

April 7, 1945

PICTURE POST

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Ballard

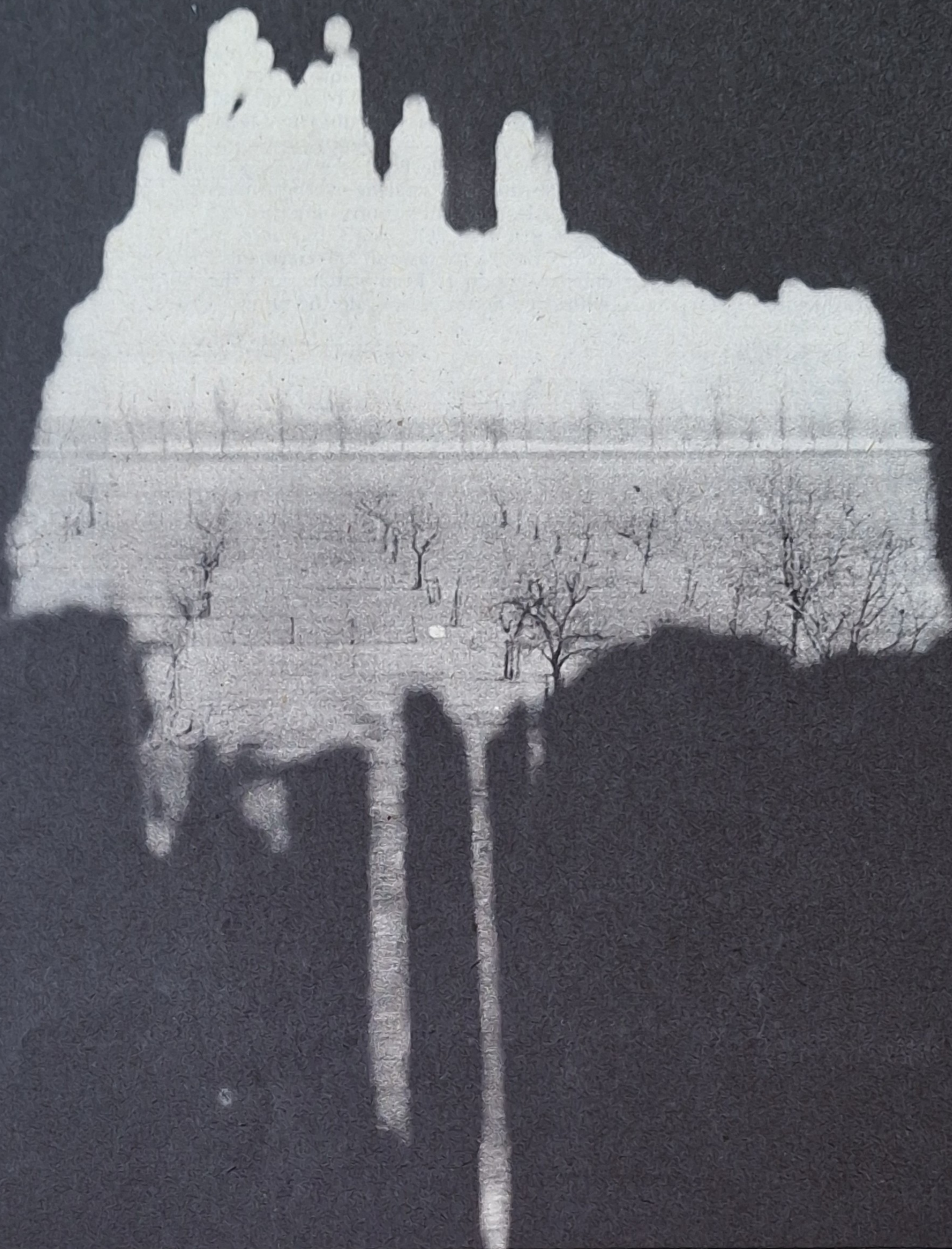
THE GIRL FROM THE MOUNTAINS
(See "Tito's Nine Hundred")

HULTON'S
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THE BATTLE OF THE RHINE
BEFORE ZERO HOUR 4^D

APRIL 7, 1945

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The Hole in the Shutter Through Which All Enemy Movement is Observed

It is in a castle on the Rhine, now used as an advanced observation post. All the time it is under fire from the enemy positioned on the other side of the river beyond the orchard. At the appointed hour it sees the final offensive begin.

ZERO HOUR ON THE RHINE

On the banks of the Rhine, before the last big heave, we blanketed our preparations under the greatest smoke screen of all time. Macdonald Hastings describes the waiting hours before the final act.

THE curtain is going up. Behind it, the buffaloes, the weasels, the crocodiles and the ducks—the whole circus of allied monsters—is shuffling into position. In front, in the stalls, the enemy is shifting nervously in his seat; looking round anxiously for signs of a programme; trying to find out where, and when, the show is going to start. The only clue is the noise of the orchestra getting ready; the rustle, the twang, and bump as an inquiring shell goes sizzling overhead. For the rest, as I write, the auditorium of the Rhine is ominously quiet; so quiet that you can hear the spring song of the larks rising and falling in the sky, the cluck of hens boasting over their eggs, and the piteous moo of cows lowing for the attention of their departed German masters.

The curtain is a real one. For tens of miles along the Rhine, a screen of smoke, so thick that you feel you could stroke it—like a piece of grey velvet—drapes the West bank of the river. It rises in a steep billowing wall from batteries of generators just be-

hind our forward positions. And it floats like a fog over the dead fields and the skeletons of villages between us and the enemy on the far bank. In the thick of it, coughing and rubbing their eyes, our forward infantry keep a watch on the river.

It's a macabre vigil. The smoke, wreathing the ruined houses, eddying over the fields, chokes the sun so that it looks like a silver sixpence and changes the light to a weird theatrical blue. You can see well enough; a few hundred yards forward of the generators, the screen isn't much thicker than the train smoke inside Victoria Station on a peacetime bank holiday (curiously enough, it smells much the same as Victoria too). But there's something unnatural about it. And, in that shell-pocked, soured and blasted strip of ground between the smoke circuit and the river—at its narrowest, it's not more than five hundred yards deep; at its widest, not much more than a mile—what you see is out of a nightmare too.

Animals everywhere, dead and dying. Herds of

Continued overleaf



The Watch on the Rhine

He is the most forward soldier in the British Army, an eye of an important section always on the enemy.

ZERO HOUR ON THE RHINE—Continued

cattle too weak to stand; pigs, blind with hunger, reeling into tree stumps; calves, with wide open puzzled eyes, pulling at the udders of dead mothers. Beasts with every manner of wound; too many to shoot and the situation too dangerous to try and move them under the enemy's nose. They must remain, wandering in the smoke, lost and helpless, till the battle passes over the Rhine. Then, what's left of them will be driven back, probably to Holland, where the majority were looted by the Germans from their Dutch owners during their retreat.

Meanwhile, our soldiers share the stables, the pig pens and the byres with the dying beasts. The farm buildings are the only buildings which remain solid enough to give reasonable shelter from shell fire.

During the day, when the smoke is on, the infantry rest, sleep and amuse themselves looking

for fowls' eggs (the chickens are the only creatures which seem to thrive in the conditions). During the night, they go forward from their dug-outs and billets in the built-up areas to fill the slit trenches and the emplacements on the edge of the river bank. But there's no shooting. Sometimes, a spandau, in the hands of an anxious German, chatters for a few moments. Occasionally, there's a crump or two of mortar or artillery fire to tempt us to reveal our positions by shooting back. But the Allies lie doggo. We can afford to wait. For the present, the only Allied pieces that fire are the heavies way back in the rear. You hear the shells roaring overhead with a rush of air like a London tube train going through the tunnel. But that's all. Our main business, in these final hours before the assault on Germany's last great defence line, is to keep watch. And the Germans, with even better reason, do the same.



The Fog Machines Throw

It might be any town on the Rhine's left bank tens of miles, curtains our front. Under it

The job of the infantry on the bank is to check enemy river patrols, to keep the Rhine tightly sealed off. But, apart from that, during daytime, while the infantry are resting, observers on both sides are watching the banks for any hint of unusual movement. And theirs is the most dangerous and responsible duty of all.

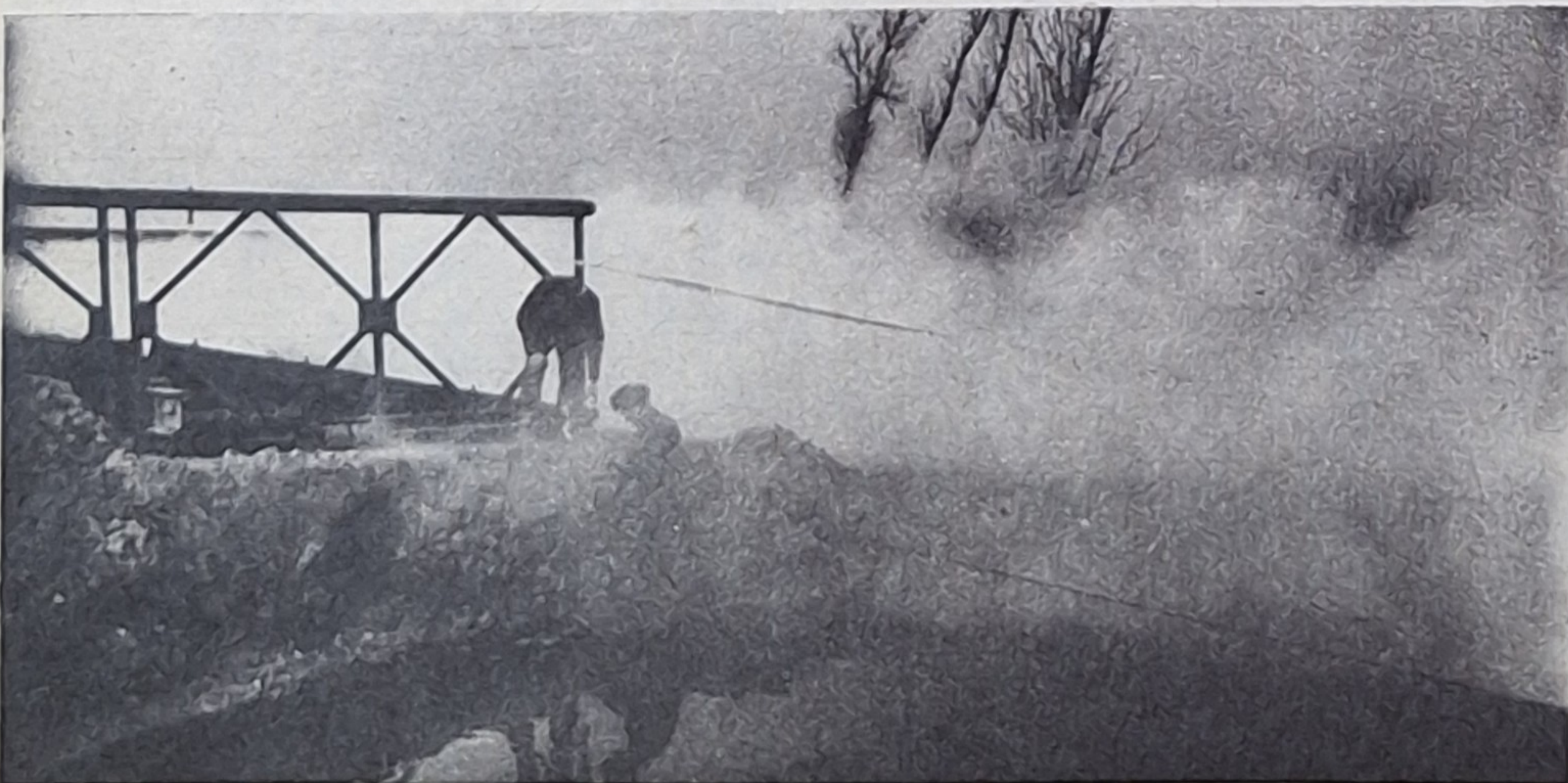
The observation posts are essentially in full view of the enemy; on our side, either above the smoke or so far in front of it that visibility is unimpaired. A field telephone gives them contact with the command posts of their units. Their job is to keep their eyes glued to their glasses, to take a compass bearing of any movement and report back the map reference and details.

I visited one observation post. It was a schloss—the shelled and ruined country house of a German baron. To reach it, you had to cross a dyke under enemy observation, row across a piece of flood

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*Shroud Over the Ruins of Germany and Over the Movement of Our Troops as They Gather Themselves for the Last Battles
a town in which there is no habitable house and no tree not torn and maimed. In its centre are the mechanical generators of the white smoke screen, which for
cover goes on the swift, quiet work of preparation for the attack which the Germans know is coming at any moment from the silent, dead fields of the west.*



The Engineers Prepare a Bailey Bridge

The smoke screen, which is their cover, has an inoffensive smell, but to work long in it gives you a headache.



Portable Canisters Thicken the Curtain

They weigh 30 lbs. and burn for 15 minutes, clouding the countryside with fumes from zinc chloride.



"Blimey—And They Call This Resting"

For the most part the infantry lie doggo during the day while the smoke barrage is on, but there are jobs to do forward in sometimes blinding smoke.

water in a little boat, and then run across open ground. The observers kept watch through a hole smashed in a shutter in one of the bedrooms. Through the hole, they looked down on the scene

of what must be one of the decisive battles of the world.

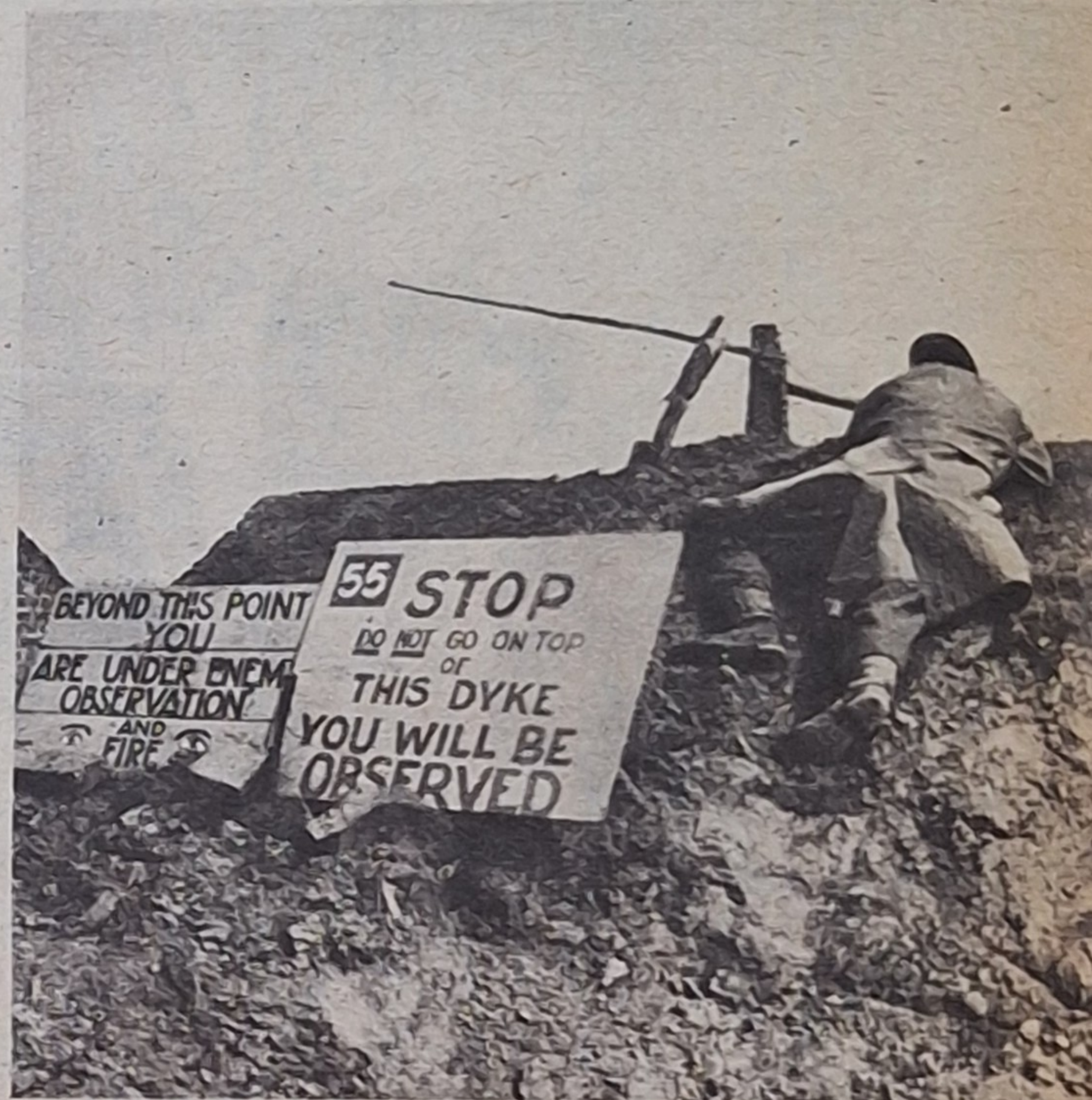
The landscape on both banks of the Rhine was flat fields. The eastern bank was pitted with our

shell holes. The observer showed me a house on the other side where, he said, his opposite number was in residence. And he indicated German gun positions and pickets. It was hard to believe him.

The world, up there, seemed at peace. Even the cattle looked contented at that distance and, with the naked eye, you couldn't pick out the damage on the farms and buildings. At a casual glance, in the heart of this great battlefield, there wasn't a sign of a gun or a tank or a man anywhere. Only the columns of smoke, rising from the line of generators extending miles away into the distance up and down the western bank, hinted that anything untoward was afoot.

We were gazing over the greatest smoke screen ever laid in the history of war. To feed it, two hundred tons of generators and material were being eaten up every day. To serve it, thousands of men, dotted at intervals of a few hundred yards all the way up and down the Rhine, were driving machines which sprayed a mixture of oil and steam into the air, and firing cylinders of zinc chloride, five at a time every fifteen minutes. It was nothing. It was just the bare preliminary to cover up the real thing. It just gave you a notion of the size of the Wotan hammer that was lifting for the final smashing of the Third Reich.

MACDONALD HASTINGS.



The Dug-out on the River Bank Which Was Just a Temporary Halt in the March on Berlin

It doesn't look just what the orderly officer would have expected in the way of tidiness, but the lads are relaxing after their grim fight to the Rhine's bank. Time for a cup of "char," to clean their shoes, to drop a line home. It's only a day or so now and they'll be in the thick of it again over the last river to victory