

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.

