target at one of the Volturno crossings. It was impossible to see what the target was from where I stood, but I could see anti-aircraft guns in action, and after the bombing I saw clouds of smoke rise to a height of fully two thousand feet. While this great pall still hung over the site where the bombs had been released, there was the drone of more planes and another formation of mediums swept in to repeat the dose. Throughout the day I saw no sign of a German plane of any kind.

As British troops advance towards the Volturno, sickening stories of German atrocities on the civil population in the villages beyond Naples are being told. I spoke to a doctor today who had been treating a young mother for wounds in the right hand. She had told him that the Germans had taken her into their officers' mess, shot her three times in the right hand with a revolver and killed her child. The Italians had sent their daughters and womenfolk away to the hills because of assaults that the Germans made upon them. In one village I learned of two women raped by German soldiers, who afterwards cut their throats. Such stories of sadism and brutality abound.

While, according to the Italians, the German soldiers behaved fairly well up to a week ago, since that time they had been brutal and barbaric. There was one well-authenticated case of twenty Italians being buried up to their waist and their hands cut off before they were shot. There was another of a child's hands being severed, while in one village through which I passed a German soldier complaining about the food he had been given burned down the house of his host. It is small wonder that these peasants, who had little enough sympathy with Fascism, are now helping all they can to rid their country of the enemy.