The Po Valley and North-West Italy.

201. The switching of the main air effort northwards against the frontier routes implied that more freedom of movement than formerly was permitted the enemy in the Po Valley. During the period of static ground operations, however, this was considered of minor importance. Nevertheless, a considerable M.A.T.A.F. effort was continued against the principal lines of communication immediately behind the battle area, especially when bad weather prevented operations further afield. During the period, sorties were flown against the Po River zone and in the Mincio, Oglia and Adda river zones, branching northwards from the Po River. Particular attention was paid to the disruption of lines leading to Milan, Turin, and Genoa in order to hinder the transportation of looted industrial and agricultural products bound for the Reich. Also in March, the night intruder effort was increased considerably, particularly in the form of a greater number of attacks on damaged bridges and diversions to demoralise the enemy's repair gangs. Generally, both the day and night attacking aircraft in the Po valley were increasingly concerned with destroying rail and road traffic and rolling stock in marshalling yards rather than the wrecking of the railway system itself.

Air Effort in April.

202. In April M.A.T.A.F. maintained the interdiction of communications between Italy and the Reich until the 9th, when its main effort was switched to the close support of the 15th Army Group's offensive. During the first eight days of the month, the various elements of M.A.T.A.F. continued to attack the same targets as during March. In particular, the medium bombers flew nearly 400 sorties against the Brenner Line, their main targets being the bridges. By the 9th of April the route was blocked in eleven places. Desert Air Force meanwhile continued to attack the lower reaches of the north-east frontier routes and the lines across the Venetian plain. On the eve of the Allied offensive, the north-east frontier zone remained well disrupted, and no through traffic was possible across the Venetian plain. The state of interdiction in the Po Valley itself was also very satisfactory. The XXII T.A.C. fighter-bombers paid a considerable amount of attention to the east-west lines north of the Po and their connecting lines, while the medium bombers made fairly constant attacks on bridges.

203. M.A.S.A.F.'s April effort against the enemy's railway communications in northern Italy was further increased. During the four days prior to the opening of the Army's offensive on the 9th April the heavy bombers dropped 2,000 tons of bombs on bridges and marshalling yards on the Brenner Pass route and also attacked bridges, marshalling yards and locomotive depots on lines to the west of the route and a marshalling yard on the Piedicolle route. Even after the offensive started, M.A.S.A.F. continued to bomb the Italian railway system, in addition to providing close support to our advancing troops.

Enemy Repair Organisation.

204. The enemy's chief means of combating the interdiction programme was a large and very efficient repair organisation.

205. He showed extraordinary energy in effecting repairs and much resourcefulness in reducing the vulnerability of targets. Troops which were held up by the breaks were pressed into the repair gangs; bridges were sometimes replaced in 48 hours and craters were filled in in far less time. In spite of frantic efforts at repair work and brilliant organisation, the enemy was never able to counter our air attacks sufficiently to make an appreciable difference to his desperate situation. The whole area was sterilized and the German Army was becoming more and more impotent because of the impossibility of movement—even by night.

206. During the latter part of 1944 the enemy resorted to deception to supplement his repairs and it certainly became a very clever and much used means to increase the flow of traffic. At Calcinato, a span of the bridge was constantly seen to be out during air reconnaissance, but accumulated evidence proved that traffic was passing over at night. In fact, when a night reconnaissance was flown, the missing span was revealed in place. This particular bridge at Calcinato became known as the first " night operational " bridge.

207. As our attacks increased in number, so the number of " night operational " bridges increased also. During April eleven of these bridges were noted; ten of them were attacked and put out of service for varying lengths of time.

208. Another method of deception used by the enemy was to maintain the unserviceability of selected bridges when there was no immediate need for their use. Certain damaged bridges were repaired up to a certain point—left so that they looked quite impassable—yet could be made passable in a few hours.

209. Full maintenance of the interdiction depended on the weather. Good weather made it possible to achieve complete success, but in periods of bad weather prohibiting flying, repairs were rapidly carried out by the enemy and supplies adequate for some days hurriedly passed through. In spite of these weather difficulties, the railways (as has been shown) were blocked almost continuously.

Interdiction of road communications.

210. Road movement was also dealt with in a systematic way. The whole area of enemy occupied Italy was divided up into a number of areas and regularly patrolled by aircraft of Tactical Air Force both by day and by night. In this way, it was possible to keep an accurate check on all enemy road movements and to attack road transport wherever it was found. However, German road movements were strictly limited because of the shortage of oil fuel. Oxen were used to tow lorries, and so valuable had even small quantities of petrol become that members of the German 98th Division were offered a reward of a thousand cigarettes if they returned from a patrol with a tin of captured petrol.

Interdiction of water communications.

211. As a result of the attacks on his other forms of communication the enemy made an increasing use of waterborne traffic. Shipping travelling by night carried supplies from Trieste and the Istrian ports, while barges were used in the waterways of North-East Italy to support