

Mediterranean Campaign

The Role of the NINTH
U.S. ARMY AIR FORCE
in the Allied Drive across
the Mediterranean

Swift Victories

NORTHWARD across the Mediterranean pointed the Allied path toward victory. Modern three-dimensional war was gloriously giving the lie to ancient history's lessons against Mediterranean northbound invasion. Precept had not reckoned with air power.

The Ninth Air Force moved into the island-conquering, pre-invasion phase without rest from Tunisia. Coordinating with the North African air, land and sea forces, the Ninth shared heavily in the actions which brought the fall of Pantelleria the impregnable, and in rapid succession, Lampedusa and Linosa.

The start of the second campaign in mid-May lent impetus to the era of swift victories which began with the fall of Tunisia and built up to the capture of Sicily on August 18.

Italy was nearing the brink of internal collapse. Heavy bombers of the Ninth fed this strife with ceaseless hammering of Sicily and the Italian mainland.

The phrases, "more than fifty Liberators" and "a quarter million pounds of bombs," became standard operational language in the latter part of May and June as the air war progressed toward the epic attack on Rome with its vast repercussions.

Heavy bombers centred most of their earlier attacks of the campaign on Reggio de Calabria and Messina, ferry links between Sicily and mainland which face each other across the narrow Messina Straits. The oft-pounded waterway had become "Bomb Alley" to the airmen. Mitchell mediums and bomb-carrying fighters were directed toward Pantelleria after Tunisia—adding to that heaviest focus of air power ever turned on an island stronghold.

Fighters of the Ninth during May flew 2,182 sorties on 162 missions. This was during a period when many American fighter pilots with hundreds of operational hours accumulated in the long desert drive were being returned to America to teach or to head new units being trained for war.

During May operations over the sea seven Axis ships were sunk, twelve others listed as probably sunk and thirty damaged, an impressive record for a secondary duty of land-based aircraft.

May was not without its stories of heroism. There was the story of the nervy bombardier, Lieut. Robert Austin, who hung from the cat-walk in flight to deaden a jammed and rapidly fusing thousand pound bomb which was within minutes of blowing a Liberator and its crew to bits.

Nearing the target in Southern Italy, the bomber ran into a covey of enemy fightercraft. The pilot ordered the bombardier to salvo his bombs and immediately started evasive action. Back in the bomb bay, the assistant engineer saw that two of the thousand pounders were hung up and that one had jammed the rack. With wind rushing through the open bomb bay doors a tail fuse started spinning. The information was passed over the interphone from engineer to pilot and from pilot to bombardier and the pilot immediately levelled out of evasive action for fear that the slightest jar would set off the bomb. Crawling across the narrow cat-walk 23,000 feet above enemy territory with both bomb-bay doors banging in the wind Austin reached the bombs. Aided by two other crew members he leaned far over the opening and worked feverishly against time and destruction. In a matter of seconds the difficult task of defusing the bomb was completed. Luckily the pursuits had abandoned the fray during this operation and the bomber returned safely to base. From May operations as a whole, however, six of our aircraft were lost.

MEMORIAL DAY

Missing the familiar home-town parades and bands, Americans in Cairo nevertheless paid homage to May 30, Memorial day.

Archbishop Francis J. Spellman, special envoy of President Roosevelt, celebrated a Memorial Day Mass at St. Joseph's Church. Diplomatic officials and high ranking military officers of other United Nations and of neutral countries represented in Egypt attended and gave to the hallowed American day of remembrance an international flavor.

In a brief but formal address the Archbishop said :

“ We Americans thank you who are not our countrymen who have come to this Church this morning to participate with us in prayerful tribute to our beloved dead. We assure you that, as we have prayed for those “ who fought the good fight ” as saviours of our own nation, we have also remembered the honored dead of your peoples, men who gave their lives either in defense of your countries or in the cause of justice and right.

“ America has many treasures both material and spiritual. In the bosom of her earth are mineral treasures. From her mountains, mines and prairies, from her lakes, rivers and oceans have come the sources of her agricultural, material and industrial greatness.

“ From the peoples of all colors, regions and races, freedom-loving and freedom-giving, from her Constitution and the Bill of Rights, from her democratic form of government with guarantees for individuals and minorities, from God-serving, neighbor-helping men and women have come her spiritual treasures.

“ Thus today, while far away from our homeland, we are, nevertheless, spiritually united to our country not only in citizenship, in brotherhood and in service but also in grateful reverence to those whose premature deaths speak with deathless eloquence of their contribution and of ours not only to the cause of war but to the cause of peace.

“ Let our thoughts, our words and our prayers be to the end that our honored dead shall not have died in vain, that our country shall be ever worthy, both of her material and spiritual treasures.”

The arithmetic of war claimed a department all of its own in the air force June 3, with the creation of the 26th Statistical Control Unit. Statistical Control had the job of making figures talk sensibly. It collected factual data from all air force units and pieced it together for composite pictures and percentages. This information had many uses in many places. It was most effective in aiding staff sections in anticipating the needs of war and thereby reducing the time lag between demand and supply. This applied to personnel as well as material.

Statistical Control perpetually held a gauge on the recent past to obtain a measure for plans of the immediate future. It knew, for example, the life expectancy of a Liberator bomber under a given set of circumstances. Their findings made it possible to project operations into the future with a rare degree of accuracy.

Lt. Col. Edward G. Hamel was taken from the G-3 section of the air force to organize and head the new unit. They immediately moved into a wing of the headquarters building at 24 Shari del Nabatat and covered the walls with maps, charts and tabulations and began to function in accordance with the wishes of Washington.

Operational reports of early June were studded with accounts of the relentless pounding of the island fortress of Pantelleria which collapsed early on the morning of June 11. The surrender followed 24 hours of continuous bombing by hundreds of Allied planes of all types. So tight was the air and naval blockade that not one member of the garrison escaped to Italy after the blitz began.

The fall of Lampedusa and Linosa followed on the 12 and 13 and were immediately occupied by ground forces. The Allies were at the gates of the fortress of Europe.

Among the air battles leading to the capture of Pantelleria a striking success was that of the "Mosquito" fighter squadron. On June 10 they shot down eleven Messerschmitts and four Italian Macchis without loss of a single one of its own pilots. Ten of the Messerschmitts were encountered just north of Pantelleria, escorting a four-engined rescue seaplane. The unarmed seaplane was unmolested, but all of the escorting fighters were destroyed. The other three victories resulted from a battle which followed this by a few minutes when the enemy planes flew into the Pantelleria "umbrella."

This achievement followed that of the "Flying Skull" squadron of the same group which destroyed nine of the enemy's Messerschmitts and Macchis in the four days ending June 10.

PARATROOPERS APPEAR

Enemy parachutists dropped out of the skies over the Ninth Bomber Command base on the morning of June 14, their mission being the destruction of planes. First news of their appearance came from an Arab who reported to Bomber Command that two had already been slain by natives. During the next two days, 39 prisoners were rounded up, none of whom showed any stomach for the fight.

The commanding officer among those captured disclosed that the Benghazi landing was only part of an ambitious venture involving eleven plane loads of parachutist-saboteurs with targets extending from Benghazi to Algiers.

