

ITALIANS' WILL TO FIGHT

Inconsistencies in the Field

ARMY TRAINED FOR SHORT WAR

FROM WILLIAM MUNDAY.

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By Beam Wireless.

We have learned many things about the Italian soldier during the last three years of war, and though these may not enable us to forecast how the Italians will fight, or whether they will go on fighting at all, they should help us to steer a course which will break as soon as possible the unnatural alliance between Germany and the Italian people.

The answer to the question of how the Italian Army will perform in the future depends largely on whether the next blow falls on Italy herself or on the Italian garrison forces in France, Greece, and Crete.

We can divide what we know about the Italians, so far as it is likely to affect the future, into two sections. One side is a story of the bewildering inconsistencies of the mercurial Latins, and the other a story of an army, trained to fight a short war, with short supply lines in Italy's own northern mountains, but which found itself instead foundering for long years in the distant deserts of Africa.

And, strangest of all, it is a story of "8,000,000 bayonets," which are blunt—of men who fight dispiritedly, not because they lack courage, but because they lack heart and belief in their cause.

ITALIAN PRIDE

If you doubt that, ponder on what the Italians did after the crushing reverses of the battle of Caporetto in the last war. In that war the Germans killed 572,000 Italians, wounded more than 1,000,000, and took 635,000 prisoners, but failed to defeat them.

The first things we must remember about the Italian are his pride and that he is a home-lover and family man. His pockets are full of religious postcards and pictures of his wife and his babies. It was the Germans, the "master race," who had their pockets stuffed full of pornographic postcards.

In the desert we had time after time that puzzling contradiction of Italians who fought valiantly and like demons

that puzzling contradiction of Italians who fought valiantly and like demons and of Italians who surrendered in dispirited hordes.

The puzzle began to solve itself as the battle went on. I shall always remember a message the Italians left behind for us in their headquarters at Benghazi. It was: "We didn't want to go on fighting you but you shamed us into it." There, I thought, was bared the truth about Mussolini's 8,000,000 bayonets and why they were blunt.

It bared, too, the stupidity of the thoughtless maligning of a proud people. Stories of the poltroonery of Italian troops are propaganda which the Germans have been most assiduous in fostering. They know there is nothing better than stories such as these to keep Italy in the battle against Britain.

There are many strange tales of the Italian pride and sense of the dramatic. Italian pilots who would avoid combat when they encountered British fighters over the lonely desert, would fly recklessly to their deaths on other occasions when half a dozen compatriots were watching.

There was the Trieste Division which had pressed at El Alamein, formed up in rows in the light of flares and threw hand grenades shouting, "Holla, Holla, Holla," as they did so. The scene was like the end of the first act of a Neapolitan opera.

Again, both at Mersa Matruh and at Ruweisat, Italian units were all set to surrender when they found they were being attacked by the famous New Zealand division and for that reason alone decided to fight on!

INFLUENCES ON MORALE

Even at the end, Field Marshal Messe, the Italian Commander-in-Chief, said he would surrender only to the Eighth Army, and he fought on hours longer suffering many casualties as a result, until he was assured that this concession would be granted him.

An Italian division, the Folgore

An Italian division, the Folgore (Lightning) Division of paratroopers, fighting as infantry, fought every bit as well at El Alamein as the much publicised German 90th Light Infantry, and repulsed every attack the British made upon them in the northern sector—but alongside them other Italian divisions crumbled, merely shrugging shoulders with indifference if you asked them why they had yielded so easily. The Folgore was unusual. The officers and most of the men were adventurers who had little interest in Fascism or any other politics.

What these inconsistent people are likely to do in future is complicated further by the differing northern and southern strains. The toughest people are in the north. Sicilians and southern Italians, though often fierce and brave fighters when aroused, generally lack staying power. Again, in a Catholic nation the disapproval of the Vatican—made clear in many ways—of the war and its ambitions and of the common cause with the Germans is not without its influence. Then, too, there has never been general enthusiasm among the Italian people for a war against Britain and later, against the United States, which contains 22,000,000 Italians. Mussolini's

propagandists have never been able to instil anything like that hatred into his people so far as the British are concerned. Their distrust and dislike are still centred on the Germans.

Some of the Duce's propaganda, however, did succeed. He managed to deceive not only his own people, but the rest of the world into believing that Italy was a first-class military Power. Posters, newspapers, radio, Mussolini himself, in blaring speeches, hailed the power, youth, and energy of Italy. "Fighting is in our blood," the Duce roared. "Only war brings human energy to its highest point and shows the nobility of race."

Italy, he asserted, was the most warlike and most powerful country in Europe. The Army and Navy were the most formidable and the best trained and best equipped.

Some, perhaps, wondered how this fitted in with propaganda about lack of primary materials, but such is the power of words and the effect of pictures—photographs of huge guns against the dawn, of busy young Fascists drilling for war—that the Italians and most of us came to believe in an Italy which was now a first-class military Power. Spain and Abyssinia added to the illusion.

FACADE CRUMBLES

The facade, in fact, remained unchipped until Marshal Graziani advanced into Egypt in June, 1940. Many reasons contributed to the

various into Egypt in June, 1940. Many reasons contributed to the Italian debacle which followed. But the most important to my mind was the undoubted fact that the whole organisation and training of the Italian Army was designed for war on the northern frontier of Italy, and consequently the overseas expedition necessitated considerable improvisation and adaptation to which the Italian Command did not prove equal.

When Mussolini and Marshal Badoglio began to reform the Italian Army in 1936 they equipped it and planned solely for a war on Italy's northern frontier. They aimed at a short, decisive war—to mobilise and to launch a concentrated attack which would smash the enemy before the latter had even quite made up his mind that a war had started. It became a premise therefore that Italy would have and would hold the initiative. Reserves would be employed to further the Italian commander's own plans rather than to safeguard against unforeseen action by the enemy.

This principle with unhappy results, was demonstrated time after time in the desert.

When Marshal Graziani attacked Egypt he advanced with all his forces along the main coast road like a triumphal procession, while light British forces were withdrawing parallel to the road and inflicting heavy losses on concentrations of enemy transport.

Symptomatic of the incident was the experience of a battalion of the Bersaglieri division which at the time of General Auchinleck's offensive in November, 1941, rushed straight from Italy to Gazala, and, without pause in their headlong progress, into captivity.

As the Italian divisions, one after another, were swallowed up in Africa, other weaknesses became apparent—the shortage of transport of anti-tank guns and ridiculous tanks.

WEAKNESSES REMAIN

The Germans have worked hard since then, advising the Italians how to organise an army, but these weaknesses remain to a lesser degree admittedly, but still heavy in the scales as far as the future is concerned.

Italian divisions still lack adequate support and anti-tank guns. They still lack transport, and, despite the brilliant mechanical engineering evidenced in Italian Iccita and Bugatti racing cars, plus German guidance, Italy has still failed to produce even a useful tank.

It is one of the minor mysteries of the war for the lack of materials should not prevent fewer but heavier tanks being produced on a modified scale. It is perhaps significant, however, that General Cavallero, whose name was involved in a scandal connected with the supply of tinned meat to the Italian Army, was a director of the Ansaldo works before the war.

The sum of all these failures both in tactics and equipment, has awakened Italian officers and men to the

ened Italian officers and men to the weakness of their army. They know now that they have been deceived.

Whether the Italians go on fighting now depends, I think, not so much on what Mussolini says or wishes, but on whether the Italians can be made to acknowledge to themselves without loss of honour that they have been victims of self-deception on a colossal scale.