

*The air effort in April.*

175. In April the need to help the Allies' last assault in northern Italy (considered later) called for a vastly increased M.A.S.A.F. effort in the area and the commitment of disrupting the enemy's communications supporting the south-eastern front was relegated to second place. Nevertheless, the latter targets still felt a very appreciable weight of M.A.S.A.F. bombs.

176. Main targets in the first week of the month were the constantly attacked Maribor railway bridge, the less visited Dravograd railway bridge, also in Yugoslavia, and the Graz, St. Polten and Krems marshalling yards. In particular, the blocking of the two latter yards cut Linz from Vienna at a very critical stage in the battle for the Austrian capital. No. 205 Group meanwhile hit the Nove Zamky marshalling yards by night and the Strategic fighters operating over a wide area destroyed nearly 100 locomotives and numerous units of rolling stock.

177. With Vienna virtually isolated, the Red Army increased the speed of its advance: from 7th to 13th April bitter street fighting occurred in the capital, culminating in its complete occupation.

178. While the heavy bombers were switching their effort to the Italian theatre, the Strategic fighters continued the work, effectively dive-bombing Austrian bridges and straffing rail traffic in southern Germany. Results of the latter activity during the week ending 15th April included 227 locomotives and 354 units of rolling stock destroyed or damaged.

179. Features of the final assaults were the complete destruction of the Rattensburg railway bridge; the Strategic fighters' continued dive-bombing and straffing effort; the night bombing of the Freilassing marshalling yards, and the severe damage inflicted on the Linz marshalling yards, the last major Austrian traffic centre on the Linz—Budejovice—Prague railway, which after the fall of Vienna, became the enemy's last important lateral communication line behind the rapidly closing eastern front, and an objective of American troops advancing from the southern end of the western front.

*General results.*

180. It has not proved possible to assess in detail the effects of M.A.S.A.F.'s four month's attacks on railway communications to help the Red Army's advance into Austria. The evidence of photographic reconnaissance, ground reports, and aircrew observations, however, examined in the light of experience gained in investigations in France and Roumania, is sufficient to give a general picture of the effect of the offensive.

181. The air attacks were always ahead of the enemy's programme to repair his battered railway centres, and troop and supply movements to the south-eastern front were seriously limited and delayed. Furthermore, the elimination of marshalling facilities in Austria and Western Hungary forced the Germans more and more to adopt the unsatisfactory practice of making up unit trains far in the rear, so that further handling before arrival at the battle area could be avoided. Additional disruption was caused by the destruction of

moving trains. A conservative estimate of units of rolling stock destroyed or severely damaged is 18,000 (including more than 1,600 locomotives). Many of the destroyed wagons were laden with supplies, and tank cars were filled with oil products. Further destruction of tanks and ordnance was effected at loading points. The cumulative effect was to cripple completely the enemy's land operations against the Russians in this area.

*THE INTERDICTION OF ITALIAN COMMUNICATIONS*

182. When it became evident, at the beginning of 1945, that it would be impossible to launch a major offensive until the Spring came, and that until that time, holding operations only were possible on the ground, the Air Force's chief task as far as the Italian theatre was concerned became the reduction of the enemy's fighting capacity on land to the greatest degree possible. To do this, it was necessary, above all, to deny him freedom of movement. Without such freedom, he would be unable to achieve the build-up of supplies and reinforcements required to withstand a major offensive.

183. But, equally important, the enemy would also be unable to adopt the alternative of withdrawing large land forces and using them to reinforce other fronts, where they were urgently required. It would indeed place him on the horns of a dilemma—he would not be able to use his troops effectively where they were, and would not be able to withdraw them for more effective use elsewhere.

184. A third consequence, rather more strategic than tactical, would be to prevent the Germans from exporting foodstuffs, industrial products, and loot generally from Italy, and from importing raw materials and coal for use in the North-Italian industrial areas.

185. By far the most important of the enemy's lines of communication into Italy, especially in view of the campaign being waged against his oil resources, were the railways. These, because of the mountainous nature of the terrain on the northern borders of Italy, were limited in number, and so their interdiction did not present a task which was beyond the capacity of the resources at the disposal of the Air C.-in-C.

186. The Commanding General, M.A.T.A.F., was responsible for the execution of the interdiction policy, and from January until the ground offensive began in April, he used by far the greater part of his effort on this task. Supplementary aid was provided by M.A.S.A.F., when weather or other considerations prevented the heavy bombers from being used to attack targets higher in priority in the strategic effort, and also to a limited extent by M.C.A.F.

*Interdiction of Railway Communications.*

187. There were eight main routes leading into Northern Italy from the rest of Europe. Of these, the two from France were no longer available to the enemy, while in March an economic agreement with the Swiss Government was concluded which vetoed the passage on the two lines through Switzerland of war material between Italy and the Reich.