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**Report date:** 25 November 1944

**Title:** Air Support

**Organization:** Headquarters European Theater of Operations War  
Department Observers Board

**Abstract:** Report number 416 – Air Support in operation in Brest by the  
2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division.

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HEADQUARTERS  
EUROPEAN THEATER OF OPERATIONS  
UNITED STATES ARMY

UNCLASSIFIED

WAR DEPARTMENT OBSERVERS BOARD

APC 887  
25 November 1944

SUBJECT: Army Ground Forces Report number 416 - Air Support.

SUBMITTED BY: Colonel Albert G. Wing, Infantry Observer.

1. Forwarded herewith, copy of a report on Air Support in operations against BREST, by the 2d Infantry Division.

2. All commanders interviewed on this subject were favorably impressed with the value of air support and expressed confidence in the ability and willingness of the air arm to give them all possible support. Instances of bombing and strafing of friendly troops were reported, but in all cases this was willingly accepted in view of the excellent support afforded.

3. Major General Troy H. Middleton, Commanding VIII Corps, expressed these conclusions in a report to the Commanding General, Ninth Army, based on experiences gained at BREST, France.

a. "Fighter bombers are more effective than medium or heavy bombers as an aid to ground troops in this type of operation.

b. "Fighter bombers on air alert are more effective in the support of ground troops than fighter bombers used on pre-planned missions.

c. "Fighter bombers on air alert aid in the advance of a division or its elements as follows:

- (1) There is a noticeable decrease in enemy artillery fire while fighter bombers are in the air.
- (2) The enemy is pinned down and unable to move reserves or maneuver while our aircraft are overhead.
- (3) Enemy strong points and personnel in front of the ground units are destroyed by bombing and strafing.
- (4) Continued activity of our aircraft has a destructive effect on enemy morale and a corresponding increase in the morale of our troops."

Major Daniel Webster, G.S.C., G-3 assistant for air, 2d Infantry Division, 8 VITH, 8 November 1944, reports: "We had considerable air support at BREST. Had 705 aircraft. Flew 97 separate missions. Dropped 360 tons of bombs. Strafed on 94 of the 97 missions.

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By authority of: W.H. Cagney, 7AOC, Cir 109, 1947

"We used the air alert plan with most success. The fighter bombers were the P-47 except 12 P-38. In addition to the above support, there were considerable heavy and medium bombers from our air force and the RAF.

"Prisoners' reports indicate that they feared strafing much more than bombing. This view of bombing no doubt was caused by excellent shelters available to the enemy in BREST.

"Panel marking with fluorescent cerise panels has not been satisfactory in all cases to mark the front lines, for these reasons:

- a. Armored forces use them on most of their cars.
- b. Infantry foremost elements cannot use them due to close contact with enemy.
- c. The German army knows their use and used them on occasion."

Major J. P. Dunne, A.T.A.C., ASP officer with the 2d Infantry Division: "Smoke is the best method we have of marking the targets. When planes are on air alert or similar mission and report in by VHF radio, I can give them the smoke signal (color) with a description of the target. If the enemy tries to use the same smoke, I can instantly change the color, and when the artillery gives me the 'on the way' signal, I relay it to the pilot. We experience no trouble 'talking the pilot' on to the target. By all means, use air alert on close support. It is flexible and control is absolutely assured".

Major F. C. Landers, A/C 29 TAC, 8th Infantry Division (Has been ASP Officer since division landed in France): "We had close support by air from our landing and through the BREST campaign. Air alert is best for us if we have sufficient targets to warrant it. Planned missions were not so satisfactory because of constant changes in the situation. Briefing cannot be as accurate as local control. The situation changes, the most profitable targets cannot always be predetermined. Mission does not always arrive exactly on time and the rate of advance of infantry units varies. We are unable to communicate with the planes and make changes to fit the latest situation. Targets cannot be identified as exactly from a map or photo as they can be by control from the ground.

"Whether air alert or a similar system is used, control offers no problem if the planes check in with the air support officers.

"I set up my VHF radio away from the division CP, if possible on high ground where I can see the target. I have a line to the artillery and a line to the CP. When the planes check in and they are over the area, I describe the target, give them the position of our troops, and, if smoke is to be used to mark the target, give them the color of the smoke to be used and call on the artillery for smoke. The cub observers get the smoke on the target or give the location of the smoke to the target. I relay this to the planes. I use red, green, purple or white smoke as the situation indicates. Rarely use white and prefer red. If the enemy tries to throw smoke to confuse us, changing smoke is simple and takes only a few minutes. I also get the results, if possible, through cub or other channels and give this to the planes before they leave. They are about as keenly interested in the results as we are.

"We like the bombing and strafing to be parallel to our lines or from the rear of our lines forward, if the sun and weather permit. We ask the pilots to take initial evasive action over the enemy lines to avoid accidental bombing by a 'hung' bomb."

Major General Donald A. Stroh, Commanding 8th Division: "The close support given this division by air has been most satisfactory. Particularly was this true on the CROZON peninsula. The same squadron and group supported us in this campaign. We got to know some of the pilots personally and they to know us. They appeared to take the same interest in our advances as we did. We have had the same ASP officer since landing and this has helped. He knows our needs and understands us. Our men like to see the air support come in and follow it closely. The 'air alert' method was the best. It was flexible. We could use it where and when we wanted it."

/s/ Albert G. Wing,  
ALBERT G. WING,  
Colonel, Infantry,  
WD Observers Bd.

1 Incl:

As indicated  
above

HEADQUARTERS 2D INFANTRY DIVISION  
APO #2, U.S. Army, 18 September 1944

SUBJECT: Air Support in Operations against BREST.

TO : Commanding General, VIII Corps, APO #308, U. S. Army.

1. In compliance with Memorandum, Headquarters VIII Corps, 11 September 1944, regarding air support in the BREST operations, the following report is submitted:

- a. (1) Normally air support did not directly aid the advance of small units in the sense that it was a close support weapon, such as artillery, mortar, or machine guns. The principal value of air support lay in destroying or neutralizing strong points 1000 yards or more behind the enemy troops in the front line. This normally had no immediate effect on enemy troops in the front lines except to weaken morale. The value of air support was felt by our small units only after they had progressed to the target area and saw the extent to which enemy supporting weapons and strong points had been reduced. Close air support did aid materially the advance of small units by: Restricting movement of the enemy, particularly of reserves; by keeping enemy gun crews under cover and hence away from firing positions; and by limiting hostile observation.
- (2) Two notable examples of very close air support are cited, although in both cases planes bombed and strafed considerably closer to friendly troops than had been requested.
  - (a) On 27 August 1944, from 1415B to 1505B, twelve (12) thunderbolts (P-47) bombed and strafed "Battery Domaine" located at coordinates (005047), Map, France - Guipavas, Sheet, 1/25,000. This position consisted of bunkers and gun emplacements of reinforced concrete. The bombing had a marked effect in the destruction of the bunkers and 105mm gun emplacements. Direct hits were observed on the positions only 200 yards from battalion front lines. Planes were reported to have strafed two hedgerows away from and parallel to Company "L", 23d Infantry front lines.
  - (b) On 3 September 1944, from 1730B to 1732B, eight (8) thunderbolts (P-47) bombed and strafed enemy positions 150-200 yards in front of Companies "K" & "E", 23d Infantry, at coordinates (001030), Map, France - Guipavas, Sheet, 1/25,000.

Due to requirements of troop safety, this type of air support is not recommended.

b. Close air support missions have not been requested by front line companies, due to limited facilities for observation and to the fact that air support may not normally be used against close-in resistance holding up a front line company.

c. No air missions were requested by assault companies. A total of ninety-seven (97) missions (involving 705 aircraft) were flown in support of the operations of this division after 23 August 1944. About sixty-five percent (65%) of these missions were the results of requests of front line battalions or were based on information submitted by infantry battalions or through artillery channels from artillery forward observers or liaison officers with infantry battalions.

d. Following comments by infantry commanders indicate the general attitude of combat soldiers toward close air support:

- (1) Regimental Commander, 9th Infantry: "As long as the planes are on the designated target, the front line soldiers have utmost confidence in them, but a stray bomb or two, and wild tracers behind front lines shakes the confidence and affects morale".
- (2) Regimental Commander, 23d Infantry: "It is believed that our recent operations have developed in the combat soldier an attitude of confidence in close air support. A number cases are on record where bombs were dropped in or behind our lines. The introduction of a well-defined system for marking front lines by the employment of cerise fluorescent panels, largely remedied the possibility for error and distrust thus developed in the minds of the troops".
- (3) Battalion Commander, 1st Battalion, 23d Infantry: "The average soldier is fully aware of the importance of air support and is highly in favor of air support. A small percentage do not favor close-in support due to the infrequent miscalculations in dropping bombs and strafing (friendly troops)".
- (4) Battalion Commander, 3d Battalion, 23d Infantry: "General attitude of the combat soldier toward air support can be summed up in a statement overheard recently -- 'Boy, I'll never bitch about the Air Corps again'".
- (5) Regimental Commander, 38th Infantry: "Men in the line and commanders of all grades reflected an attitude of appreciation of air support and general acceptance of misplaced or accidental bombing in our own areas. In one case, Company "B" was strafed by our own planes at the beginning of a run that succeeded in reducing an enemy emplacement that would have been a more serious danger than the small zone accidentally strafed. The men remarked on taking the position that they were glad to have the close support".

e. Statements by regimental commanders relative aid of supporting aircraft in capturing key terrain features and strong points:

- (1) Regimental Commander, 9th Infantry: "Thus far in the BREST operation air support has not figured in the capture of strong points or key terrain features by the 9th Infantry".
- (2) Regimental Commander, 23d Infantry: "On 8 September 1944, pinpointed targets on Hill 90 were pounded and strafed almost constantly during the afternoon. Previous heavy opposition from fortified installations had been holding up all efforts to take the hill. That night, patrols reported that the remnants of the enemy who had not been destroyed during the day had withdrawn. At 0630B the following morning we occupied the hill without resistance".
- (3) Regimental Commander, 38th Infantry: "Hill 100 which is the dominating terrain feature at the eastern edge of BREST was completely neutralized by air missions. The enemy had excellent observation to the east and northeast and with the large antiaircraft guns (with 360 degrees traverse) were able to harass our troops and retard our advance. With the large guns and operating installations destroyed, the Hill 100 fell without excessive loss to the infantry".

f. Air alert missions have the following advantages over planned missions:

- (1) Enable ground commander to concentrate air power on active targets at closest possible distance, consistent with troop safety, at the time of aircraft over target.
- (2) Proclude the briefing of pilots at their base on targets which are at a safe distance from front line troops at time requests are submitted, generally from fifteen (15) to twenty-four (24) hours in advance of actual time of planes over target, but which are unsafe at time of aircraft over target, due to our troops advancing in the interim. Numerous planned missions have had to be diverted or cancelled.
- (3) Enable missions to be chosen intelligently from latest G-2 information and PW reports, thus permitting active targets to be hit on short notice.

g. Methods and technique employed to obtain and control close air support missions:

- (1) A list of active or suspected targets is prepared; copies furnished to air support officer and to division artillery.

EXCERPT

- (2) Ground observer of infantry and artillery report active targets, and aircraft are directed to highest priority target at time that planes are over target area.
- (3) Air support officer briefs pilots, giving, in addition to a description of the target, such additional information as may be of value to the pilot in performing accurately his mission, as location of nearest friendly elements, preferred direction of attack, peculiar conditions existing in the target area, as smoke, burning buildings, prominent landmarks. On completion of the briefing, the target is marked with colored smoke and the pilot informed that smoke has been laid on the target. The flight leader reports to the air support officer when he has definitely located his target and colored smoke and reports again on completion of mission, giving observed or estimated results. At the same time, ground observers report the results and this information is given to the pilot.

h. In this operation, following have been excellent sources of information in selection of air targets:

- (1) Division artillery - including ground OP's, shelling reports, corps observation battalion.
- (2) Infantry units - including information submitted by front line companies and infantry battalion observation posts.
- (3) Civilian evacuees.
- (4) Prisoners of War.

i. Effectiveness of heavy and medium bombardment is difficult to estimate accurately, but questioning PW's has brought out the following points:

- (1) Civilians from BREST state that very few casualties to personnel have occurred there since air raid shelters are sufficiently strong to protect personnel. Practically all buildings have been destroyed, many of them hit long before the invasion when American bombers tried to hit German warships in the harbor.
- (2) Almost all PW's state they have had casualties within their families in Germany from Allied strategic bombing.
- (3) Ground observers are unable to give detailed information on heavy or medium bombardment missions.
- (4) PW information indicates the German soldier fears strafing considerably more than bombing, though bombing causes far greater damage to guns, vehicles and other material.

j. Fighter bombers have been much more effective than heavy and medium bombers in assisting this division in the BREST operation, for the following reasons:

- (1) Fighter bombers are employed on targets which directly affect the tactical operation.
- (2) A degree of control may be exercised over fighter bombers in order to mass air power on critical targets at critical times. This is not possible with heavy and medium aircraft.
- (3) Dive-bombing and strafing have a more terrifying effect on enemy personnel than do medium and high altitude bombing.

k. General Comments:

- (1) In a static situation, panels displayed on vehicles in rear of front lines tend to confuse pilots as to actual location of forward elements.
- (2) Small units are unanimous in the recommendation that aircraft make bombing or strafing runs parallel to friendly front lines or perpendicular to and away from friendly front lines to prevent overs, hung bombs or wild Cal. .50 machine gun bullets from landing within friendly lines. Also, initial evasive action should be over enemy positions, as a number of hung bombs shake loose during such action.
- (3) Recommend that air-alert, rather than planned, missions be used in support of future operations.
- (4) Recommend that available channels on VFH radio of air support officer be divided equally between air support parties working in given area to minimize congestion of radio traffic.

For the Command General:

/s/ John H. Stokes Jr.,  
JOHN H. STOKES JR.,  
Colonel, G. S. C.,  
Chief of Staff.