

A tremendous weight of day and night heavy bombers, medium bombers and Allied Tactical Air Forces was made available in support of the operation.

At 1530 hours on 23rd March I gave orders to launch the operation, as the weather was good.

The attack began on the night of 23rd March, and by the next morning, all four assaulting divisions (51 Division, 15 Division and 30 and 79 United States Divisions) and 1 Commando Brigade (British) had accomplished their initial crossings between Rheinberg and Rees. The key to the crossing was the important communicating centre of Wesel, which was captured by the Commando Brigade after an intense air attack by Bomber Command. On the morning of the 24th, XVIII United States Airborne Corps, with 6 Airborne Division and 17 United States Airborne Division, dropped on the East bank of the Rhine within supporting distance of our guns on the West bank.

The enemy reaction was initially strongest on the Northern flank, where three parachute divisions had been concentrated. But, generally speaking, his power of manoeuvre was greatly limited by the very heavy air interdiction programme which had been originated several days before the assault. The airborne troops took full advantage of his failure to launch any effective counter-attack against them, and rapidly made contact with the formations crossing the river. The British and American bridgeheads were quickly joined. Some remarkable engineering feats were accomplished in working ferries and bridging the river, and it is interesting to note that the Royal Navy was well to the fore with craft which had been dragged by road all across Belgium, Southern Holland and the Rhineland.

We were now in a position to drive into the plains of Northern Germany. It was a matter of great satisfaction to see how plans which had been maturing back on the Seine were reaching their fulfilment.

The Advance to the Elbe and Baltic.

Within four days our bridgehead over the Rhine had been established, and on 28th March the advance to the Elbe began.

On the right flank Ninth United States Army was directed to the sector Magdeburg—Wittenberge. In the centre Second Army was to advance with its left flank on Hamburg. On the left, 2 Canadian Corps, after crossing through the Second Army bridgehead, swung North along the Rhine to outflank Arnhem and open up the routes leading Northwards from that area. Later, 1 Canadian Corps assaulted across the river at Arnhem and turned into western Holland to establish a protective flank between the Rhine and the Zuider Zee.

The enemy tried desperately to assemble his remaining forces in opposition to our advance. The core of his resistance formed on the Ems-Dortmund Canal, facing the left and centre of Second Army. Bitter fighting ensued; in the meantime in the Ninth U.S. Army sector, and on the right of Second Army, progress was rapid.

By 3rd April, Ninth U.S. Army had reached the Weser in the Minden area, and had linked up with First U.S. Army advancing from the Remagen bridgehead. The Ruhr was enveloped. Ninth U.S. Army reverted to command

Twelfth U.S. Army Group. The two U.S. armies proceeded with the clearance of the Ruhr, and at the same time pushed forces Eastwards to the Elbe.

The subsequent action of 21 Army Group may be compared with the drive across N.W. France. The German East-West lines of communication to the coast were progressively cut and a series of right hooks were delivered to round up the enemy. The left flank formations drove up towards the coast to complete the task.

8 Corps of Second Army crossed the Weser near Minden on 5th April, followed a few days later further North by 12 Corps, which then worked its way along the East bank in an advance which brought it to the outskirts of Hamburg. This wide turning movement loosened the enemy on the left, and while Bremen was masked from the South by 30 Corps, a hook further up river came in on the city from the East. Bremen fell at the end of the month.

First Canadian Army made steady progress, and by mid-April had liberated most of Northern Holland. By the same time 1 Canadian Corps had safeguarded our flank in Western Holland and isolated the large enemy garrison there.

The main drive to the Elbe continued towards Lüneburg, which was reached on the 18th, and our forces began to line up on the Southern bank of the river masking the city of Hamburg. The Elbe was crossed on 29th April and spearheads made straight for Lubeck in order to seal off the Schleswig-Holstein peninsula. At the same time, moving by road, a U.S. airborne corps of two divisions, together with 6 British Airborne Division, formed a defensive flank facing East on the line Darchau-Schwerin-Wismar. Once across the river our operations were virtually unopposed. The plan for outflanking Hamburg by a manoeuvre similar to that used at Bremen was actually under way when, on 2nd May, the Germans came out to negotiate its surrender. Across the Elbe the countryside was packed with a mass of German soldiers and refugees, fleeing from our own advance and from that of the Russians: with whom we established contact on 2nd May.

The negotiations which began in Hamburg led on 3rd May to the despatch by Doenitz of envoys to my Tactical Headquarters, then at Lüneburg Heath. By this time I had ordered a pause in our advance to be made on a line which would cover Hamburg and Lubeck. Some fighting was still in progress with German remnants in the Cuxhaven and Emden peninsulas.

The German delegation which came to my Headquarters was headed by General-Admiral von Friedeburg, Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy. He was accompanied by General Kinzel, Chief of Staff to Field Marshal Busch, and by Vice-Admiral Wagner. I quickly established that they had not in fact come to negotiate the unconditional surrender of the troops on my front, and at once made it clear that I would not discuss any other matters. I did, however, take the opportunity to show von Friedeburg a map of the current operational situation of which he was apparently not properly aware, and this helped to convince him of the hopelessness of the German position.