

FEBRUARY 1944 TO JUNE 1944

A new period began early in 1944 at a time when the air forces' capabilities were very much increased by the appearance of the P-51 long-range fighter, the introduction of blind bombing techniques, and the rapid build-up of both the RAF and the Eighth AF to over 1,000 heavy bombers and of the 15th Air Force to almost 600. The stage was set for an all-out assault on the German aircraft industry, but the offensive was delayed for two months by bad weather and urgent commitments against flying-bomb sites. The operation "Argument" was only delivered at the end of February. In the week of February 20-25 approximately 4,000 tons of bombs were dropped on aircraft targets, accounting for 90 percent of the production at that time. The offensive was continued during the subsequent months, reaching a peak in April when 7,758 tons were dropped on aircraft production centers. During this period there was some shift to aero-engines, but airframe plants remained the first priority because the previous damage to these plants was thought to have created a surplus in the other components.

A reexamination of target potentialities by the U.S. Strategic Air Forces led to the recommendation on March 5 that oil should henceforth be given top priority, since by that time the reduction of this target was fully within the air forces' capabilities. At the same time, the newly created Allied Expeditionary Air Force presented a plan in support of the coming invasion, involving the use of the entire British-based air forces in an all-out attack on the French railway system for a period of about six weeks. On March 25 General Eisenhower decided in favor of the plan to attack French and Belgian marshaling yards in addition to the interdiction of railway lines. Permission was granted to bomb oil targets for two days in May, but the real attack on oil was postponed until after the invasion.

JULY 1944 TO APRIL 1945

The full scale offensive started in July. The operations of the three major air forces were for the first time fully coordinated, with the RAF as a full scale partner in precision attacks both by night and day. The great bulk of the offensive was concentrated on oil and transportation, with munitions as a secondary target.

In June the impending capture of Ploesti by the Russian armies strengthened the case for an all-out attack on the synthetic

oil industry, henceforth Germany's sole source of oil. On June 8, two days after D-day, a new directive stated that the "primary strategic aim of the United States Strategic Air Forces is now to deny oil to enemy armed forces." After preliminary attacks on May 12 and 28, the full scale attack started at the end of June and continued until March 1945. Over 160,000 tons were dropped during this period on synthetic plants, refineries, and benzol plants and a further 23,500 tons on oil storage depots. There were 555 separate attacks on 135 different targets, in the course of which every synthetic plant and major refinery known to be in operation was successfully attacked. During the summer most of the attacks were made mostly non-visually and the RAF applied the new precision techniques in night bombing in a notable series of raids in January.

In July the requirements of the ground forces called for an attack on the tank and motor vehicle industries. Attacks on the major producers were carried on until November when a directive from SHAEF requested the discontinuance of these attacks in order to free resources for a more concentrated attack on transportation, which then assumed second priority after oil. The attacks against tanks, motor vehicles, and ordnance were not resumed until February.

THE TRANSPORTATION ATTACK

Throughout the war, a considerable tonnage of bombs was dropped on transportation targets both by the RAF and the U.S. Strategic Air Force. These early attacks, however, were not systemic, and almost always when transportation targets were attacked, it was because weather conditions made it impossible to attack other targets, or because the primary target could not be found. It was fully realized that transportation was a strategic target system with great potentialities, but the task was considered too large and the time too short for engaging in an operation that promised only a distant return. The systemic use of the strategic bomber force against the railway system started in the months before D-day as a tactical operation in direct support of the ground forces. It continued as a tactical operation during the months after D-day, but with a gradual shift of emphasis towards the strategic aspects of the campaign.

The use of the strategic bomber force in mass attacks against marshaling yards as a means of denying military traffic to the enemy was the subject of acute controversy from the beginning of the air war. It was

argued that purely military traffic was only a small proportion of the total traffic, and that even if the attacks on marshaling yards succeeded in reducing the railway system's carrying capacity by two-thirds or three-quarters; this would cut only into non-military traffic and leave essential military communications unhindered. It was also argued that the interdiction of military traffic could be accomplished much more easily and effectively by tactical bombers disrupting railway lines and destroying bridges. The military leadership insisted, however, on a combined plan both for attacking yards and for interdicting railway lines, putting more emphasis as time went on, on the economic effects of the operations.

The attack on transportation shows seven distinct phases. (1) During the months of August-October 1944, the attacks though fairly heavy, were largely tactical in character and concentrated on the yards through which the bulk of the military traffic was supposed to go (Saarbrücken, Karlsruhe, later Frankfurt, Ludwigshafen, Mannheim, the Cologne area, etc.). (2) In November and December when transportation obtained second strategic priority after oil, a detailed plan of paralyzing the railway system of western Germany was worked out and was being carried into effect. This plan divided the belt between the Rhine and Longitude 10E into zones, a systemic attack to be made on each zone according to priorities established on the basis of military requirements. (3) During the period of the Rundstedt counter-offensive the carrying out of the strategic plan was interrupted and the bomber forces concentrated on paralyzing the Cologne-Coblenz-Trier area for tactical purposes. (4) During February 1945 the strategic operations were resumed but concentrated on a smaller area than was envisaged in the November plan. (5) At the end of February, in the operation "Clarion," 8,000-9,000 planes from British and Continental bases attempted to paralyze the whole of Germany's railway system. (6) In the next phase the Ruhr interdiction plan succeeded in isolating the Ruhr from the rest of Germany by March 24, when the Allied offensive across the Rhine had started. (7) In the final phase in April 1945, the air forces reverted to a general attack on central Germany with the object of cutting reinforcements and supplies both to the eastern and western fronts, and of preventing the enemy from moving forces into the Nation Redoubt area.

This in brief is the story of the air offensive. How successful it was in