

Gargano peninsula. Special Operations aircraft operated from Brindisi and Lecce. On occasions, however, particularly when the Germans were withdrawing from Greece, Brindisi was used as an advanced base by all types.

87. In addition to bases in Italy, an advanced base was available on the island of Vis throughout B.A.F.'s period of operations. Owing to the shortness of the landing strip and bad approaches, this was normally only used by fighter-bombers, with a daily average of some 35 sorties. During 1945 it became more and more a special advanced base of the Italian Spitfire and P-39 squadrons. It was not suitable for Macchis.

88. From February onwards, an advanced landing ground was established at Prkos, near Zadar, and gradually developed until, by the end of April, No. 281 Wing, which by then comprised all single-engined squadrons except the Italians, was based there.

Operational Conditions.

89. The lack of adequate air bases on the east side of the Adriatic meant that a very great majority of sorties flown by Balkan Air Force involved a double sea crossing of at least 100 miles in each direction, and often much more, which added considerably to the strain on aircrew, particularly after facing heavy flak.

90. Added to this were the dangers inseparable from operations in mountainous country during the extremely cloudy weather conditions prevalent during the winter. Moreover, when aircraft reached the target area, the rugged mountainous nature of the country often made attacks difficult to carry out, as for instance, when targets were road or rail movement running through ravines, as was frequently the case.

91. These conditions combined with the nature of the work to make operations in the Balkans, particularly by fighter-bombers and Beaufighters, as tough as those normally carried out in other theatres in spite of the almost complete lack of air opposition. On the other side, however, was the compensating advantage that if shot or forced down in the Balkans there was always a good chance of falling into friendly hands and sooner or later getting back to Italy. Towards the end, missing aircrews would very often be back with their units within two or three days.

92. Another result of these conditions was that calls from the Partisans for support were very often impossible to meet. The difficulties were not always appreciated by the Partisans who, except when weather conditions obviously made an attack impossible, were apt to interpret the non-fulfilment of a task as an example of bad faith and non-co-operation.

British Liaison Officers and Target Information.

93. With friendly forces located throughout Yugoslavia and Albania, and with excellent information being passed by the British Liaison Officers attached to all main Partisan Headquarters, a wealth of data on German formations and enemy movement was always available. A vast amount of intelligence of all kinds was received at Headquarters, and collated and evaluated by the intelligence staffs of the three services.

94. In a very great number of cases however when Partisan Headquarters desired air attacks to be made on specific targets they did not pass adequate or detailed information on the target through the British liaison officers, and often requests to attack German garrisons in towns failed to give detailed aiming points. The obtaining of such vital information therefore led to delays before attacks could be carried out.

Target Clearance.

95. One of the major difficulties encountered in operating over Yugoslavia was the fact that targets could not be attacked without prior clearance from Partisan G.H.Q. This authority was delegated, as regards tactical targets, to Partisan subordinate Army H.Q.'s; but as far as major strategical targets were concerned, delays by Partisan G.H.Q. in giving clearance often seriously delayed or hindered attacks of considerable importance. On occasions, clearance was refused and attacks could not be made.

96. One could understand the reluctance of the Yugoslavs to clear targets in their own country for heavy air attack, with the inevitable damage to their towns and civilians, but often this permission was refused or withheld for long periods in spite of the fact that the enemy were obviously attaching great importance to the targets and possibly taking advantage of such "immunity." Thus Ljubljana marshalling yard, which had over 1,000 units of rolling stock in the later stages, was not cleared for attack. It is only fair to state, however, that permission was normally withheld only when targets lay in built-up areas.

97. Balkan Air Force was responsible for approving all targets in the Balkans selected for air attack. This was done by means of daily signals to all other air forces and by holding daily target conferences which were attended by Intelligence and Operations Officers of the XV Air Force, 205 Group and 37 Military Mission. A representative of B.A.F. also attended the daily target conference of M.A.S.A.F. In this way a most satisfactory liaison was kept up. Day attacks of the XV Air Force and 205 Group heavy bombers were closely co-ordinated with sweeps by B.A.F. fighters and those of Desert Air Force.

The Bomb Line.

98. Mention has already been made of the difficulty of maintaining up-to-date information on Partisan positions and intentions. This was increased when the Russians entered Yugoslavia and showed the same reluctance to give information as the Partisans, while their communications with the Mediterranean theatre were even more circuitous and inadequate. These factors led to the establishment of a bomb line which gave a very generous safety margin except when close tactical support had been called for by the Partisans. In the Russian case this was 80 miles ahead of their last known position, unless previous clearance was obtained through Moscow.

99. In spite of these precautions, instances unfortunately occurred of Partisan forces being attacked by Allied aircraft, due in most cases to their having moved without intimation. These, however, never led to serious repercussions.