

MANUSCRIPT DATA SHEET

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Garmisch, 25 April 1947

[-1-]

Effect of Allied Air Attacks on the VERONA Area and the BRENNER Railroad  
Line during the Period from the End of April 1944 until 25 April 1945

Based on the Map of Northern Italy Furnished by Historical Detachment.

When I arrived in VERONA from BERLIN on 27 April 44 to take over a <sup>newly to be</sup> /  
activated Traffic Control Center [Leitkommandantur] at VERONA, I was  
astonished at the well-preserved city and at the orderly, even peaceful  
life pulsing through it. I had been led to expect terrible destruction  
in the city and in its railroad terminal facilities as a result of a recent  
bombing attack. With the exception of some, in part rather serious, damage  
to houses in the eastern and southern suburbs, and the destruction of the  
East Railroad Station - the Main Railroad Station was <sup>un-</sup> / damaged - the total  
picture of the city in all its monumental beauty had not changed.

Traffic, including both supply and evacuation, rolled smoothly and  
unhindered. The trains on the BRENNER line, once having put the heavily  
bombed and disorganized Munich yards behind them, ran without difficulty  
through VERONA and on to the front. Undisturbed by air attacks, vehicles  
of all kinds rolled throughout day and night over the well-maintained  
highway net of Northern Italy.

The active air defenses around VERONA had been strengthened after the  
first major attack; the passive, on the other hand, left much to be desired.  
In any case, they did not meet the demands of the stepped-up air war which  
I had known in BERLIN and which was now to be expected in Northern Italy.  
The Italian people and their authorities did not seem to take the air war  
very seriously. As a result, very little was done for general safety. Nor  
did the ARP measures of the German military installations, as observed by  
me, by any means satisfy the demands of protection against bombs. Very  
few by-passes, decoy roads, or roadside slit trenches were to be seen.



[-1-]

Important traffic installations were either insufficiently protected, or not at all. For example, the large PO river bridge south of CREMONA was protected by two Italian machine guns manned by Italian militia; the large, vital railroad viaduct on the VERONA - MILAN line (west of PESCIERA on LAKE GARDA), and the MINCIO railroad bridge on the same line east of PESCIERA were guarded only by sentries.

Since the first major attack on VERONA, which had occurred some time ago, had not been followed up by others, it seemed that once again one could rock oneself into a state of complacency, especially since the front was still so far away.

The first heavy bombing attack after a lengthy interval burst on VICENZA around noon one day at the end of May 1944. A short while afterward I entered VICENZA, and could therefore determine right on the spot the effects on the city and population.

[-2-]

While the railroad yards had suffered only minor damage, the inner city and the outer districts along the roads to SCHIO and PADUA had been hard hit. Traffic in the main street was blocked by debris. In this street, the ancient city palace of Count Schio, with whom I personally spoke, had, like many other buildings, been destroyed by a direct hit. The palace had been preserved as a monument. A nearby church was destroyed as well. Across from the bishop's residence, which showed concussion damage, only the outer walls of what formerly had been the cathedral now remained. Several bombs had fallen in the immediate vicinity of the German Town Major's office, causing the usual concussion damage to the large hotel in which this headquarters was located. A number of bomb craters lay closely around the highway bridge on the road to PADUA, but the bridge itself was negotiable. The important railway repair shops, as well as a few factories, were paralyzed by direct hits.

The attitude of the population after the attack could better be described as calm and composed than as upset or disheartened. At the time I thought I could judge from the Italian demeanor that they did not place



[-2-]

the guilt for the destruction and sacrifice of human life on the attackers, but simply blamed it on the fact that war still reigned in Italy. I found this view substantiated during the later course of the air war.

Smaller-scale air raids during June and July on various cities and rail yards in the VENICE area, a number of them on the rail yards of MESTRE (across from VENICE), caused temporary disruptions in industrial plants and of traffic, but were unimportant to the over-all situation. It was not difficult for the German headquarters and organizations co-operating with the corresponding Italian governmental agencies to overcome these damages.

During the night 5-6 July a major air attack concentrated on the installations of the VERONA Main Railroad Station. An estimated number of 100 planes participated in the raid. Numerous bombs were dropped on the extended yards, causing serious damage. The station itself suffered a few hits, and several houses in the vicinity of the station and of the Via Vittorio Emanuele were destroyed by direct hits or incendiaries. Four cars loaded with ammunition, which were standing just outside the station, were set on fire and through a series of explosions created a danger-laden situation which especially threatened the numerous other cars loaded with very valuable army freight. An ammunition train which had arrived at the Main Station on 5 July had been able to proceed in good time to open track at the sounding of the sirens. The energetic efforts of the German agencies, in conjunction with the Italian fire department of VERONA, who conducted themselves heroically, succeeded in eliminating the danger, partly by moving the other cars from the vicinity of the burning ammunition cars, and partly by extinguishing the fires in the latter.

The railroad bridge leading southward across the ADIGE river received a direct hit, but after merely making a hole between the tracks, the bomb, like all the others aimed at the bridge, fell and exploded in the ADIGE river.



[-3-]

The German-Italian antiaircraft defense was strong and apparently prevented a concentrated attack. The intention doubtlessly was to destroy the VERONA Main Railroad Station and its entire installations with this attack. This aim was not achieved. Only two days later, trains coming from north and south could enter and pass through, thanks to the tireless efforts of the German and Italian labor units.

It was assumed that the presence of an ammunition train at the VERONA Main Railroad Station had not gone unnoticed by the Allied air reconnaissance. It was subsequently forbidden for any ammunition train to stop, or for any ammunition-laden car to be placed, at the Station or in its vicinity - actually an obvious measure. However, against stupidity and indifference even the gods struggle in vain.

After this attack, the antiaircraft defenses around VERONA received considerable reinforcements more in line with the importance of this vital traffic center, naturally at the expense of other places. When no more large attacks were made on VERONA, it became necessary gradually to decrease once more the strength of the AAA defenses. Except for minor air raids on the rail yards and feints against VERONA, the city remained practically undisturbed until 10 October. During the night 10-11 October a bombing attack on the rail yards again caused considerable damage which resulted in serious disruptions of the already restricted rail traffic.

During the latter half of the summer, the immediate vicinity of VERONA and the surrounding area underwent air raids which were to have decisive meaning for the over-all war situation.

Unfortunately, I do not remember the exact dates of all incidents and have to confine myself to stating the results.

Repeated bombing attacks on the PARONA railroad station (north of VERONA), as well as on other stations along the BRENNER line as far north as TRIENT, caused disruptions and temporary stoppages in the traffic entering VERONA.



[-3-] A tremendous expenditure of time and energy was required in order to maintain and restore the line to some degree of operating efficiency. Movement to destination could often be effected only by transfer of passengers and freight from one train to another. The effect on supply shipments from Germany and on Germany-bound rail traffic is fairly obvious.

Not only the above, immensely vital, north-south arteries, but also the west-east routes were the target of the Allied air force. The west-east routes had considerable importance not only from the standpoint of passenger traffic. The food supply for the densely populated Italian cities depended on them in large measure. They had extraordinary importance for the German war effort because they constituted a pipeline for various industrial products to plants located farther east. A case in point were ammunition components manufactured in the industrial areas around MILAN and PRESCIA. These components had to be shipped east to installations like the large CASTELLFRANCO shell-filling plant west of TREVISO. Other products - agricultural, textile, etc. - which were consigned to the German Wehrmacht in Italy or to the German economy in general, had to move over these routes to central points.

[-4-] The most important traffic artery in this sector was the railroad line from MILAN to VERONA, VICENZA, and TREVISO; or its branch from VERONA to PADUA and MESTRE (VENICE).

The destruction of the MINCIO rail bridge near PESCIERA on Lake GARDA, completely interrupted service on the MILAN to VERONA line for a rather long period of time. This bridge was put back into operation twice through the use of expedients. Hardly had this been accomplished when, both times, new bombing attacks resumed the work of destruction. A field of bomb craters in the vicinity of the bridge gave evidence of the importance which the enemy ascribed to this particular structure.

When the gigantic, architecturally beautiful railway viaduct west of PESCIERA was also cut by one single well-placed bomb which landed between two of its pillars, the line became completely useless.



[-4-]

As a consequence, it was decided to complete a project, begun earlier by the Italians, for a railroad connection across the MINCIO valley. This line of about 2.5 km length dispensed with the use of the MINCIO bridge and viaduct and followed a low embankment, already partially in existence, at ground level around the bridge and viaduct. For the crossing of the MINCIO river, a simple wooden bridge with iron supports was sufficient. Even so, the construction of this detour required approximately two months since, due to the incessant air alarms, absenteeism among <sup>the</sup> predominantly Italian labor forces caused many delays. When this emergency line was finally completed by fall, further interference by aircraft reduced the traffic capacity. Shortages in the food supply and delays in ammunition production were the worst consequences.

The heaviest blow dealt to our southern front by the Allied air force was the sudden destruction of all PO bridges. Indeed, it was only with the utmost effort that the railroad bridge at OSTIGLIA could be restored; this condition, however, was of short duration, for a new attack reopened the old wounds. From then on, not a train could move toward the South or come through from the South; the rolling stock south of the PO was cut off - a painful loss.

This was the enormous direct effect of the Allied air raids. A further indirect effect resulted from this newly created situation because passenger traffic and the entire flow of supplies had to be shifted almost completely to motor vehicles. Tremendous quantities of fuel were swallowed up by this traffic and, consequently, were unavailable to the combat troops on the ground and in the air. The supply condition was about to become critical.

Attempts to repair some of the bridges were immediately discovered by the alert eyes of the Allied air force, which could operate practically undisturbed. These attempts were immediately quashed and were finally abandoned.



[-4-]

Several ponton bridges over the PO, for example at CSTIGLIA and south of MANTUA, made a crossing possible. After a short time, however, they were usable only after nightfall, provided they had not been damaged by daylight attacks as frequently happened. It consequently became the practice to withdraw the bridges during the day, to camouflage the sections along the

[-5-]

banks, and to reassemble them at nightfall. Daytime traffic across the river was limited to ferries, and then possible only under the constant threat of fighter-bombers. The engineers employed on this job were badly missed at the front.

For this reason, long lines of motor vehicles of all kinds collected toward evening on both banks at the bridge sites, particularly at the one south of MANTUA, and presented another excellent target to the fighter-bombers.

It is not necessary to enlarge on the extent of trouble and delay caused to the entire traffic situation by this condition. It frequently happened that, because <sup>of</sup> lengthy interruptions of traffic on the main highways, the bridge sites were accessible only by way of detours. For example, the use of the road through MANTUA became impossible for quite some time because of the repeated destruction of the bridge over the marshes north of that city. This fact necessitated a rather long detour.

In view of all the difficulties and the blows constantly being dealt by the Allied air force, it was astonishing that the various German headquarters with their labor forces, reinforced by engineers, again and again succeeded in mastering the situation in relatively short time. During the course of the winter 1944-45 it was impossible to prevent the appearance of increasingly serious phenomena of a demoralizing nature, such as traffic jams and stoppages and the accumulation of soldiers on furlough, replacements, duty-status travellers, and - naturally - also shirkers, in the rear area north of the PO and especially in the larger cities.

In these surroundings, the Allied propaganda leaflets which accompanied practically every attack, found fertile soil. Nor did they fail to have effect on the Italian population. Not even the strictest orders and pro-



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In these surroundings, the Allied propaganda leaflets which accompanied practically every attack, found fertile soil. Nor did they fail to have effect on the Italian population. Not even the strictest orders and prohibitions were of any use. Even failure to turn in a found leaflet was



[-5-] subject to punishment. The passing-on of leaflets was prosecuted as subversion of the war effort.

Because the conditions in personnel transport were steadily becoming worse, the work of the regulating stations of the RTO became overwhelming, particularly when their facilities were destroyed or disordered by air attacks. This happened frequently in VERONA where the RTO regulating station was located in the immediate vicinity of the Main Railroad Station. So long as there was still rail traffic, the RTO had to be near the station. When this traffic ceased, the office was moved piecemeal to various safer parts of the city. This naturally involved disadvantages. Many transients dispensed with the regulating station's control and attempted by any and every means to continue their journey. The best possibility was to stop any sort of motor vehicle and to ~~xxxxxxx~~ commandeer a place on it.

As a consequence, <sup>there</sup> gradually developed the so-called hitchhiker traffic which eventually became organized and extended. In all the cities and larger towns hitchhiking stations now grew up where the transients could await an opportunity for a ride with a passing vehicle. Although this operation eventually became well organized, it was, in relation to the hordes of travellers, nothing more than a pitiful stopgap. Front-line divisions, on their own initiative, had established receiving and forwarding centers north of the PO. There the divisions collected their men returning from home together with their supplies, and sent them forward in convoys - an effective makeshift means of transportation.

[-6-] In view of the fact that during the summer and fall the railroad operation in Northern Italy was almost completely halted by the bomb destruction on the remaining lines - every junction point of any importance was a shambles, and hardly a single rail bridge was intact - the Allied air force now extended its activity to the main highways through the increased use of fighter-bombers. For this reason some risk was entailed in travelling these roads during daylight hours and one had to put up with detours on less perilous side-roads.



[-6-]

But fighter-bombers were not the only cause for detours. Detours were also temporarily necessitated by bomb damage to the roads, as, for example, to the main road along the east bank of the ADIGE river to the BRENNER pass - the secondary valley route west of the ADIGE remained strangely undisturbed - or to the road from VERONA to VICENZA. On the latter one, the systematic destruction of the long highway bridge near MONTEBELLO necessitated a detour via LONIGO, and normally involved a 30-45 minute delay for passenger automobiles. At night, since there were many very narrow places in this detour, the passing of oncoming vehicles was very difficult or impossible and resulted in serious traffic jams and even accidents. Not to be forgotten was the increased wear and tear on equipment and the expenditure of fuel, considerable because of the large number of vehicles using this by-way. This condition lasted for many weeks. In addition, tank obstacles erected pursuant to an order of early January 45 caused a further increase of the congestion on all the roads of Northern Italy. Moreover, it became necessary to observe black-out precautions in night driving because of the danger from the air.

Continued bombing attacks on the BRENNER highway not only increased the anxiety about the ability to get through, but also aroused a dreary outlook for the coming spring months. A special unit organized for the maintenance of this highway was able to keep it in passable condition. Renewed air attacks, however, repeatedly undid the work after short periods of time. Travel delays were the rule on the BRENNER highway. As early as Christmas 44 a trip to Berlin, for example, took from 4 to 6 days.

As far as I know, the results of the dropping of supplies to the Italian partisans were negligible. By examining the contents of the parcels found by German soldiers and Italians it could be determined what was being dropped. The parcels consisted principally of food, special-purpose equipment, and occasionally weapons and explosives. There is no way of determining the extent to which the latter were used in the few bomb plots against bridges



[-6-] and railroad lines. The majority of the dropped articles which were picked up were probably appropriated by the "honest" finders for their own use.

[-7-] Around Christmas and New Year 44-45 comparative peace reigned in the air. Our own air forces had become a rarity in the area north of the PO. To be sure, there were, occasionally, a few fighters at the large VILLAFRANCA DI VERONA airfield (about 15 km southwest of VERONA). One day, however, they too disappeared, for this base was under the constant surveillance of the Allied air force and at the first suspicious sign was immediately bombed.

Around noon of 4 January 45 the sirens again wailed in VERONA. Strong Allied bomber formations were reported to be approaching. There began ~~xxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ a great migration/toward the mountainsides on the north bank of the ADIGE, where absolutely safe air raid shelters had since been erected. Thousands could find protection in them. According to previous experience, it was sufficient to seek a place on an open field where no bombs were to be expected. The targets of the Allied air force had up to now, with few exceptions, always been the same.

After various deceptive feints, the first wave roared in at 1315 and unloaded their bombs on the rail yards of the Porta Nuova and Porta Vescova railroad stations. Wave upon wave followed. Soon fires broke out in the inner city. The attack raged until 1600. All of Verona was enveloped in smoke and fumes, which rose together to great heights in balls resembling thunderclouds. The destruction was considerable. Immediately after the first attacking waves, lights and water were off. The important Victory Bridge over the ADIGE was knocked out by a direct hit. The Main Railroad Station was now completely destroyed. A considerable number of demolition bombs and many magnesium incendiaries fell in the center of the city near the arena. The City Hall (Municipio), the Opera House, and a number of other buildings were victims of the flames. The Piazza d' Erbe and the Market Place, which lay close together, fortunately remained completely unscathed as did the bishop's residence, although a nearby church was destroyed.



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[-7-]

It was the largest raid which VERONA experienced, and it was evidently aimed also at the bridges over the ADIGE, in the waters and vicinity of which many bombs had fallen. That section of the city below the narrow-gauge railroad station of the LAKE GARDA line, which was occupied almost entirely by German headquarters and where camouflaged motor parks were located in the streets, had received hits resulting in losses of trucks and disruptions of military traffic. It was to be regretted that the old city, from which German headquarters and billets had long since been moved, also suffered in this raid, and that there were victims to be mourned among the civilian population.

The aerial photographs made in connection with this attack must have confirmed good results, for the rest of January and the first days of February remained quiet - perhaps a consequence as well of the alleged protest lodged at the Vatican by the Bishop of VERONA.

Furthermore, there were no more important military objectives here since rail traffic to and beyond VERONA had already been brought to a halt and highway transportation had taken its place. The resulting situation brought about additional new tasks, difficulties, and shortages in all fields.

[-8-]

The cleanup and repair jobs in the city made rapid progress because the inhabitants in their own interest took an active part. As early as 1130 on 5 January 45, VERONA again had lights and water.

The power stations had been spared and continued to be spared by the later raids; the same was true of many other Italian industries.

Three raids in close succession at 2000 on 8 February, 1845 on 12 February, and at 2145 on 13 February, were the opening signal for an uninterrupted chain of attacks on important objectives in, near, and around VERONA, but without appreciably damaging the city. In a bombing, apparently aimed at the large highway bridge over the ADIGE on the road to PERONA - where, incidentally, a hitchhiking station was located - a building about 300 m



[-8-]

away in the extended military hospital complex received a direct hit which took about 50 lives. The bridge itself remained open. The hospital had never been touched before. As was reported to me, shot-down British fliers who were patients in the hospital refused to be taken to the air-raid shelter during an air raid because, they said, there were express orders given in their air force to spare hospitals. Furthermore, a conspicuously large modern house in the neighborhood of the aforementioned bridge, which the Town Major's office was preparing as a hotel for transient German officers in order to furnish a substitute for the abandoned Hotel Colomba d'Oro, received a direct hit and was rendered useless.

As the result of an inadequate flow of supplies, the population of VERONA began to feel the pinch of hunger at the beginning of March 1945. Those who were unable to buy on the black market - and most could not - suffered under the famine. Stocks of bread and flour were exhausted. Help was extended through temporary loans out of German army stores.

From about February 45 on, one of the main efforts of the Allied air force was directed against the BRENNER railroad which was repeatedly the object of attacks and slowly but surely was rendered completely useless. The labor units committed to its repair were battling windmills. The only way of possibly reaching Germany by rail was finally the time-consuming, inconvenient, roundabout way via UDINE, VILLACH, and VIENNA.

Daytime travel on the main highways during this period was practically impossible, for even vehicles travelling alone were attacked by fighter-bombers. All boat traffic on LAKE GARDA was tied down by fighter-bombers operating at extremely low altitudes, which kept everything down to the smallest fishing boats under close control. This impairment of the productive fishing industry resulted in further losses to the food supply.

Otherwise, the vicinity of LAKE GARDA was strangely neglected by the Allied fliers, although it was surrounded by numerous German billets. Only



[-8-] isolated instances of bombings are known to me. One single bomb was dropped on FASANO (GARDONE). <sup>Around noontime,</sup> /it hit - perhaps deliberately - the house of the German Ambassador Rohn while he himself <sup>was</sup> in the air-raid cellar of a neighboring house.

[-9-] On the edge of GARDA, near the road leading out toward PESCIERA, several houses were demolished by bombs. The little palace Madonna di Pergolana, which belonged to Count Cavazocca and which sat all alone directly on LAKE GARDA at LAZISE, was strafed on one occasion without any apparent reason, by a fighter-bomber coming in over the lake. In the tunnels of GARDASANA (the road along the west shore of LAKE GARDA) there were, to be sure, some armament industries located, but in a sheltered position and entirely cut off from any traffic - for both reasons hardly a worth-while target for planes.

Extending into the first half of April, the Allied air force kept everything in a state of tension without meeting any effective German opposition. The alarms, which lasted increasingly longer and came closer together both by night and by day, caused extensive day-time absenteeism, unrest, and interruptions to the German military installations and to the armament industry. In BRESCIA, for example, the Metallurgica Bresciana was hit many times during January and February 45. Despite this, operation could be resumed each time in a few days. At that very place the large modern hotel housing the German military command was hit.

The repeated bombings of the MONTEBIANCO, about 10 km south of PESCIERA, ended in the latter half of March 1945 with an irreplaceable loss for the German war effort. The Central Depot of Explosives <sup>and gunpowder</sup> /which was located there, with all of its tremendous quantities of powder and explosives, was totally destroyed in one explosion. This sealed the fate of all ammunition-filling facilities as well as the ammunition production program for the Italian Theater of War.

After the break-through at BOLOGNA and the resulting rolling up of the Fourteenth Army front, the air raids in the VERONA area gradually subsided.

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Signed: Hoegner