

52. A close liaison was maintained with the U.S.A.A.F. supply services, and where convenient, supplies of "common user" items were pooled to achieve maximum efficiency. A particular instance of this was 1,000 lb. bombs, of which there was a shortage in both services.

ORDER OF BATTLE FOR THE FINAL ITALIAN OFFENSIVE.

53. With but a few minor exceptions, the order of battle I have described above remained unchanged for the final Italian offensive, and in particular, no changes were made which would impair the effectiveness of M.A.S.A.F., M.A.T.A.F., or B.A.F. for giving support to the ground forces.

54. One change was the transfer of the two U.S.A.A.F. special duties squadrons from B.A.F. to M.A.T.A.F., in order to increase the effort available for supplying the Italian Partisans in Northern Italy.

55. On 16th March, I was informed by the Chief of the Air Staff that in view of the services overall manpower deficiencies, which had already arisen in the Royal Air Force, and which would increase still further in the next six months unless corrective action were taken, it was essential that there should be a reduction in the number of R.A.F. first line squadrons. The contribution that MEDME would be required to make was:—

(a) the rolling up of 6 heavy bomber squadrons of No. 205 Group at the rate of one per month, commencing in April;

(b) the rolling up of 3 light bomber squadrons of Desert Air Force immediately;

(c) the rolling up of 4 day fighter or fighter-bomber squadrons at the rate of one per month commencing in April;

(d) the transfer of 2 South African medium range general reconnaissance squadrons to A.C.S.E.A., when operational, so that two R.A.F. squadrons could be rolled up in that theatre;

56. The Chief of the Air Staff emphasised that he was prepared to consider alternative proposals provided that they produced no less saving in manpower.

57. I discussed this matter with my operational commanders, and decided that in view of the forthcoming offensive in Italy, it was most important that the fighter and fighter-bomber strength of M.A.T.A.F. should not be reduced, and that because of the preliminary success of Marshal Tito's offensive in Yugoslavia, the strength of B.A.F. should also be maintained as far as possible. On 22nd March, therefore, I replied to the Chief of the Air Staff, proposing an alternative programme of reductions, which would provide the same savings in manpower, and yet not affect the air power available for the direct support of the land forces. At the same time I strongly recommended that earnest consideration should be given to the possibility of postponing all reductions for this theatre until after the end of May, when it was expected that the operations then imminent would have passed their critical phase; and if that were not possible, that at least the postponement of the disbandment of 2 heavy bomber squadrons, and one light bomber squadron, which I had included in my programme, should be considered.

58. As a result of these representations, I was informed by the Air Ministry on the 2nd April that I should be required to reduce my strength in April by only 3 squadrons—one Beaufighter anti-shipping squadron, and 2 fighter or fighter-bomber squadrons. More extensive reductions were to follow from June onwards.

59. The three squadrons to be rolled up in April were found from M.A.C.A.F. and B.A.F., the former supplying the Beaufighter anti-shipping squadron and a fighter squadron engaged on the escort of air sea rescue aircraft, and the latter a fighter squadron based in Greece. Thus the striking power available for the direct support of the land forces was not affected.

60. As events turned out, the war in Europe had finished before the time had come to begin the reductions scheduled for June, and an alternative programme was put into effect.

PART III.

THE BALKAN AIR FORCE AND AIR OPERATIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE JUGOSLAV FOURTH ARMY OFFENSIVE.*

THE FORMATION OF BALKAN AIR FORCE AND ITS CO-ORDINATING RESPONSIBILITIES.

61. The situation in the Western Balkans, as the year 1944 progressed, was that considerable German forces were holding the principal towns and the communications between them in the face of numerous but ill-co-ordinated Partisan attacks. The Partisans were provided with Allied arms and equipment and were supported by small Allied raiding forces and by air and naval attacks. This support was, however, less effective than it might have been, because, while there was a measure of intelligence co-ordination which enabled the various air forces concerned to operate fairly successfully, there was during the first half of 1944 no Headquarters which provided operational co-ordination without need for constant reference to Allied Force Headquarters and M.A.A.F.

62. In order to provide such co-ordination, it was decided in May 1944 to apply to trans-Adriatic operations the principle of three co-equal Commanders of whom one was to be charged with the co-ordination of planning and execution of operations. This was not quite parallel to the system in force at A.F.H.Q., where the Supreme Allied Commander was a "commander" and not a "co-ordinator", nor to that in force in the Middle East where the three service commanders were co-equal. So far as the Balkans were concerned, moreover, it was appreciated that operations could not be divorced from politics and were closely inter-related also to "special" activities.

63. It was thus regarded as essential that some machinery of co-ordination should also be provided between the three service Commanders and the Foreign Office and State Department representatives in Bari, and between the three service Commanders and the Special Operations formation concerned with the Western Balkans.

* As the final offensive in Yugoslavia started earlier than that in Italy, it will be convenient to trace it to its completion before dealing with events in the main theatre.