

SPEED—THE NEW FACTOR

Strengthen the Still-Independent Air Force

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THE success of British arms in the Western Desert demonstrates once more that the pre-war theories about the tremendous strength of modern defences were incompatible with the developments in offensive weapons. The factor which has upset all the military theories (which were based upon the earthwork stagnation of the Great War) is speed. The rapidity of movement of modern mechanised and motorised armies has reintroduced the element of surprise. It has done more. It has reintroduced the war of columns. It places within the power of commanders the opportunity to cut the enemy lines of communication and supply. A continuous front does not necessarily provide adequate defence in this form of war if a weak spot can be found, or forced by pressure, through which the columns can pass.

What is the strength of this form of attack? Obviously, its ability to cut lines of communication and supply. How, then, can it be best countered? Clearly by retaliating against the lines of communication and supply of the enemy who is exerting the pressure. But it is difficult, if not impossible, for a retreating ground force to cut the lines of communication and supply of a victorious advancing army. The two operations are inconsistent. It can be done only in one way—by air.

Defence Combination

The skilful combination of a well-organised retreat and a powerful air offensive against the enemy rear appears to offer the best form of defence against the modern form of land attack. No army yet attacked by the modern form of land war has possessed the requisite conditions to apply this form of defence. All the armies which met the onrush of the German armies on the Continent of Europe were hopelessly outnumbered in the air as well as on the ground. The Italian armies in the Western Desert cannot be strong enough in the air to achieve a result commensurate with their need.

The Italian aircraft industry could not expand as the British aircraft industry expanded during the three years which preceded the outbreak of war. It has recently suffered damage from British bombing forces. It has no source of external supply such as we have from America. To-day the *Regia Aeronautica* must be numerically inferior to the Royal Air Force in aircraft and personnel. It has extensive territory to man: Italy, Albania, Libya, the Dodecanese, Eritrea, Somaliland, Abyssinia. Its aircraft are not technically equal to the British. There seems no possibility, therefore, that the *Regia Aeronautica* will be capable of exerting by itself the pressure necessary to relieve its land forces.

The old form of Army Co-operation did not cover modern war conditions on the ground. The old method—and it is not so very long

since it was the only method practised—of Army Co-operation meant spotting for the artillery, carrying messages, photographing, making reconnaissances and acting generally as the eyes and messenger boys of the ground troops. The modern method of Army Co-operation brings in the whole gamut of air war. But—and this is important—it has introduced no factor which is new to air crews or air commanders. It matters not at all to the crew of a bomber whether they have to bomb a bivouac or a barracks, a column of troops or a railway line, a boat or a bridge, an armament works or a harbour, a tank or an oil dump. All they need to know is their objective, its exact situation, the time when their attack is to be made, the type and number of bombs they are to drop, and any particular height (if specified) from which they are to release their bombs. Nor does it matter to a fighter pilot or crew whether they have to attack aircraft in the air or on the ground, aerodromes or troops, or any other target.

Ready for Anything

Much the same applies to naval warfare. There is no mystery about things naval except the secrecy in which they are all wrapped up. None of the Royal Air Force crews I have ever met in the Coastal Command ever experienced the slightest difficulty in dealing with naval affairs. And they are just as capable of flying overland and dealing with army affairs if that duty should be required of them. It is for these reasons that the independence of the Air Arm is vitally important.

There must be times when the major part of the Air Arm must operate in conjunction with the Army. There must be times when the major part of the Air Arm must operate in conjunction with the Navy. There must be times when all three Services (or a part of all three) must

collaborate. In such circumstances it does not matter who is placed in supreme command, provided the post is filled by the best man for the job. The Navy has now decided to promote to the rank of Rear

Admiral not by seniority but by merit. That is yet another assurance that seniority is not always the hall-mark of efficiency. That principle of efficiency first is worth bearing in mind during com-

bined operations.

No one can complain about the Fleet Air Arm as at present constituted being part and parcel of the Navy. It might, however, be laid down that the aircraft carriers may have to be prepared upon occasion to fly their aircraft ashore to operate from aerodromes on foreign or Imperial soil just as the Navy puts Marines ashore and sometimes sailors. Nor can anyone complain about the Army having operational control over Army Co-operation squadrons whose duties are those of Army Co-operation as it used to be understood.

If this war could remain as it is at present, and if a decision could be reached by the result of the Battle of the North African Coast, it would also be a good measure to place the Coastal Com-

