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Behind The Headlines

She's Mother Of The Dead

BY JAMES M. LONG

ROME (UPI) — A greyhaired old woman daily plods the fields and byways of Italy, carrying a spade, a black bag and tattered maps of World War II battle lines.

She is Mamma Lucia, the mother of the dead.

Her real name, Maria Lucia Pisapia Apicella, is inscribed on the honor rolls of the medals of merit of the Italian Republic and on a special decoration as "die mutter der toten" of the German Federal Republic.

Almost 20 years after the thunder of cannon and the crackle of rifle fire ceased on Italian World War II battlefields, the old widow still is searching ceaselessly for the unburied remains of thousands of soldiers.

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THOUSANDS have been found and taken to British, French, Polish, Brazilian, American, German and Italian military cemeteries. Hundreds of these were found by Mamma Lucia.

Her own home at Cava di Tirreni was destroyed in wartime bombing. She lives in a rented house now. But her work has taken her from the battlefields of Sal-

erno and Monte Cassino to the old Gothic line across North Italy.

With patience and old maps she seeks out the lines where battle raged in torn fields and shattered woodlands. Painstakingly she searches for trampled fox holes, little hillside caves, or water washed ditches where soldiers might have died.

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SHE FINDS bleached or mud plastered bones, bits of uniforms, sometimes identification discs from which names can be known.

"I kneel, then, and cry for them with the tears of their mothers," Mamma Lucia says.

"I do not know whether they were German, American, Italian.

"It does not matter. Death has no nationality."

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MAMMA LUCIA marks each site with a little cross of broken branches, decorated with field flowers if any are in bloom.

She carries the bones away in her little bag, washes them with her own hands, and takes them to a church. If they can be identified by nationality they are turned over to cemetery commissioners of their home countries. If not, they are buried here.