

Lecier's News "DOBBY DAY"

## Ben Rhydding Airman's Death Remarkable Letter from Italian

Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Smith, of Pelton Cottage, Ben Rhydding, have received from Italy a remarkable letter telling the story of the fate of their son, Sergeant Stephen F. Smith, who was one of five members of the crew of a British plane which crashed in November, 1943, near Spezia, in Italy.

The letter occupied over six closely typewritten quarto pages. It is the work of Manironi Eraldo, a teacher at Polverara and resident in La Spezia. It would appear that a similar letter has been sent to two other families of members of the crew, and he asks to be supplied with the addresses of the remaining two families, so that he might send to them a similar memorial.

The writer explains at the outset that "human pity and gratefulness feelings" guide him to send this memorial of the sacrifice of their relatives. There are many expressions of gratitude for the service rendered by the Allies in the fight against Fascist tyranny, and a touching prayer which he conceives the dying might have made in their fall.

### Crash in Thunderstorm

There follows a day-to-day account from November 24, 1943, to November 30, 1943, of what took place on the side of Monte Groce following the crashing of the plane. It was during a violent thunderstorm that countrymen heard the sound of the plane, and saw flashes of light. Through the storm, in pitch darkness, they made their way to where the plane was blazing, but were unable to approach too near on account of the heat and the explosion of projectiles. Next morning they discovered it was an English plane, falling in the locality of Venturello, about ten kilometres from Spezia, on the path going to Monte Groce.

Among the books and magazines was found a card addressed to Mrs. W. H. Smith, Pelton Cottage, Manley Grove, Ben Rhydding, and next day there was found a document which gave the names and ranks of the five men in the plane. The German military authorities did not arrive until November 27, and the medical doctor, after seeing the bodies, declared that each of the five must have died immediately.

### The Funeral

The letter tells, too, now a kindly German interpreter showed the writer photographs of Sergeant Smith, and the German authorities said that every personal document would be sent to the International Red Cross. On November 29 the bodies were removed in coffins to Polverara, where, on November 30, a service was held in the Church. The writer gives a carefully detailed account of the funeral service, with women and boys continually placing flowers on the coffins, of the burning of candles and incense, and of the deep emotion aroused in the onlookers. The coffins were afterwards borne to the Polverara communal cemetery. Permission to photograph the transfer of the coffins was refused, and the writer tells of the impatience of a Nazi-Fascist military representative waiting near the gate, impatient because of the homage being paid to the fallen.

### A Moving Scene

In his halting English there is given a very moving picture of the scene and of his thoughts while acting as coffin bearer.

"Between two lines of crowd defile the coffins," says the letter. "In every glance, in every gesture, in every attitude, an expression of sadness is marked. I uphold the coffin from one side and I think— If my hand might have shaken the young aviator's hand when he was to liberate towards the blue sky, instead of this piece of wood; if my arms might have embraced the shining body of the hero while he was going towards the extreme sacrifice, instead of these wood slabs . . ."

"I walked and upheld that sacred weight; I would defend it for a sense of pride that made me fervent, for a sense of sorrow which tormented myself."

He goes on to describe the interment, the German officer calling the name of each man, the Fascist militia-men responding to each name with a volley of gun-fire, whilst the Germans saluted.

### From a Wide Area

Hundreds of persons came from the Valley of the Vara, and from Spezia, to the funeral, and the Fascist militia and the Germans expressed their appreciation of the ceremony and the great quantity of flowers offered to the fallen.

Finally there is given a detailed account of how the cemetery may be found should their families make a pilgrimage to the place. He adds that soon after the falling of the plane, some countrymen, who afterwards enlisted with the partisans, took off from the plane, at a moment when the carabinieri were absent, three mitrailleuses in very good condition. They would be employed to achieve the same aims as had inspired the five English heroes.