

given in my Despatch as Supreme Allied Commander, forwarded to the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Before proceeding, however, to my concluding evaluation of the Italian campaign it will be as well to complete the picture of the over-running of Italy from Cape Passero to the Brenner by giving in broad outline the events which led up to the final capitulation. It is unnecessary to be detailed, for the stage had been set by the events of the winter and the action proceeded according to the plans laid down then. The problem was to disrupt the enemy's defences in the valley of the Po by attacks at two separate points, to surround as much as possible of the forces disposed between the two points of rupture and to exploit with the utmost speed to the Po both in order to forestall any attempt to reorganize the defences of the river line and to cut off and destroy the maximum number of enemy south of the river. There were two axes on which to operate, each of them capable of serving for the advance of an army: Route 12 (Modena-Ostiglia-Verona) for Fifth Army and Route 16 (Ferrara-Rovigo-Padua) for Eighth Army. On the former route the problem for Fifth Army was to break out of the mountains where they had been locked up since the previous winter; once in the plains their advance would go with the grain of the country. The obstacles facing Eighth Army were, as in the previous winter, a series of water barriers, especially the fortified lines of the rivers Senio, Santerno, Sillaro and Idice. Above all the road to Ferrara was narrowed to a heavily defended defile by extensive artificial flooding in the area of the town of Argenta. This defile, known to us as the Argenta Gap, loomed large in all our appreciations; in order to advance rapidly to the necessary crossing sites on the Po we must either force it or outflank it and the latter looked the more difficult, and certainly the more time-wasting, of the two possible courses. North of the Po the enemy had constructed defence lines based on the rivers Adige, Tagliamento and Isonzo, and behind them was the final line of the Alps. I was less concerned with these, as if we were successful in our battle south of the Po the enemy would have no troops left to man them.

It will be seen that the Germans had made most elaborate preparations for a protracted defence in Italy and it may well be asked why, when the Thousand Year Reich was clearly crumbling to ruin nine hundred and eighty-eight years short of its proposed span, great masses of slave labourers should still be toiling to throw up defences in the plains of Venetia. The answer must probably be connected with the Nazi plan for a "National Redoubt". For the sake of the example for the future, and because the armies were still firm in the hand of a man who was determined never to surrender, it was still necessary to plan as if there were some hope left. The only prospect which appeared to offer any chance for protracting resistance was to abandon the defence of the open country of North Germany and concentrate on holding for as long as possible the mountains of the south in the area of Tyrol, Salzburg and Western Carinthia. It was questionable how long, if at all, this fortress could be held and there must have been many commanders who doubted but, such as it was, this represented the only future plan which

could be contemplated. To carry it out the forces fighting in Italy were absolutely essential; they represented the only large coherent body of men left in the spring of 1945. They were in a position to withdraw straight into the southern face of the redoubt; they might, moreover, retain for at least a time the food-producing and industrial areas of Northern Italy. Undoubtedly if they had been able to withdraw across the Po in good order they would have given a very good account of themselves in the defence of the Alps; it was more than ever necessary, therefore, to ensure their destruction south of the river.

The armies facing us were still strong* well-equipped and in good heart. Four divisions, by no means the best, had been transferred to the Eastern front between January and March to balance the transference of the Canadian Corps and 5 British Division from my command but General von Vietinghoff, who succeeded Field-Marshal Kesselring on 23rd March, on the latter's transfer to the Western front, commanded on that date a force of twenty-three German and four Italian (German-equipped) divisions.† Furthermore, by contrast with other fronts, the divisions which faced us in Italy were real divisions and not the scratch battle-groups which usurped the name elsewhere. Reinforcements had continued to arrive and a vigorous comb-out of rear areas and a considerable reduction in all but essential services had maintained fighting strength. The parachutists, for example, were particularly strong—I and 4 Parachute Divisions went into action with sixteen thousand and nearly fourteen thousand men respectively—and so were the mobile divisions; in fact the average strength for German divisions was eleven thousand five hundred, slightly over the standard war establishment strength for infantry divisions at that period of the war.‡ The troops were well rested and had spent the period of the lull in intensive training. Morale was astonishingly good. In spite of the desperate situation of German arms in the homeland itself the Germans in Italy continued to show the same resolute spirit of resistance and dash in counter-attack which had distinguished them hitherto. It was not until they had been driven against the Po, and had lost all their heavy weapons in the vain attempt to cross it, that any large-scale surrenders were recorded.§ To

* The German Order of Battle on 9th April, 1945, is given at Appendix "J".

† On 10th April XCVII Corps in north-eastern Italy, with two divisions, was transferred to the Commander-in-Chief South-east. There were also in Italy various foreign levies, a Cossack division, 29 S.S. Grenadier Division (Italian troops with German officers) and other Italian formations to a strength of 126,000.

‡ These figures are from an official German document from Headquarters Army Group "C".

§ This was a disheartening result for the large organization engaged in propaganda and "Psychological Warfare" to the German troops. In general the verdict must be that this had no military effect whatsoever; the enemy continued to resist beyond the limits of what could have been thought possible. Such deserters as gave themselves up during the campaign were naturally claimed as successes of our psychological warfare but it would be difficult to prove that they would not have deserted in any case, especially as the great majority of them were persons of non-German origin, forcibly conscripted. There will always be deserters in a war fought in such unpleasant conditions; the surprising thing is that their numbers were so entirely insignificant.