

the Po at an early stage of the battle before disorganisation was too great for a controlled retreat. But the German Commander, von Vietinghoff, did not give the order to pull back until the Eighth Army had broken through the Argenta Gap and was across the Idice River near Budrio, and Fifth Army troops had reached Route 9 west of Bologna. By then, an orderly withdrawal would in any case have been difficult as all reserves had been committed to the battle; and the attempt that was made was completely smashed by the power of the Allied Air Forces.

298. On the 21st April, Bologna was captured, Polish troops of the Eighth Army entering it from the east at the same time as American troops of the Fifth Army entered it from the south-west. The main part of the German garrison had withdrawn during the previous night.

299. On the Eighth Army's right flank, the drive to the Po along Route 16 was completed, leading elements reaching it on the 23rd, and on the 24th Ferrara was captured. The situation was then that some five German divisions were being contained against the Po east of Ferrara, and were fully occupying the Eighth Army troops in that area. But west of Ferrara to Bondeno the way was clear of the enemy, so it was decided to make a crossing there. By the 25th a secure bridgehead had been obtained, and the division making the crossing later revealed that the total forces opposing it consisted of 14 men.

300. In the meantime Eighth Army troops, advancing westwards south of Route 16, and in the central sector, had linked up with the Fifth Army troops advancing north between the Rivers Reno and Penaro. Meetings were made near Bondeno and Finale, and again near Cento.

301. The Fifth Army had reached the Po River at San Benedetto on the evening of the 22nd and a crossing was made at this point on the 23rd. On the 24th, the bridgehead was enlarged and Fifth Army troops began to pour across the River.

302. Meanwhile, another Fifth Army column was racing west along Route 9, capturing Reggio and approaching Parma. On the west coast, La Spezia was occupied on 23rd April without opposition.

303. In this period many thousands of prisoners were taken and the complete disorganisation of the German Armies was achieved.

#### *Summary of the Air Effort from 21st to 24th April*

304. Since September, 1944, constant reconnaissance of the Po River had been maintained, and an assessment made of the crossings which would most probably be used by the enemy if and when he tried to retire across the river. When, therefore, aerial reconnaissance carried out on the night of the 20th/21st April revealed that practically the whole stretch of the Po from Ostiglia to Crespini (halfway between Polesella and Berra) was active with pontoon bridges and other crossing activity, plans which had previously been prepared were carried into effect, and the full power of the Tactical Air Force was concentrated on the task of making the German retreat a shambles.

305. Constant attacks by the medium bombers made it impossible for the Germans to use the pontoon bridges and the ferries for heavy armour and motor transport. During the four days, 21st to 24th April, B-25 aircraft of the 57th Bombardment Wing made 38 attacks on active sites flying 605 sorties. At the same time, fighter-bombers of XXII T.A.C. and D.A.F. kept constant patrols above the river, and destroyed all craft which they found trying to cross during the day. In the same four days, some 220 boats and barges were destroyed or damaged.

306. In addition to attacking all attempted traffic across the river, the Tactical Air Force fighter-bombers paid great attention to searching out enemy movement on the roads and destroying the vehicles when they were found, and to cratering roads to impede the retreat. For instance, in the middle of the morning of April 24th, a collection of enemy armour, motor transport and guns was seen between Polesella and Berra—at that time the stipulated bomb-line. A special bomb-line was immediately laid down, and under "Rover" control, fighter-bombers attacked the target until late in the evening. In all, there were some three hundred vehicles in the area, and by the end of the day the majority of them had been destroyed.

307. It was in this period too, that the night-intruders put out their greatest effort of the offensive, maintaining during the night the interdiction of traffic across the river established by the medium and fighter-bombers during the day. They attacked pontoon bridges, ferries, boats and barges and concentrations of troops and vehicles assembled near the crossing points. For example on the night of 22nd/23rd April, the Bostons, Baltimores and Mosquitoes of D.A.F. flew a record number of sorties—174. Almost every aircraft was flown twice during the night and some crews made three sorties. The results achieved were also a record—55 motor vehicles destroyed, and 105 damaged, together with six barges. In addition, many direct hits were seen on bridges, wharves, ferry points and pontoons.

308. There can be no doubt that the efforts of the Tactical Air Force played a very important part in the crippling losses in armour and equipment which were inflicted on the enemy south of the River. During the four days 21st to 24th April 3735 motor vehicles were destroyed or damaged by Tactical Air Force. At the same time, claims against occupied buildings fell to 414 destroyed or damaged as compared with over 1,300 during the previous four days, which is indicative of the greatly lessened resistance put up against our advancing troops.

309. The air attacks carried out on the crossings during this period undoubtedly caused the enemy to abandon most of his equipment on the south side of the river. In the stretch between Pontelagoscuro (due north of Ferrara) and Polesella, for instance, where 76 Panzer Corps crossed, 900 vehicles, 100 guns of all calibres, and 59 Mk.4 Tanks, were counted left abandoned on the South side of the river, and this Corps was believed to have suffered fewer losses than other German formations. The air attacks against the Po crossings played a major part in rendering the enemy too weak