

6. The period falls into two main parts. The first is from 16th March to 8th April, the time from my assumption of command to the beginning of the final ground offensive in Italy, and the second is from 9th April to 2nd May, in which the final Italian offensive took place.

7. There was one event, however, which was taking place during the whole of the period, and therefore cannot conveniently be dealt with in the arrangement of parts I have described; I refer to the offensive by Marshal Tito's Fourth Army in Yugoslavia. It began before the Allied offensive in Italy and continued a few days after the German surrender in Italy. Because of this, I have devoted an early part of the despatch entirely to this subject and this has enabled me also to describe, more fully than would otherwise have been possible, the special organisation of command of the Balkan Air Force, and the special problems with which it had to contend.

PART I.

CONDITIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE ON MARCH 16TH, 1945.

The Ground Situation.

8. The enemy ground forces in the Italian theatre consisted of the German 10th and 14th Armies comprising some twenty-five divisions, which were stretched along a line reaching roughly from Lake Comacchio on the Adriatic Coast through Vergato, South of Bologna, to Pietrasanta on the west coast. This was the line which had been finally stabilised after the Allied Offensive in the summer of 1944 had battered its way from Cassino up the Italian peninsula, and had only just failed to overflow into the Po Valley. The Fifth Army had been unable to reach Bologna before winter conditions had made operations in the mountains impossible, and the Eighth Army, when it reached the Po Valley on the East coast after long and hard fighting, found itself confronted by a series of formidably defended river lines which it was unable to pierce without sustaining very heavy casualties.

9. It did not prove possible to make any further progress during the winter. Both Allied Armies were very tired after a most exhausting campaign, while the enemy had managed to improve his supply position since he had been falling back on his dumps. Moreover, the Allied ground forces were weakened by the withdrawal of divisions to reinforce other theatres, with the consequence that a large number of anti-aircraft gunners had to be trained as infantry, and this required time.

10. It was decided at the beginning of January 1945 that the 15th Army Group would plan for an all-out offensive in the early Spring. The date of the attack would be at a time when good weather could be expected for air and armoured operations and when both armies could deploy their maximum strength against the enemy, having rested those divisions required for the assault and built up adequate reserves of supplies and a great superiority of tanks and guns.

11. To the Allies it was clear that the enemy would at all costs stand and fight where he stood. He was forced to adopt this attitude by the complete superiority of the Allies in the air*. He dared not retreat since air action had deprived him of practically all means of transporting fuel from Germany into Italy, and any considerable withdrawal would have meant the expenditure of almost all of his slender fuel reserves. In any event he could not afford to abandon without a fight territory whose possession would have enabled us to move our bomber bases so much nearer to Germany itself. Furthermore, any large scale movement would have been extremely hazardous, as he would have laid himself open to intensive and continuous air attack both by day and by night.

12. By the beginning of April the Allied armies were ready once again to resume the offensive, rested and re-equipped. The enemy on the other hand, constantly harassed by air attack throughout the Winter and Spring, had had but little rest, and only a trickle of new equipment had come to him, so that he was forced to rely mainly on such of his old material as the Allied Air Forces had left him intact.

13. It was, of course, obvious to the enemy that the Allies intended to launch a major offensive in the near future. The disposition of his forces suggested that he was awake to the possibility of amphibious operations at the head of the Adriatic, combined with a frontal attack. He had split his mobile reserve of two divisions accordingly to deal with either or both eventualities. He also showed his appreciation of the vulnerability of the Argenta-Ferrara axis, and of the area West of Bologna where the Allies were in a favourable position to carry out an outflanking thrust towards Modena.

14. The following table gives some figures to illustrate the comparative strengths of the Allied and German resources employed in the opening phases of the offensive:—

	<i>Infantry</i>	<i>Artillery</i>			<i>Tanks</i>	
		Hvy.	Med.	Fld.	Med.	Light
15TH ARMY GROUP	82,100	134	492	1,424	2,426	612
10TH AND 14TH GERMAN ARMIES ...	74,500	25	250	771	200	—

NOTE.—The above figures do not show the number of men manning the Artillery and the Tanks. Moreover, they do not include men and equipment not actually employed in a fighting rôle in the opening phases of the battle.

The American Fifth and British Eighth Armies comprised seventeen divisions and ten brigades of many nationalities—British, American, New Zealand, South African, Indian, Palestinian, Polish and Brazilian—while four Italian Gruppi also played an important part.

The Air Situation.

15. On March 16th the enemy in the Italian

theatre could put into the air at most 130 aircraft. The Allies could put 4,000. Such figures speak for themselves—the enemy was outnumbered in the air by approximately 30 to 1. Air superiority—which is nowadays the essential pre-requisite to victory on the ground—had been attained in North Africa and never again relinquished, for although enemy air

* See paras. 15–17 below.