

The Air Force Plan.

240. The Air Force plan was to give maximum assistance to the Armies by close support operations; to prevent the withdrawal of the enemy north of the River Po; and, when the enemy was in sufficient concentration, to ensure his destruction.

241. To achieve these aims, the whole striking power of M.A.T.A.F. and M.A.S.A.F. was to be used, support of the land forces becoming the over-riding priority for both Air Forces as soon as the offensive began.

242. In general the Desert Air Force was to support the Eighth Army and XXII Tactical Air Command the Fifth Army, although one would lend assistance to the other as the ground situation required, and as determined by H.Q. Tactical Air Force. The prior objective of these two forces was to give close support in the immediate battle areas. The 57th Bombardment Wing of medium bombers was to be used on either Army front for close support operations as the situation required.

243. The Strategic Air Force was to be used in close support operations at the beginning of the offensives by each Army. Thereafter, it was to be available to attack communications targets in Italy, nominated by the Commanding General M.A.T.A.F., in order to maintain the interdiction already accomplished while M.A.T.A.F. forces were employed upon immediate battlefield objectives.

244. The opening of the offensive by the Eighth Army was conditional on a preceding air assault by both M.A.S.A.F. and M.A.T.A.F. Entry into the battle of the Fifth Army was to be dependent upon the gains made by the Eighth Army, and was therefore to be made whether or not it was possible to precede it with an air bombardment.

245. Preceding the 8th Army offensive some 800 Fortresses and Liberators were to bomb troop concentrations and gun installation areas 3,000 yards behind the enemy front line on D-day. Roughly 170 medium bombers were also to attack gun areas, after which 700 fighter-bombers were to follow with attacks on headquarters buildings, strong points and targets of moment. Approximately 100 Boston, Baltimore and Mosquito aircraft and the whole of No. 205 Group were to maintain the attacks during the night hours.

246. In addition to the close support operations full tactical and artillery reconnaissances were to be flown and four "Rover"* stations made available.

247. This air programme was planned for four days and thereafter as required. Its execution, together with that for the 5th Army offensive, is described fully in the narrative of the final offensive.

THE BATTLE.*Preliminary Phase.*

248. At 0300 hours on 2nd April the preliminary phase of the battle began. Commandos in powered storm boats attacked at its western shore the Spit that divides Lake

Comacchio from the Adriatic. After two days fighting, the Spit had been taken, together with nearly 1,000 prisoners, thus eliminating enemy observation of the Eighth Army's right flank. This attack was helped, especially on the 2nd April, by fighter bombers and medium bombers, who bombed gun positions, troops, and other battlefield targets.

249. A further attack was made on the night of the 6th April across the Reno River on the Lake's southern shore and by the 8th, a bridgehead had been secured across the River. These two operations had secured the Eighth Army's right flank for their main attack.

250. On the 5th April, on the extreme left of the battle-front, an operation was undertaken to capture Massa. This was a diversion to keep the Germans busy in the west. Air support for this operation was provided by fighter bombers and medium bombers. The latter also flew missions against coastal guns near La Spezia which threatened to menace the Army advance up the western coast.

THE EIGHTH ARMY OFFENSIVE.

251. The first phase was to break the series of river lines—Senio, Santerno, Reno and Sillaro—in which the enemy was very strongly entrenched. The Air Forces' task was to make these defence lines one by one untenable.

252. The first main assault began on 9th April when M.A.S.A.F. was used to pound the enemy's front line positions. Some 800 Fortresses and Liberators of 15th Air Force attacked troop concentrations between the Rivers Senio and Santerno. Medium bombers supplemented the attack and concentrated on gun positions. These in turn were followed by the full weight of Tactical Air Force fighter-bombers, who bombed, strafed and fired rockets at enemy positions to the West of the Senio River and along the floodbanks of the river itself.

253. At 1920 hours the Eighth Army's V Corps on the right and the II Polish Corps on the left opened the assault on the Senio positions near Lugo. By nightfall a bridgehead had been gained and bridges thrown across the river.

254. The effect of the preliminary air bombardment can be judged from the fact that, in spite of extremely difficult terrain and formidable defences, the army gained its objectives with remarkably light losses. The New Zealand Division, for instance, crossed the Senio without a single casualty, killed or wounded.

Night 9th-10th April—Eighth Army Front.

255. Following up the heavy raids of the afternoon, 72 Liberators of No. 205 Group dropped a further 200 tons of bombs on fortified positions along the Santerno River, to which the enemy had retreated after the heavy air attack in the afternoon and to which he had also brought forward two reserve divisions. This raid was in preparation for the Army attack on the Santerno positions which was to take place the following day. The employment of heavy bombers by night so close to our own positions was a new development, and undoubtedly surprised and dismayed the enemy. The attack was carried out within a period of four minutes and not a single bomb

* The "Rover" system was used for bringing aircraft on to targets visible to a controller who was usually in a specially adapted armoured car or jeep—so that close support aircraft could be up to the minute with a rapidly advancing ground force.