

Air Operations in support of the Offensive

110. Active air operations in support of the Fourth Army commenced on the 19th March and continued with unabated vigour until the end of hostilities on the 8th May 1945. At the same time a considerable effort was maintained against the enemy in the Sarajevo area, and against his communications throughout Yugoslavia to prevent reinforcement of his forces in front of the Fourth Army.

111. The detailed description of air operations in support of the Yugoslav Fourth Army offensive follows in the next section of this part. It is never a simple task to give a compact and lucid account of air operations in support of a land battle, because of the constant necessity to relate those operations to events on the ground and to the overall picture of the battle. In this particular case, the task is far more difficult than usual, simply because a clear picture of exactly what was happening on the ground was, more often than not, not available to the air forces. Some of the difficulties of co-operating with the Partisans have been indicated in earlier paragraphs,* and though these were reduced for this particular offensive, the degree of liaison and close co-operation achieved never approached that which existed between the Armies and Air Forces in Italy. Because of this, there could be only a minimum of advance planning, and air operations were therefore, of necessity, much more of an ad hoc nature. This fact is reflected in the account of the air operations which follows. Moreover, political developments following the cessation of hostilities made impossible an accurate assessment of the value of the operations by Balkan Air Force, since the Allies were not allowed to examine targets, to have discussions with the Yugoslavs themselves, or to interrogate their prisoners.

*Operations during the Offensive.**The first phase—capture of Bihac*

112. On the 19th March, Marauders and Baltimores heralded the opening of the Yugoslav Fourth Army's attack on Bihac with intensive bombing of strongpoints south-west of the town. From then until the 25th, when Bihac was entered, uninterrupted aid was given to the land forces by tactical support and attack on communications in the enemy's rear.

113. Simultaneously, attacks were mounted against Gospic, Senj and Ogulin and throughout the same period practically the whole of the road and rail system of North Yugoslavia was subjected to straffing and bombing. Aircraft of M.A.S.A.F. and M.A.T.A.F. added weight to this concentrated and widespread effort. Mustangs of D.A.F. gave special assistance by highly successful attacks on road and rail bridges.

114. The Fourth Army successfully completed the first phase of its offensive with the capture of Bihac on the 28th March. They claimed to have killed 4,000 enemy and taken 2,000 prisoners.

Second Phase—clearing of Islands and advance to Fiume

115. Determined to hold the Northern Adriatic coast at all costs, the enemy continued

his policy of strengthening the coast and inland defences, but the toll taken by B.A.F. and the Royal Navy of his shipping, apart from the threat of invasion, was causing him much embarrassment and he finally evacuated them.

116. No summary of the operations during March would be complete without mention of the outstanding work of the Long Range Desert Group patrols established in Istria, and on the Island of Rab. These patrols were set up in enemy-held territory and were frequently located by them. Nevertheless, they continued to send out most valuable information for the R.A.F.

117. April was the climax of B.A.F.'s effort in support of the Yugoslav Fourth Army, and indeed, to the whole of its operations over Yugoslavia during the past year. Flying well over 3,000 sorties, fighters, fighter-bombers and medium bombers destroyed or damaged during this month approximately 800 M.T., 60 locomotives, and 40 naval craft.

118. On the 4th of April, a co-ordinated attack was put in against the island of Pag, the coastal garrison of Karlobag and the town of Gospic, and by the 6th all three objectives had been cleared of the enemy. In quick succession followed the fall of Rab, Krk, Lussin and Cherso.

119. The task of the ground and naval forces was lightened immeasurably by the air support given by B.A.F., so much so that little or no interference was experienced from the formidable defences during the actual assaults. Along the coastal road, under cover of our fighters, Fourth Army forces also moved up without air or ground opposition, and by the 15th the coast-line had been cleared up to and including Kraljevica.

120. In the hinterland, however, the enemy appeared momentarily to have stabilised the situation, but B.A.F. kept up the attacks on communications. In anti-shipping strikes over the Northern Islands R.P. Hurricanes and Spitfires reaped a good harvest, disabling and sinking several vessels.

121. Between the 20th and 27th April, a large number of close support attacks was put in against gun positions when the Fourth Army were held at the outskirts of Fiume, and attacks were maintained on shipping.

Third phase—link-up with 15th Army Group and clearing of Northern Yugoslavia

122. During the final week of April the Yugoslav Fourth Army made a break-through in North Istria to the River Isonzo and near Monfalcone met the advanced spearheads of the British Eighth Army. This left the Germans with a number of isolated and ill-garrisoned strongpoints running from Novo Mesto (on the road from Karlovac to Ljubljana) to Gorizia.

123. The final assault on Fiume was made on April 30th; the drive to Trieste met with comparatively little opposition.

124. Evidence that the enemy realised the hopelessness of his position in the Istrian Peninsula and elsewhere was shown on 1st May—a week before hostilities ceased—when approximately 25 vessels of all types surrendered to

* 79-82 and 94.