

THE FINAL PHASE

The division of Germany accomplished by the junction with the Russians at Torgau produced immediate and far-reaching consequences. The enemy's difficulties of command which followed the loss of Army Group B in the Ruhr now reached their climax, and all chance of restoring effective unity to the armies facing the western Allies irrevocably disappeared. The enemy found himself split into virtually independent commands in the north and south, with no means of coordinating the operations in the two zones. Each had to fight its own battle as best it could.

The moral effect of this situation was immense, and a weakening of the resistance previously offered in both north and south was at once evident. During the first 3 weeks of April over a million prisoners were taken by our armies, and losses sustained at such a rate inevitably brought on collapse in every sector. The Russians, moreover, were now fighting their way into Berlin, and the government, already partly evacuated, was rendered powerless.

At the same time, the paralysis of the German administrative system as a whole, which had set in as a result of Allied air action and since spread rapidly as the 12th Army Group advanced eastward, gripped the entire country. The autocratic nature of the system was such that, with its mainspring disabled in Berlin, the parts throughout the rest of Germany automatically ceased to function. Communications finally broke down, the postal services came to a standstill, and the complete isolation from his home in which the German soldier now found himself sapped his last powers of resistance. With his world collapsing about him, he lost all heart in the fight. The horror pictures which the Nazis had painted with such lurid colors in their anti-Bolshevik propaganda began to have an effect very different from that envisaged by their originators. Instead of being steeled to a last superhuman effort, the soldier, confused and disillusioned by the helplessness of the units to which he had once been proud to belong, became concerned solely with his individual desire to be with his family in whatever fate might be overtaking them.

Prior to the Allied advance across central Germany, evidence had been received that the government was preparing to evacuate Berlin and move southward, ultimately perhaps to Berchtesgaden in the national Redoubt. Some of the departments had already left the city,

but the main body now found that, with the Allied link-up on the Elbe, it was too late. An impassable barrier had been drawn across the country, and the way to the Redoubt was cut off. In consequence, Hitler and his intimate henchmen stayed on in Berlin.

Although the Redoubt was not, therefore, to be the last seat of the Nazi government, the possibility remained that it would still be the scene of a desperate stand by the fanatical elements of the armies south of the dividing line, together with those which might retreat northward out of Italy. These armies, totaling about 100 nominal divisions, included the bulk of the remaining German armored and SS formations, and up to 30 panzer divisions might conceivably be concentrated behind the mountain barriers. In addition, most of the surviving German jet fighter plane strength was located in the south. The conquest of the Redoubt area thus remained as an important objective of the Allies, despite the collapse of the rest of Germany. In the event of determined resistance, its reduction would constitute a formidable problem, and speed of movement was therefore essential to forestall the enemy's retiring into the area in time to fortify it against our attacks.

Extending some 240 miles in length and 80 miles in depth, the Redoubt comprised the western half of Austria, with small portions of Germany to the north and Italy to the south. It was bounded on the north by the Bavarian Plains, on the south by the Dolomites and Carnic Alps, on the west by the Swiss frontier and the Rhine Valley, and on the east by the Lageneurt Basin and the eastern extremity of the Niedere Tauern. Within it lay Berchtesgaden and Hitler's "Eagle's Nest."

The whole area was extremely mountainous and thus unsuitable for large-scale airborne operations, while the roads into it followed narrow valleys which could easily be held by determined defenders. The snows and danger of avalanches limited the possibility of any military operations to the summer months between May and October. Although there was no evidence of any completed system of defenses along the natural ramparts, some progress appeared to have been made in this respect along the northern flank. Air reconnaissance also revealed underground constructional activity. It was believed that some subterranean factories had been established in the area, but if any considerable numbers of troops were to be maintained there they would have to rely

for their supplies, both of food and ammunition, upon previously accumulated stocks.

North of the dividing line in central Germany some 50 enemy divisions were likely to remain to be mopped up, and of these the only formidable elements were those of the First Parachute Army. Although it was not conceivable that resistance could long be maintained in the North German Plain, it was possible that some withdrawal might be attempted into Denmark and Norway with a view to make a last stand in those countries, while "Fortress Holland" would also continue to hold out behind the water barriers. The prevention of such a withdrawal, by means of a rapid Allied advance to the Baltic, thus became the primary objective of our operations in the northern sector.

For the subsequent reduction of Norway, in the event that the German garrison there continued to hold after its isolation had been effected, a task force was assembled in Scotland under the command of Lieut. Gen. Sir Andrew Thorne.

On the central German Front, although elements pushed forward, as described, to meet the Russians at Torgau, it was necessary to halt the main Allied forces on the lines of the Elbe and Mulde Rivers and the Erzgebirge. For this decision logistical factors were mainly responsible, as well as the aim of concentrating forces now on the north and south flanks. The rapidity of our advance and the large scale upon which the operation was conducted had strained our supply organization to an unprecedented degree, and it could not, at the moment, be further stretched.

As in the dash across France in 1944, it was possible now to maintain the momentum of the armored columns in their swift advances only by the expedient of airborne supply. In executing this task, the carrier planes accomplished remarkable feats, and, invaluable as they had proved throughout the campaign in Northwest Europe, the "flying boxcars" were never more essential than in these concluding stages of the war. Landing on improvised airfields close to the front line and sometimes within pockets temporarily surrounded by the enemy, 1,500 IX Troop Carrier Command C-47's, supplemented by heavy bombers stripped for the purpose, flew over 20,000 sorties during April to carry nearly 60,000 tons of freight (including 10,255,509 gallons of gasoline) to the forward elements of the ground forces. Making their outward flights from French bases in the mornings, the planes returned in the

afternoons bearing thousands of evacuated casualties and Allied prisoners of war who had been liberated during the advances. Without such assistance it would have been impossible for the armored divisions to achieve the sweeping successes which attended their operations.

While our forces in the center were halted on the Mulde and Elbe Rivers, we turned to the completion of operations in the north and south, concentrating upon two principal objectives of further subdividing the enemy's remaining armies and of neutralizing the areas already described where he might the most effectively make his last stands.

Accordingly, in the northern sector the 21 Army Group with the U. S. XVIII Airborne Corps under command, was directed to fulfill the tasks upon which it was at present engaged west of the Elbe, to seize crossings over that river in the British Second Army zone, secure Hamburg, and advance with the utmost speed on the general area of Kiel-Lübeck. This done, Field Marshal Montgomery was to be prepared to conduct operations northward to liberate Denmark, using, if necessary, an airborne assault to force the Kiel Canal. Meanwhile operations were to continue to achieve the clearing of the coastal belt, and to reduce the enemy naval bases and fortifications which threatened the approaches to Hamburg. The Allied naval and air forces were to assist in these operations, but the nature of the defenses made it possible that their reduction might prove lengthy and difficult, in which case the availability to the Allies of the German ports might be delayed. The question of the subsequent opening of either Hamburg or Bremen, or both, was also dependent upon the condition in which we should find their port installations, but first priority was to be accorded to Hamburg. On the eastern flank of the 21 Army Group, operations toward Berlin would have to await the developments of the situation following the accomplishment of the more important tasks outlined above.

In view of the great importance of the opening up of the port of Bremen, Bomber Command carried out a heavy attack on Heligoland on 18 April in order to neutralize its defenses and thus facilitate a commando landing if such an operation became necessary. At the same time that the 21 Army Group concentrated on its principal thrust to Lübeck, a similar advance was to be made in the southern zone down the Danube Valley toward Linz with the object of effecting a further junction with the Russians. The static situation in the center now permitted the use of the Third Army for this purpose, while the 6th

Army Group devoted the whole of its attention to the problem of the Redoubt farther south and west.

Even when the Danube offensive had subdivided the enemy's forces in the south, it might still be possible for the Redoubt to hold out, and the Third Army was therefore instructed, in addition to its principal thrust, to seize Salzburg, while the Seventh Army, under the 6th Army Group, was to advance along the axis Würzburg-Munich, penetrate the mountains, and subsequently to occupy the fortress area. We made available to General Devers the use of the U. S. 13th Airborne Division to assist in these operations if it should prove necessary. Farther west, the French Army was to mop up the Black Forest region and clear along the Swiss frontier, and subsequently to enter Austria if the situation required.

In the execution of the 21 Army Group operations in the north, the resistance encountered by the British Second Army in its attacks toward Bremen and Hamburg was persistent. Following the fall of Bremen on 26 April, however, the situation changed. The main Allied effort was now transferred to the sector of 8 Corps, which launched an attack across the Elbe at Lauenburg on 29 April. Weak opposition only was offered — chiefly by local defense battalions and labor services — and across the river the bridgehead was quickly enlarged. Simultaneously the U. S. XVIII Airborne Corps, now fighting in a ground role, effected a crossing to the south and was attached to the Second Army to provide flank protection for further advances. On 1 May, the 11 Armoured Division broke out of the British 8 Corps bridgehead to dash across Schleswig-Holstein to the Baltic and entered Lübeck on the afternoon of 2 May, thereby sealing off the enemy in Denmark. On the same day, the British 6 Airborne Division, under XVIII Corps, reached Wismar, farther east along the coast, while inland Schwerin was attained.

While the hold thus gained on the neck of the Danish Peninsula was being consolidated, other forces crossed the Elbe and turned down its right bank toward Hamburg, which surrendered and was occupied by the 7 Armoured Division on 3 May. At the same time, the 30 Corps completed clearance of the area between the Elbe and the Weser.

On 3 May, the U. S. XVIII Airborne Corps was in contact with the Russians along the line Wismar-Schweriner Lake-Grabow. While Berlin was in flames, a new offensive by the Red Army during the last week of April had taken Stettin and swept rapidly westward

across Mecklenburg, driving disorganized remnants of German armies before it. Now, with the junction of the Allied fronts, all resistance in northern Germany ceased.

By the end of April the enemy had finally abandoned all attempts to stem the Allied advances from east and west simultaneously. He turned his back upon the western Allies to concentrate all his remaining forces in a last desperate effort to hold back the Russians, but it was too late. As his armies were forced farther and farther back, the troops gave themselves up in thousands to the Anglo-American armies in their rear. While the Second Army was thrusting unopposed to the Baltic, the American units standing on the Elbe were receiving wholesale surrenders from the enemy retreating westward across the river and into their arms. One corps alone took 300,000 prisoners in the course of a single day.

In northeast Holland and along the coastal belt eastward, the Canadian Army continued its operations to clear the area, taking Oldenburg on 2 May, after overcoming stiff resistance, and driving on beyond. In western Holland, however, no further ground advances were made across the flood barriers behind which the German Twenty-fifth Army lay entrenched.

The situation confronting us in western Holland was one of peculiar difficulty. Civilian conditions there had deteriorated steadily for some months, and after the advances of our armies to the east had isolated the area from Germany, the position of the population became desperate. It was imperative, therefore, that steps should be taken by the Allies to relieve the growing distress before wholesale starvation took place. The strength of the German defenses was such, however, that to mount an operation on a sufficiently large scale to insure success would have necessitated a serious weakening of the main armies in Germany just at the time when it was all-important that we should press home the attacks which were bringing about the final collapse of the enemy there. Moreover, even had we been able to launch an offensive against western Holland at this moment, the enemy would have opened the dykes to flood the whole country, ruining its fertility for many years to come, and bringing further miseries to its people.

We warned General Blaskowitz, the German commander, that the opening of the dykes would constitute an indelible blot upon his military honor and that of the German Army, and pointed out to him that the retention of Holland could not impede the coming collapse of Germany before our advances.

Meanwhile, Seyss-Inquart, the Nazi Commissioner for Holland, offered a solution by proposing a truce. If the Allied forces were to continue to stand on the Grebbe Line as at present, no further flooding would take place and the Germans would cease all repressive measures against the Dutch, at the same time cooperating in the introduction of relief supplies. The Combined Chiefs of Staff having accorded me a free hand in the matter, my Chief of Staff met Seyss-Inquart on 30 April, a Russian representative being present and concurring in the action taken on behalf of his government. Methods of introducing food by land, sea, and air routes were agreed upon, and the movement of the supplies which the Allies had held ready commenced forthwith; the free dropping of food had indeed already begun.

Seyss-Inquart was impressed by the arguments put forward by the Allies that, recognizing the hopelessness of the position, the German garrison should surrender at once instead of waiting for the inevitable; but that, he said, was a decision for the military commander, over whom he had no control. Blaskowitz would not consider capitulation so long as any form of resistance continued in Germany.

With the relief of the Dutch thus assured, no useful purpose could be served by attempting inroads into "Fortress Holland" at this time when the final collapse of all German resistance was imminent. The Canadians accordingly held fast on the Grebbe Line until the enemy garrison surrendered with the remainder of the forces in northern Germany.

In the south, the thrust of the Third Army down the Danube Valley began on 22 April and made rapid progress against a tottering enemy. Although the defenders held out at Regensburg until 26 April, XX Corps established bridgeheads across the Danube east and west of the city on the 25th, and then advanced southeast down the right bank while XII Corps did likewise north of the river. By 2 May, the north bank had been cleared of the enemy as far as Passau, and the 11th Armored Division shot ahead to receive the surrender of Linz on 5 May. With this lengthening of the XII Corps line, the Third Army took command of V Corps, from the First Army, for operations into Czechoslovakia on its northern flank. By an attack eastward across the frontier, Pilsen was captured on 6 May.

These operations were carried out in full coordination with the Russians approaching from the east. The American troops advanced to the line Budejovice-Pilsen-Karlsbad, but were there halted while the Red Army cleared

the east and west banks of the Moldau River and occupied Prague. South of Czechoslovakia, the agreed provisional line of junction ran down the Budejovice-Linz railroad and thence along the valley of the Enns, where contact was effected in due course.

South of the Danube, XX Corps crossed the Isar River on 29 April, at the same time clearing the north bank to the Danube confluence. On 1 May the corps reached the Inn River at Braunau and proceeded to close that river in its sector. On its right flank, III Corps crossed the Danube in the Ingolstadt area on 26 April, and, advancing southeast, established bridgeheads over the Isar on the 28th, in conformity with the Seventh Army offensive farther west. On 2 May, III Corps reached the Inn at Wasserburg, securing the Mühldorf bridges intact, after which the sector was taken over by the Seventh Army.

The final thrust by the Seventh Army also began on 22 April, following the fall of Nürnberg two days earlier. On the right flank, XV Corps moved down the Danube and then struck south to Munich, which was captured, in the face of some opposition, on 30 April. The enemy attempted to move an SS Panzer Division to block the Allied advance along the Alpine foothills, but was powerless to check our progress. On 4 May, the 3d Division of XV Corps cleared Berchtesgaden, while other troops occupied Salzburg, and the entire enemy sector between there and Linz fell apart.

Meanwhile XXI and VI Corps had crossed the Danube in the Dillingen area on 22 April, and at Donauwörth 2 days later. Pockets of the enemy created south of the river by the converging advances were eliminated, and Augsburg was cleared by XXI Corps on the 28th. Farther west, the Ulm area was reached by VI Corps, which, after a pause occasioned by the moves of the flanking French units, drove on toward the Alpine foothills. The infantry passed through the armor to penetrate the mountains, where the terrain served to slow progress more than did the opposition of the enemy. On 3 May, Innsbruck was taken, and the 103d Division of VI Corps pushed on to the Brenner Pass.

Here, at Vipiteno on the Italian side of the border, a junction was effected during the morning of 4 May with the 88th Division of the U. S. Fifth Army which, after the defeat of the enemy forces in Italy, had struck into the Alps from the south. The danger of an enemy last stand in the Redoubt was finally eliminated, and on the following day the enemy Nineteenth Army capitulated, followed

by the whole of Army Group G on 6 May. Among the prisoners taken in the course of the Alpine campaign was the most formidable of my former antagonists, the now retired Field Marshal von Rundstedt.

While the Seventh Army was smashing its way into the Redoubt, the French First Army was completing the destruction of the enemy farther west. Following the collapse of the German resistance in the Black Forest sector, the French broke through with great speed. On 22 April, French I Corps thrust to the east of the Black Forest to reach Lake Constance, and the corridor was widened on the next day. Then, turning northeast, an advance was made to Ulm, where contact was made with the Seventh Army forces on 24 April. This action created three pockets of the enemy: one in the southern Black Forest, one in the Stuttgart area, and one north of Sigmaringen. Meanwhile another French force drove up the right bank of the Rhine to the Swiss frontier at Basel and then east to complete the process of encirclement. By 26 April, the Allies were along the Swiss border from Basel to Lake Constance. Stuttgart itself had been cleared on 21 April, and by the 27th organized resistance had ceased in all the pockets despite the strong opposition offered in some places, aided by difficult terrain.

After being relieved by the Seventh Army in the Ulm sector, the French armor now drove along the northern shore of Lake Constance and turned south across the Austrian border on 30 April. Feldkirch was captured on 4 May, and the advance was continued up the Ill and Kloster Valleys to penetrate the western end of the Redoubt and to make contact with the Seventh Army there as the enemy capitulated.

Apart from the main activities of the French First Army, operations were also carried out at this time by French forces under the control of 6th Army Group on the Franco-Italian border and against the German pocket which had continued to hold out at the mouth of the Gironde. Extensive air operations supported the latter offensive. The penetrations over the Alps into northwest Italy were executed as a diversionary measure to assist the 15th Army Group in its breakthrough across the plain of Lombardy. As such, they fulfilled all that was expected of them. Operations against the Gironde enclave were launched on 14 April, after repeated postponements since October 1944 necessitated by the demands of the more important battles elsewhere. Long isolated, and now demoralized by the Allied successes on the main fronts, the defenders were incapable of any extended resistance. Fighting

ceased in the Royan sector north of the river on 18 April and 3 days later the Pointe de Grave on the south bank fell. The final elimination of the enemy was achieved with the reduction of the Island of Oléron on 1 May. Farther north the St-Nazaire-Lorient "fortress" held out until the final surrender of all the German armies.

In these concluding stages of the war, the Allied air forces continued to afford the invaluable support which had been such a vital factor in insuring our successes throughout the entire campaign. As the Eastern and Western Fronts closed together, however, the opportunities for employment of the strategic bomber forces grew more and more limited, former strategic targets having now become tactical ones. The chief occupation of Bomber Command and the Eighth Air Force by the beginning of May consequently consisted of flying food supplies to the Dutch civilian population and of evacuating casualties and liberated Allied prisoners.

The tactical air forces' work in close support of the advancing armies in the north and south went on, but their operations also were restricted by the danger of hitting advanced Russian elements and the large bodies of prisoners who, having broken loose from their camps, were streaming westward along the roads. The last major offensive by the tactical planes was in the south, where attacks were concentrated ahead of the Third Army advance down the Danube Valley, destroying the enemy's remaining dumps of fuel and other supplies in that area, and cutting the few communications still available for their distribution.

Of enemy offensive activity in the air there was no sign. As the area left to the Germans decreased, the congestion of planes on the remaining airfields grew worse, and the number of aircraft destroyed on the ground mounted in proportion. The demoralization of the German Air Force personnel was too far developed for any suicidal effort to be made with the jet aircraft squadrons left in Austria and Czechoslovakia, and by the beginning of May practically the only flights undertaken were for the purpose of desertion.

The end of the German Navy was even more unspectacular. Having put to sea only on rare occasions throughout the war, then invariably to be hounded to their destruction or driven crippled back to their bases where the Allied air forces repeatedly undid any repair work attempted, the heavy units lay helpless in the northern ports as these fell into the hands of the advancing armies. Only three of the larger ships were in anything approaching a

condition for effective action when the last naval bases surrendered. The coastal craft had ceased to operate during April, and it was left to the submarine forces — the only truly successful naval weapon of which the enemy had enjoyed the use — to carry on the fight to the end.

By 5 May the principal objectives of the Allies had been achieved in every sector, and the war in Europe was virtually at an end. Nowhere on the Continent was there still in existence a German army capable of continuing to fight.

To the east, the armies under my command were joining hands with their Russian allies from the Baltic to the Alps. To the south, they had linked with their comrades in Italy, where already the enemy had made formal surrender. Of the Nazi "fortresses," the national Redoubt had been penetrated while its intended garrison lay dispersed and broken outside its walls; Norway was isolated and doomed; Dunkirk, the Brittany ports, and the Channel Islands were helpless; and Holland and Denmark had just capitulated.

The German war machine which had sought to dominate the world lay overwhelmed and crushed to a degree never before experienced in the history of modern armies. The moment had come for Germany to make her final acknowledgment of defeat.