

Day 20th April. Fifth Army front.

284. On the morning of the 20th the leading elements of the Fifth Army broke out of the Appenines into the Po Valley, and took up positions astride Highway 9 between Bologna and Modena. Preparations were immediately made for an attack on Bologna, all the high ground before it having by now been cleared.

285. At last the Fifth Army was ready to begin its drive across the Po Valley, first between the Rivers Reno and Panaro, and then across the latter and up to the Po.

THE EIGHTH ARMY OFFENSIVE.

286. I have now reached a suitable stage in the narrative to go back to the activities of the Eighth Army. It will be remembered that I had taken their story to the 14th April, when a bridgehead had been gained over the Sillaro River and a strong threat developed towards the Argenta Gap.

Ground effort 15th to 20th April. Eighth Army front.

287. On the right flank, four days were spent in forcing the Argenta Gap, but on the 16th Bastia succumbed. On the 19th the infantry fanned out into the open country beyond Argenta, though resistance from strong points and defence posts, and at canals, was still met. An armoured brigade previously held in reserve was committed, and began to move through the gap to break the defence wide open.

288. In the centre, on the 17th April, a sweeping advance was made from the bridgehead across the Sillaro, along the Medicina-Budrio railway, until it was halted by yet another defended river position on the Gaiano. By the 20th this river had been crossed and the advance continued to the next river, the Idice. By this time the resistance was faltering, and a bridgehead was quickly gained here.

289. On the southern flank, the Polish Corps pressed on along and north of Route 9, and on the evening of the 17th opened long-range artillery fire on the enemy in Bologna. By the 20th the core of resistance in this sector was broken, and the advance here, together with that in the centre, was menacing the enemy's escape route from Bologna along Route 64 to Ferrara.

*Summary of the air effort from 15th to 20th April.**Eighth Army front.*

290. During these days the Desert Air Force continued its effort over the entire Eighth Army front at full intensity—a typical effort being that of the 16th when some 800 sorties were flown on Army support targets. A great deal of the D.A.F. air effort was concentrated on assisting our troops through the Argenta Gap. A secondary effort was aimed at assisting the advance in the centre.

291. As the enemy was forced from his front line positions, the distribution of his forces became increasingly disorganised, and it became difficult, therefore, to brief fighter-bomber pilots concerning their targets before take-off. In these conditions, briefing in the air by advanced mobile operations sections—"Rovers"—paid rich dividends. Of D.A.F.'s effort on the 16th April, of 800 sorties on close support targets, two-thirds were directed by forward

"Rovers". "Timothies", a code name for assaults by relays of fighter-bombers against points of resistance in the path of our advancing troops, were flown all day and every day. A feature of the attacks was the increased employment of fuel tank incendiary bombs which created widespread havoc over gun areas and strong-points.

292. There can be no doubt that the assistance given by the Air Force to the Army during this period of reducing the enemy's highly organised defences had a decisive effect. For instance, during the twelve days 9th-20th April, over 3,200 enemy-occupied buildings were destroyed or damaged by M.A.T.A.F. aircraft.

293. The Tactical medium bombers' main effort during this period on the Eighth Army front was directed to helping in the penetration of the Argenta Gap by bombing assembly areas and troop concentrations in that area, as well as those further north around Porto Maggiore.

294. No. 205 Group again gave considerable assistance by attacks on the enemy's lines of retreat. The first was made on the night of 17th/18th April against Porto Maggiore in the Argenta Gap. The attack was extremely successful, and the roads of the town were entirely covered with rubble and craters. The second attack—and this was the last made by the Group in direct support of the Army—was made on the night of 19th/20th April on Malalbergo, on Route 64 between Bologna and Ferrara. The town was at the time being used as a lateral communication route for enemy troops facing the Eighth Army and as a normal rear communication route for those facing the Fifth Army front. The attack was so successful that thereafter it could be said that Malalbergo ceased to exist as a communications centre.

295. The night intruders of Desert Air Force also did extremely valuable work during this period, attacking villages immediately to the rear of the enemy's front line, bombing crossings, barges and pontoons on the Po and Adige Rivers, adding weight to the attacks made by No. 205 Group on key communication centres, and attacking all road movement to the enemy's rear wherever it could be found. A tribute to the work of these aircraft was paid by General Von Senger, commanding the German armoured forces, who stated: "The night bombing was very effective, and caused heavy losses."

296. A special air operation (bearing the code name "Herring") added materially to the enemy's discomfiture at the beginning of his retreat. This was on the night of 20th/21st of April when a force of over 220 Volunteer Italian Parachutists was dropped just behind the enemy's lines in the Po Valley (mainly north and north-west of Bologna) by 15 C.47's of the 51st Troop Carrier Wing. They achieved considerable success, killing or capturing over 1,000 Germans and carrying out a varied programme of sabotage and demolition.

THE FIFTH AND EIGHTH ARMIES' OFFENSIVE. 21st to 24th of April.

297. In these four days the German Armies in the Po Valley were cut to ribbons. Considering the enemy's small reserve and limited supplies of petrol and ammunition, normal military strategy would have dictated withdrawal across