

THE LUFTWAFFE IN SICILY

According to Karl Seppelin, the official German air correspondent for the principal Spanish Newspaper 'Arriba', the Luftwaffe had air superiority over Sicily at the time of the Allied invasion.

"The stabilisation of the military situation in Sicily", he wrote a few days ago, "is primarily due to increased air activity on the part of the Axis. Complete air superiority has been wrested from the enemy. The enemy is feeling the catastrophic effects of the Luftwaffe's continual attacks."

It is therefore interesting to study the facts now revealed by the Allied Headquarters in that theatre - to gain an idea of the sort of struggle which the Luftwaffe actually put up.

In the campaign, to date, the Axis has so far left behind 999 aircraft upon Sicilian airfields which have been captured by the Allies. In addition, over Sicily alone, the Axis has so far had 422 of its aircraft shot down by the Allies for a loss of 161 of their own. Over 1400 Axis aircraft lost in Sicily alone - since the Allied landing.

Between July 9 and 17, Spitfires, Kittyhawks and Warhawks flew nearly 6,000 sorties and lost only 30 - one half per cent. Most of these 30 were destroyed by Axis ground forces and not by fighters in combat.

In these 9 days the Italian and German air forces, together with all the resources of their ground defence, destroyed 91 Allied aircraft - and lost 208 of their own.

The considerable Axis Air Forces in and around Sicily had excellent airfields - far more than were available to the Allies, who had at first chiefly to rely upon Malta. Yet both German and Italian aircraft entered the battle in a half-hearted manner, particularly by day, and such opposition as they offered at first rapidly collapsed.

German and Italian fighter aircraft avoided combat as often as they accepted it. They were victims of an acute 'Spitfire psychosis'.

This is revealed by an analysis of Malta's fighter effort in the critical initial stages.

On July 10, when no Sicilian airfields were available to the Allies, the Allied fighters from Malta flew nearly 1,100 day sorties, in protection of the beach landings. Indeed, Malta's chief role in the initial stages was the protection of the Allied landing beaches.

So limited was Axis opposition, however, that the Allies were able rapidly to reduce their beach protection sorties and transfer the fighters, instead, to the harrying of the Axis armies in the field. Four days after the first landing, Allied beach patrols shrank to 451 sorties, and, by July 17, no beach patrols were required - since the beaches were no longer threatened with attack. Yet, in those important early days, the success or failure of the Allied landing hung in the balance and the whole invasion might easily have been frustrated had the Luftwaffe been able to attack the newly landed forces upon a sufficient scale.

Individual combats also reveal the lack of initiative of the Axis air forces.

On July 12, for example, a formation of Spitfires encountered a single Ju.52, guarded by a very strong escort of German and Italian fighters. The Spitfires shot down the transport in flames together with 6 of the escorting fighters, without loss.

On the following day a squadron met 12 unescorted Ju.87's near Gerbini. The British fighters shot down five of the Stukas and severely damaged the remaining seven without loss.

This proved to be the last day on which the enemy put up any real show of resistance. Thereafter, our fighters roamed the skies at will, almost completely unchallenged.

By the 15th, the skies were so cleansed of Axis aircraft that nearly 200 Spitfire sorties were flown during the day and not a single German or Italian aircraft was seen.

+++++