

Talk by Air Vice Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham to assembled British and American general and senior officers. Commander in Chief, Middle East, Commander in Chief, Home Forces, and Chief of Staff to General Eisenhower were present.

Tripoli, Libya

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1. On page 2 of his Notes on High Command in War and in the remarks he has just made, the Army Commander has stated more perfectly than I can hope to do the present position of Army-Air development in this operational area. But I should like to amplify what he has said because I attach such great importance to proper doctrine. Unless we do keep our doctrine right there will be continual trouble.

2. The doctrine that we have evolved by trial in war over a period of many months could, I think, be stated in its simplest form as follows:

The Soldier commands the land forces, the Airman commands the air forces; both commanders work together and operate their respective forces in accordance with a combined Army-Air plan, the whole operations being directed by the Army Commander.

3. There are fundamental differences between the Army and the Air forces which should be recognised:

The Army fights on a front that may be divided into sectors, such as a Brigade, Division, Corps or an Army front. The Air front is indivisible.

An Army has one battle to fight, the land battle. The Air has two. It has first of all to beat the enemy air, so that it may go into the land battle against the enemy land forces with the maximum possible hitting power. We have not, as yet, secured sufficient superiority to finish the air-to-air battle off completely, but we have been pretty near it and we have been able to concentrate up to 80 or 90% of our hitting power on the enemy land forces.

The fighter governs the front, and this fact forces the centralisation of air control into the hands of one air commander operating on that front. I think it is generally accepted that with adequate fighter superiority and bomber forces the air has a governing influence on what happens within reach on the ground or on the sea.

And finally, there is no doubt that in this technical age it needs a life of study and specialising for a sailor, a soldier or an airman to learn his profession. He is never free from the problems of development, particularly in war, and I therefore cannot accept the possibility that any man, however competent, can do the work of the other services without proportionately neglecting his own. In plain language, no soldier is competent to operate the Air, just as no airman is competent to operate the Army.

It is generally agreed that the fighting efficiency of a service is based upon leadership, training and equipment. The commander is personally responsible for the leadership and training, and no one who has not this power should operate the forces concerned. There is too great a tendency these days to think in terms of numbers and strengths, whereas the real battle forces are properly organised units.

4. You will notice that the Army Commander does not use the word "co-operation". I submit that we in Eighth Army are beyond the co-operation stage, and that work is so close that we are, in effect, one unit. I hope you won't mind if I suggest that co-operation means the other fellow cooperating with you. We in the Air Force have cause to view the word with mixed feelings because in the past co-operation has meant the Air co-operating with the Navy or the Army. The difference in the Eighth Army is that there has been as much air co-operation by the Army as army co-operation by the Air, and the natural result is that we have now passed beyond that stage into a unit or team which automatically helps the other.

5. The use of the words "Air Power" describes the weapon we are trying to use. I should like to give you some examples of what has happened during recent months:

i) The Battle of Egypt.

At the commencement of the battle, I commanded approximately 900 aircraft for use in field operations, but behind that force was strategic air power co-ordinated from Cairo and even from England. During the days of hard fighting at El Alamein, bombers were sinking ships, attacking harbours and cutting supplies many thousand of miles away from the battle area. Even the Home based Bomber Command was attacking Northern Italy so as to stop the use of Genoa and interfere with reinforcements. This was unknown to the Army at the time, but when, after the battle was won and the advance was taking place through Cyrenaica, hundreds of lorries, tanks and guns were found abandoned through lack of fuel it became obvious how successful strategical bombing had been.

Ever since those days nearly four months ago the enemy has been suffering from shortage of supplies, and I hope he will never be free from such worries whilst he remains in Africa.

ii) Air Support in Battle.

It often happens that an Army formation at the front sees a good target which, though reported, is not attacked. To take an instance: a front formation reports a concentration of 200 M.T. and accompanying arms. Its request for air attack is turned down. 15 or 20 miles away, however, there is a concentration of 2,000 or more, indicating an Armoured Division or even larger forces.

This concentration, we know from experience, will probably affect the whole battle area perhaps 10, 18, 24 hours later. It is this concentration which is receiving all the weight of air attack, and that is why the comparatively little target on the front is ignored. The smaller formations of the Army must understand that penny packets of air are a luxury which can only be afforded at certain times, and that judgement on the question of targets is the result of agreement between the Army and Air Commanders, and in accordance with the Army Commander's broad directive on priority.

It is bad luck that the front line soldier cannot always see the main targets that are being attacked, but if he sees the sky full of his own aircraft he can rest assured they are not wasting their time. I think all forces in the Eighth Army, when they see the Bombers going over, take it

for granted that the Hun is being thrashed and that there is something more important than their own small front line target being dealt with.

iii) At Marble Arch more than 1,000 mines and booby traps were moved by the Army within 8 hours with a loss of ten lives. This is an example of air co-operation by the Army, and though the clearing of the landing ground was of mutual benefit to both services it was done unhesitatingly and was primarily an essential air requirement.

iv) At Hamroit, the New Zealanders detailed 2,000 fighting men to pick stones and make a landing ground. On other occasions a whole Brigade has been detailed for this duty and there has been no hesitation in postponing operations so as to be able to use fighting troops in this way.

v) Sedada is a good example of the standard that we have reached. This point was almost midway to Tripoli from the fighter aerodromes south of Tamet, and on the Army axis of advance a possible landing ground site was selected before the attack began. The advance forces of the spearhead of the 7th Armoured Division took with them a landing ground party and one or two specialist personnel. They reached the area at dusk, and on breaking camp next morning threw off the aerodrome party, 18 to 24 prized Bofors, M.T. and an ambulance holding unit. By 9 o'clock word was received that a landing strip was ready. Two squadrons of fighters escorting a transport plane with the necessary R.D.F. and immediate requirements, landed. They flew on their auxiliary tanks which were immediately dropped and they were then at readiness. Two other squadrons flew on another 80 miles to within 40 miles of Tripoli where they bombed and landed back at Sedada. By this time air transports were coming in with fuel, ammunition and personnel. The Ambulance Holding Unit had already received a number of the Army's casualties, and as the transport aircraft unloaded so ambulance cases went on board and away without delay. By arrangements like these we have during the three months from the Battle of Egypt to the capture of Tripoli given air passage to 5,800 Army medical cases. You can imagine the effect on the morale of the Army when it is known that badly wounded cases, if trundled over the desert, very often die. By that evening the Bofors guns and M.T. which had been loaned, and the same aerodrome specialists had re-joined the Divisional advance forces 30 miles further on, and already the fighters were operating a further 70 miles beyond.

By the following morning two more landing grounds 40 miles ahead of Sedada had been sited and work commenced and the whole fighter force was operating a further 80 miles than it had done the previous day. It was on this day that the Army Commander moved 100 miles forward with his Armoured Brigade so you can judge the importance of this machinery of fighter advance in such highly mobile warfare. It was made possible by careful planning, preparation and complete mutual adjustment of work and resources between the Army and the Air forces concerned.

6. In conclusion, is it too much to suggest that we obey the rules of simple logic and take success in Army-Air development as reached in this theatre as a model on which further development can take place? The Army has little time to waste, for they have still only a tiny veteran force--Eighth Army. We in the air have already taken the measure of our enemy air opponents. The potential air power that will be used against the enemy ground forces is unbelievably great, but it must be used properly, and what better way as a beginning than in accordance with the doctrine the Army Commander and I have explained to you?