

222. It should, perhaps, be mentioned that plans were made, and all preparatory action taken for an airborne assault at brigade strength in the initial phases of the battle. Since this assault was not carried out, for reasons of an Army nature, I have made no further reference to it.

PLANNING FOR THE BATTLE.

The Army Plan.

223. The task before the 15th Army Group was to destroy some 25 divisions of the enemy before they could retire north-east into the Alps towards Austria, and prolong the struggle from there.

224. The task was a formidable one. On this west flank, the enemy was firmly planted in the rugged mountains. On his east flank he was solidly entrenched behind the Senio, Santerno, Sillaro and Idice rivers, all comparatively wide and steeply banked; an attacker there faced a maze of ditches, dikes and flooded fields.

225. Beyond these rivers there were still others which made good defence lines for the enemy—the Po and the Adige, both of which were already fortified. Beyond these again, were more river lines, and mountains, across the road to Austria.

226. Against these advantages the enemy was short of transport, his communications were under constant air attack, his air power was negligible, he had very little petrol, and he was woefully inferior in tanks and guns. The relentless air attacks to which he had been subjected in recent months had destroyed his mobility and had decisively undermined his whole powers of resistance.

227. It was certain that he would fight desperately to retain the Po Valley. If, therefore, the 15th Army Group could achieve a quick break-through and a rapid exploitation, huge enemy forces might well be destroyed or captured before they could retire across the Po.

228. The possible lines of attack were severely restricted. The 15th Army Group's front now ran from the Comacchio lagoon on the Adriatic to just below Massa on the Ligurian Sea skirting south of Bologna. The Fifth Army held the mountainous zig-zag line from Massa to Monte Grande, ten miles south-east of Bologna; the Eighth Army line ran south-east from Monte Grande, across the Sillaro and Santerno Rivers, and then north-east along the Senio's south bank to the southern shore of Lake Comacchio and the Adriatic.

229. It was decided that the main effort of 15th Army Group should be launched in the Bologna area by the Fifth Army, since once the latter reached the Po valley, the terrain in their front favoured a quick break-through and a rapid advance.

230. This main thrust by the Fifth Army was to be preceded by an Eighth Army attack, with the object of drawing enemy reserves away from the Fifth Army front.

231. The plan therefore fell into three main parts, which were to follow each other without any pause. In the first stage, each Army would break through the heavily defended enemy

lines opposing it—the Eighth Army first, breaching Senio and the Santerno lines and attacking towards Bastia and Budrio; the Fifth Army second, breaking out of the mountains and into the Po Valley, with the secondary mission of capturing or isolating Bologna.

232. The second stage provided for a break-through by either or both Armies to encircle the enemy forces south of the Po. The Eighth Army was to go through the Argenta Gap to seize the Po crossings at Ferrara and Bondeno, and there make contact with Fifth Army columns exploiting north-east from Route 9 down the corridor north of the Reno. A secondary Fifth Army effort was to be made northward on Ostiglia.

233. In the third stage, operations were to be directed toward crossing the Po and exploiting northward, especially with the object of capturing Verona. If the situation permitted, further exploitation toward and across the Adige River was to follow.

234. As a prelude to this main attack, two important subsidiary operations were to be carried out. The first of these was an attack against Massa, on the extreme left of the battle front, in order to keep the Germans in that area occupied. The second was an amphibious operation to capture the isthmus projecting between Lake Comacchio and the Adriatic, which would give the Eighth Army free access to the Lake, and prepare the way for further amphibious operations which were to aid in opening the road through the Argenta Gap to Ferrara.

The Naval Plan.

235. The Navy plan for the final offensive was drawn up to give the Army as much support as possible. On the Eighth Army front the capture of the Argenta gap would require an assault in tank landing vessels, across the flooded country surrounding the Valle di Comacchio. A Naval party was to be formed to assist the Army in training L.V.T. (landing vessel, tank) squadrons, and to act as navigational leaders in the assault.

236. The coast northwards of Ravenna was generally unsuitable for amphibious landings. The enemy was, however, sensitive in this area, and a concentration of tank landing craft in the Ravenna-Porto Corsini Canal, combined with a dummy assault and shore bombardment by landing craft at Porto Garibaldi, was to be undertaken in order to delay the movement towards the battle area of the coastal defence division stationed there.

237. On the west coast, gun support to the advance of the Fifth Army along the coast was to be given by cruisers and destroyers. The clearing of a gunfire support area between Viareggio and Spezia would entail further minesweeping.

238. A flotilla of assault landing craft manned by Royal Marines was to be carried overland from Ancona on tank transporters, and launched into the Po River to assist in the crossing.

239. Plans were made for the harbours of Genoa, Trieste and Savona to be opened, and also the Port of Venice as a standby, in case there should be difficulty with the Yugoslavs over the use of Trieste.