

gains of approximately three miles. The German Winter Line had been broken into but not broken; there were still some miles of mountain before the rear line of the position, the "Gustav" line, should be reached and the difficulties of that line were already the subject of serious study.

It was during this period that we received the only serious blow which the German Air Force was ever able to strike us during the campaign. On the night of 2nd December an air raid by about thirty aircraft on the port of Bari took the defences by surprise and caused very heavy damage. Seventeen ships of various sizes were sunk and thirty thousand tons of cargo lost, mainly by the explosion of two ammunition ships. The port was not permanently damaged but we lost five days' working.

At the turn of the year the Mediterranean theatre, which had already lost so many of its best troops, now lost two of its senior commanders for the benefit of the Western campaign. On 10th December, 1943, General Eisenhower was informed of his appointment as Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force; he actually handed over to General Wilson* on 8th January, 1944. General Wilson's appointment was announced on 27th December and on the same day was made the announcement of General Montgomery's transfer to command of Twenty-first Army Group. General Montgomery was succeeded, on 1st January, 1944, by General Leese,† who had commanded 30 Corps in the desert and in Sicily. In the new organisation in the Mediterranean, Allied Force Headquarters now had a wider authority, including those areas which had previously come under General Headquarters Middle East. To a large extent, therefore, its preoccupations were political and logistical; I was accordingly instructed that for the conduct of the campaign in Italy I was given a free hand. For this reason the title of my headquarters was changed from Fifteenth Army Group to Headquarters Allied Armies in Italy‡ and my administrative staff was reorganised and put on a proper level with the operations staff. At the same time I was relieved of the duties of Deputy Allied Commander-in-Chief, being succeeded in the appointment by Lieutenant-General J. L. Devers of the United States Army.

I had had the pleasure of serving under General Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander for about a year. I have already expressed, in my Despatch on the Conquest of Sicily, my appreciation of his gifts as a commander and I need not repeat it here; but I will say that, apart from our professional relationship, the footing on which we stood personally was of close friendship and understanding. General Wilson, of course, was a member of the old Middle East team, having commanded Ninth Army in Syria and subsequently the Persia and Iraq Command. He had succeeded me in command at General Headquarters, Middle East when I took over command of Eighteenth Army Group on 10th February, 1943. His diplomatic gifts and his

experience in negotiations with various nationalities made him the natural first choice for the command of Allied Force Headquarters in view of its new rôle; in particular his knowledge of the Balkans made it essential that he should continue to be in charge of that area which was now under Algiers. My military relations with him were slightly different in principle, as I have explained, from those with General Eisenhower but our personal relationship was excellent and I must record my gratitude here for the comprehension and support which he never failed to afford me.

The Cassino Position.

I have already described the Liri valley as the gateway to Rome and alluded to the strength of the defences of the gate. A description of the terrain now facing us will make clear the reasons why this one sector was the only place where we could hope to develop an advance in strength and why I was obliged to transfer there ever-increasing forces until by next May the bulk of my Armies was disposed in the Tyrrhenian sector. The Adriatic coastal plain in which Eighth Army had been operating leads nowhere except, eventually, to Ancona. The centre of the peninsula is filled by the Apennines which here reach their greatest height; they were now under deep snow and even in summer are quite impracticable for the movement of large forces. The west coast rises steeply into the trackless Aurunci and Lepini Mountains and the coastal road runs close to the seashore, except for a short stretch in the plain of Fondi, until it debouches into the Pontine Marshes which the Germans had flooded. The Aurunci and Lepini Mountains are separated from the main Apennine range, however, by the valley of the Liri and, further to the north-west, by the valley of its tributary, the Sacco. The gap thereby formed, through which runs Route 6, the Via Casilina, varies in width from four to seven miles. When it reaches the eastern end of the Aurunci chain the Liri meets the Rapido (known also as the Gari for the stretch between Cassino and the confluence) flowing from due north at right angles to its course and the joint stream, now called the Garigliano, flows due south to reach the Tyrrhenian Sea east of Minturno. From the confluence with the Rapido to Ceprano, where the Sacco joins the Liri, the valley is about twenty miles in length with the river on the south side and the road on the north. Undulating and well-wooded towards the north-west the valley gradually loses these characteristics, and open cornfields in the vicinity of Aquino give way to flat pasture land nearer the Rapido. Numerous transverse gullies break up the surface, the most important being the *Forme d'Aquino*.

The mouth of the valley was closed by formidable defences. To enter it it is first necessary to cross the Rapido river which, as its name shows, is very swift-flowing; the banks are generally low but marshy, in fact most of the land here is reclaimed land. The Rapido might be compared to the moat before a castle gate and on either hand are two great bastions. To the south Monte Majo, rising to just under three thousand feet, sends down spurs to the river running along its eastern side. The key of the position, however, lies on the north. Here Monte Cairo, over five thousand feet, rears its head as the southernmost peak of a

* General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson: now Field-Marshal The Lord Wilson of Libya, G.C.B., G.B.E., D.S.O.

† Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, Bt., K.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.

‡ For a short time it was known as "Allied Central Mediterranean Forces".