

AIR POWER IN SALERNO BRIDGEHEAD VICTORY

The victory of the Salerno bridgehead provides yet another striking example of the use of concentrated air power in close conjunction with ground forces to stem an enemy advance and to prepare the way for the Army to push forward.

For a period of 72 hours the whole might of both the North West African Strategic and Tactical Air Forces was hurled at the German troop positions and gun posts which commanded the Salerno beaches from the hills overlooking them and at vital road points just behind. This use of concentrated air bombardment turned the tide of battle, eased a serious situation and enabled the British and American troops to resume the offensive.

From the time of the landing, early on Sept. 9, the Tactical Air Force had been attacking these battle area targets while our strategic bombers were pounding road and rail communications farther afield.

But the British and American land forces were not able to make headway, they remained pinned to a coastal strip four miles or less in width and some 20 miles long.

It was on September 14 that the Strategic Air Force narrowed the arc of their bomber circle and ringed the Salerno bridgehead itself with medium and heavy bombs in the most concentrated attack made in any one region in one day during the operations in the North African theatre. Nearly 600 sorties were flown by the heavy and medium bombers along, in addition to the U.S.A.A.F. and bombing and strafing by the Tactical Air Force in the same area. Fifteen separate formations went over during the day, an average of at least one an hour during daylight, and dropped thousands of bombs ranging from 1,000 lbs to 500 lbs in weight. The Strategic Air Force attack, in which B.17, B.26, and B25 aircraft took part, was concentrated on roads, railways, troop concentrations and gun positions inland from Salerno. In the Eboli area the Fortresses plastered a narrow strip of road directly in front of our troops, dropping tons of bombs and covering the entire roadway and dispersal areas alongside it. A later wave of Fortresses hit heavy traffic and dispersed trucks and tanks in the same area. The road was carpeted with bombs.

Auletta and Avellino, important road junctions a few miles farther inland, also received a battering, and the Tactical Air Force, in addition to providing fighter cover over the beaches, added their share of bombs to the nearby communications.

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It is a noteworthy point that hardly any enemy opposition was met on these devastating raids and not one of our aircraft was lost during the day. Only one formation of enemy aircraft was encountered by Mitchells, which attacked gun positions and railway yards near Eboli. About ten or twelve enemy fighters intercepted, and three of them were shot down by the bombers without loss.

Incidentally, this absence of the Luftwaffe, which was even commented on by captured German soldiers, was largely due to the earlier plastering of enemy airfields with high explosives, which destroyed the runways and landing areas, and fragmentation bombs which slashed up enemy aircraft.

The Salerno area was again bombed during the night, this time by Royal Air Force Wellingtons, so that the enemy had no chance to make repairs or bring up reinforcements and supplies during darkness, nor did his soldiers get any rest. Prisoners taken later were in an exhausted condition and told their captors that the continual bombing was more than flesh and blood could stand.

By half-past nine in the morning the first wave of Strategic Force bombers had taken over the task again and were dropping their first loads on the same targets as before. Fortresses, Marauders and Mitchells again took part, and it was as late as ten minutes to eight when the last Fortress dropped its bombs in the evening. American Invaders of the Tactical Force started the day even earlier, for they were over the target as dawn broke.

During the day the Tactical Air Force flew more than 1,000 sorties, even Kitty bombers and Lightnings joining in.

Two days and the intervening night of this concentrated blitz was enough. The next day's army communique announced that our troops had taken the offensive and were pushing forward, so the Strategic Air Force once more widened its arc of destruction, returning to its normal role.

There have been occasions in the past when an overwhelming bomber force thrown into battle has turned the scales but never in such a large and concentrated way. When Rommel turned on the American forces at the Kasserine Pass in February and started to push them back, threatening to break through the Pass and fan out to the rear of our central sector, air power played a great part in restoring the situation, and 'tank busting' Hurricanes, making a sudden appearance in southern Tunisia the same month saved a small Fighting French unit from almost certain destruction. When Montgomery delivered his famous left hook at El Hama the way was cleared by the concentrated bombing of the Desert Air Force.

The most important occasion before this latest one at Salerno was when the Tactical Air Force flew 1,500 sorties before lunch on May 6th, blasting a strip measuring four miles by 1,000 yards at Marsicault to enable the Allies to break through to their final clean-up of Tunisia.

Allied ground and air forces are now so co-ordinated in this theatre that they are used by the supreme commander as though they were his right and left fist.