

Operations with Light Naval Forces.

100. The air force role in these operations was to silence the large coastal defence (C.D.) batteries (especially on Cherso, Rab, and Lussin islands) by intensive air attack so that Naval craft could bombard from close range in safety. These batteries consisted of guns up to 150 mm. in calibre, and with all aircraft often operating from the same airfield, Biferno, it was possible to carry out several very effective attacks.

101. Marauders and Baltimores attacked from medium level, while R.P. Beaufighters, with Mustangs as anti-flak escort, come in at low level in a co-ordinated attack. These batteries were also attacked from low level by Mustangs carrying Napalm fire bombs. As a result, at least four major C.D. batteries were silenced, thus permitting the Navy to bombard the anchorages and to operate their M.T.B.'s close inshore to disrupt the enemy's coastal shipping routes.

Co-operation by M.A.T.A.F.

102. When operations in Italy permitted, M.A.T.A.F. allotted a force of eight squadrons for operations over the Balkans, and this was supplemented by additional squadrons when weather conditions were unfavourable in Italy. They were normally given a specific area in which to sweep roads and railways. On occasions, Mustangs were asked to take on particular targets such as bridges, as B.A.F.'s own aircraft of this type could not carry 1,000 lb. bombs.

THE OFFENSIVE BY THE JUGOSLAV FOURTH ARMY.*The ground position at the beginning of the offensive.*

103. The withdrawal of the German Army Group "E" from the Aegean, Greece and Albania had begun in late 1944. The movement of the German 21 Mountain Corps from Northern Albania and Montenegro into Croatia was one of the major parts of this withdrawal, and by the end of March, 1945, the Corps had reached Sarajevo and were in the process of withdrawing northwards towards Brod and thence to Zagreb. There had been a general thinning out of the German forces on the west coast, and following the Yugoslav Army's success in pursuing the retreating Germans, it remained to carry out a final offensive to clear the rest of Northern Yugoslavia of the enemy.

Preparations for the Offensive.

104. Consideration had at one time been given to the possibility of launching an ambitious operation from the Zadar area using considerable forces from the 15th Army Group, which would be aimed at Trieste and Ljubljana Gap and which would be made in conjunction with an offensive on the Italian front. However, when at the end of February, 1945, the Supreme Allied Commander had a long-postponed meeting with Marshal Tito no further mention of the proposal for this operation was made. The 15th Army Group had recently lost several divisions to the Western Front and, apart from any strategic considerations, there were no troops to spare for diversions across the Adriatic. Instead, it was agreed that a large scale offensive should be carried out in Dalmatia by units of the Yugoslav Fourth Army

under General Drapsin, which was composed of the former 8 Corps and 11 Corps of the Yugoslav Army of National Liberation. The first object of the operations was to clear the enemy from the Gospic and Bihac areas and then to liberate the whole of the northern Dalmatian coast and islands.

105. In his talks with Marshal Tito, the Supreme Allied Commander promised that the maximum air support should be given by B.A.F. for this operation, subject to its other commitments in the Balkans, that Allied naval craft should co-operate as far as possible, and that the maximum quantity of supplies should be sent to the various Yugoslav formations concerned in the operation.

106. The plans for the original ambitious operation from the Zadar area had included the establishment of an air base there. The plan for the setting-up of this air base was called Operation "Accomplish," and was completed by the 7th February after protracted and difficult negotiations with the Yugoslavs. In the meantime, by the end of January, a refuelling and rearming party had been sent to Prkos airfield at Zadar, mainly with the object of providing for Allied aircraft which landed there in distress.

107. When the plan for an offensive by the Yugoslav Fourth Army was decided upon, arrangements were at once made for providing the maximum air support possible. An Air Adviser was attached to General Drapsin's Headquarters, and R.A.F. liaison officers were attached to each of the Partisan Corps concerned in the offensive in order to supplement the work of the ordinary British liaison officers. I did not consider it advisable, however, to build up the Air Forces at Zadar itself as had been envisaged under Operation "Accomplish," even though this would have been very desirable, because of the danger of an attack against the base by German land forces.

108. However, when the offensive started on 19th March, it very soon became evident that it was going very well and that the risk of incursion by German land and sea forces had considerably diminished. Accordingly, on 22nd March I pressed the Supreme Allied Commander to approve a modified form of Operation "Accomplish" named Operation "Bingham," and he agreed that this operation should take place at the earliest possible date. It was therefore started on the 2nd April, and as a result No. 281 Wing, which comprised all the short range single-engined fighter squadrons in B.A.F. except the Italian ones, was fully established at Zadar by the end of April. The effect of this was to enable B.A.F. to give an increased and closer Air Support to Marshal Tito's forces.

109. A naval agreement had been signed in Belgrade in January which permitted the use of Zadar as a base for light naval craft. In the middle of February units of L.F.A., including one squadron of the Long Range Desert Group, and one squadron of the Special Boating Service, were sent to Zadar. The establishment of an air base there resulted in a rather complex problem of inter-service co-ordination, which was solved by the creation of a headquarters to control raiding operations involving all three services, called Combined Operations, Zadar (C.O.Z.A.).