

# CHRONOLOGY OF PRINCIPAL EVENTS

<u>GENERAL</u>	<u>MEDITERRANEAN</u>		<u>GIBRALTAR</u>	<u>RED SEA</u>
	<u>Central Basin</u> (Malta)	<u>Eastern Basin</u>		
1939	March/April: May and October:	Anglo-French Staff Conversations re security of Mediterranean		3 June Anglo-French Staff Conversations re security of Red Sea.
3 Sept. Outbreak of War with Germany			9 Sept. Formation of No.200 Group 9 Sept. No.202 Sqn. (Londons) transferred from Malta to Gibraltar for anti- U-boat and convoy work.	
		18 Sept. Formation of No.201 Group at Alexandria.		
1940		Jan. Med. Fleet left Alexandria for Home Waters.		
		March Med. Fleet returned to Eastern Mediterranean.		
	May Further Anglo-French Staff Conversations re security of Mediterranean.			4 May Naval Conference at Port Said re safeguarding Red Sea.
		May A French Naval Sqn. joined Med. Fleet.		
		May No.230 Sqn.(Sunder- lands) sent as reinforcement to Alexandria.		
	1 June Formation of Fighter Flight (3 Gladiators) at Malta.			
		4 June No.228 Sqn.echelon (Sunderlands) sent as reinforcement to Alexandria.		
10 June Italy entered the War				
11 June Air Ministry's "Charter" defining Command of A.C.C.-in-C., Middle East.	11 June First attacks on Malta by Italian aircraft.			
		12 June Bombardment of Tobruk by R.A.F. and Naval units.	June Formation of Naval "Force H" (capital ships) at Gibraltar.	
21 June Surrender of France				
		8/9 July Naval and Air engagement during passage of two British convoys from Alexandria to Malta.		July Start of British convoys passing through Red Sea (after R.A.F. had bombed enemy airfields in E. Africa).
18 Aug. Loss of British Somaliland (to Italy)		Aug. Reinforcement of Med. Sept. Fleet.	12 Aug.No.200 Group placed under Coastal Command.	R.A.F.(Aden Command) employed on convoy work and in attacks on enemy ports and bases in Eritrea (and on Abyssinian aerodromes).
		18 Aug. Naval bombardment of Bardia (protected by R.A.F. fighters)		
		31 Aug. Arrival of first Wellingtons in Middle East (further R.A.F. reinforcements arrived from time to time).		/12 Sept.

GENERAL	MEDITERRANEAN	GIBRALTAR	RED SEA
	<div>Central Basin (Malta)</div> <div>Eastern Basin</div>		
12 Sept. Italy invaded Egypt.	<div> <p>Sept. Arrival of Glen Martin (Maryland) Flight (No.431) at Malta. (further R.A.F. reinforcements - including Hurricanes - had arrived by the end of the year).</p> <p>17 Sept. H.M.S. Kent (cruiser) sunk by Italian torpedo-bombers off Bardia.</p> <p>17 Sept. First air attack (by F.A.A.) made on Benghazi.</p> </div>		R.A.F. (Aden Command) employed on convoy work and in attacks on
	<div>11 Oct. H.M.S. Ajax sank 3 Italian destroyers.</div>	<div>24/25 Bombing of Gibraltar by French aircraft.</div> <div>18 Oct. Italian U-boat captured after being bombed by R.A.F. and depthcharged by destroyers.</div> <div>20 Oct. H.M.S. Hotspur (destroyer) rammed and sank Italian U-boat.</div>	
28 Oct. Italy invaded Greece (from Albania).	<div>1-11 Nov. R.A.F. and F.A.A. begin attacks on Naples, Brindisi and Albanian ports.</div>		4 Nov. Last enemy air attack (unsuccessful on a British convoy in Red Sea.
Nov. Series of Greek victories over Italians.	<div>11 Nov. Battle of Taranto</div> <div>11 Nov. F.A.A. attacked Italian Fleet in Taranto harbour: 3 battleships sunk.</div> <div>11 Nov. Destruction of enemy convoy by light Naval forces.</div>	From November 1940 to 31 May 1941 Gibraltar aircraft carried out 4,500 patrols and 200 special sorties	enemy ports and bases in Eritrea (and on Abyssinian aerodromes)
9 Dec. Opening of Gen.Wavell's campaign in Egypt and Cyrenaica.	<div>27-30 Nov. Successful British convoy from Gibraltar to Alexandria.</div>		
		Dec. R.A.F. "softening up" Cyrenaican ports for Gen.Wavell's advance.	
	<div>18 Dec. Naval bombardment of Valona(Greece).</div>		
1941 Jan. Gen.Wavell's advance into 11 Feb. Cyrenaica	<div>9 Jan. Luftwaffe from Sicily began air attacks on Malta.</div> <div>10 Jan. No.431 Flight (Malta) disbanded and re-formed as No.69 (G.R) Sqn.</div>	R.A.F. attacks on enemy ports and bases	
			/10 Jan.



GENERAL

MEDITERRANEAN

GIBRALTAR

RED SEA

Central Basin (Malta)		Eastern Basin	
R.A.F. and F.A.A. attacks on enemy ports and bases.	10 Jan. H.M.S. Southampton (cruiser sunk, and H.M.S. Illustrious (a/c carrier) severely damaged by enemy air attacks while escorting convoys to Malta and Greece.	22 Jan. British captured Tobruk.	R.A.F. attacks on enemy ports and bases
	6-23 Jan. The "Illustrious Blitz" (Malta).	7 Feb. British captured Benghazi.	
	9 Feb. Naval "Force H" bombarded Genoa.		
	Feb. Extension of "Sink at Sight" powers in Central Mediterranean.		
(Early) March. Arrival of B.E.F. in Greece.			
16 March. Re-capture of Berbera by British (followed by re-occupation of British Somaliland).			
		28 March Battle of Cape Matapan (R.A.F. assisted Royal Navy to gain victory).	
March Arrival of Rommel's Afrika Korps in N. Africa.			
30 March German advance in Cyrenaica.			
3 April British retreat to Halfaya.		3 April British loss of Benghazi (Tobruk retained with a garrison).	
		April Extension of "Sink at Sight" powers to Eastern Mediterranean.	
6 April Germany invaded Yugoslavia and Greece.			
6 April British occupation of Addis Ababa (Abyssinia)			
15 April Evacuation of B.E.F. from Greece.	13-20 April Malta Wellingtons bombed Tripoli	15 April R.A.F. assisted Royal Navy in evacuating B.E.F. from Greece (Sunderlands and Blenheims played a notable part in this operation).	
2 May	15 April Enemy convoy annihilated by 14th Destroyer Flotilla.	-2 May	

From November 1940 to 31 May 1941 Gibraltar aircraft carried out 450 patrols and 200 special sorties

R.A.F. (Aden Command) employed on convoy work and in attacks on enemy ports and bases in Eritrea (and on Abyssinian aerodromes)

2/3 April R.A.F. and Naval units liquidated four Italian destroyers.

8 April British captured Massawa (Eritrean port on Red Sea).

16 April Convoy system discontinued as Red Sea considered virtually secure.

/2 May.

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GENERAL	MEDITERRANEAN	GIBRALTAR	RED SEA
	<div>Central Basin (Malta)</div> <div>Eastern Basin</div>		
2 May <u>Beginning of Iraq Rebellion</u>	<div>1 May First attack by Malta Blenheims on enemy shipping in transit.</div> <div>2 May Arrival of Beaufighters at Malta for convoy work.</div> <div>6-12 May Successful British two-way convoy from Gibraltar to Alexandria and Alexandria to Malta.</div>	May No. 202 Sqn. re-equipped with Catalinas.	
17 May Duke D'Aosta's surrender at Amba Alagi (Abyssinia)			
20 May <u>Germany invaded Crete by Air.</u>	<div>21 May Last British convoy (until May 1943) through Mediterranean to Alexandria.</div> <div>29/30 May R.A.F. assisted in evacuation from Crete: heavy Naval losses.</div>		
31 May <u>End of Iraq Rebellion.</u>			
	<div>1 June H.M.S. Calcutta (cruiser) sunk by JU.88.</div> <div>(Early) June "Sink at sight" powers extended to Syrian territorial waters.</div>		
8 June <u>Opening of British &amp; Free French campaign against Vichy French in Syria.</u>			
15 June Operation "Battle-axe" to relieve Tobruk (failed after 3 days).	R.A.F. and F.A.A. shipping strikes and attacks on enemy ports and bases	R.A.F. protection of shipping and anti-submarine patrols and attacks on enemy ports and bases	R.A.F. convoy escorts, searches and anti-submarine patrols
21 June British occupied Damascus			
22 June <u>Germany invaded Russia</u>			
12 July <u>End of Syrian campaign.</u>			
	<div>29 June Successful British convoy from Mersa Matruh to Tobruk (assisted by R.A.F.)</div> <div>4 July Vichy troop-ship St. Didier sunk by Albacores.</div>		11 June British captured Assab (last Italian port on Red Sea.)
	<div>18 July- 19 Aug. Army &amp; R.A.F. re-inforce- ments sent to Cyprus (Op. "Guillotine").</div>		

GENERAL

MEDITERRANEAN

GIBRALTAR

RED SEA

Central Basin  
(Malta)

Eastern Basin

R. A. F.	21-24 July	Successful British convoy from Gibraltar to Malta (Op: "Substance") assisted by R.A.F	R. A. F.	protection of shipping and anti-submarine patrols and attacks on enemy ports and bases
F. A. A.	26 July	Repulse by R.A.F and shore batteries of enemy attack by "E"-boats & midget submarines on Grand Harbour, Valetta. (Heavy enemy losses)		
			12-19 Aug.	18th Australian Bgde. relieved at Tobruk by Polish troops (Op: "Treacle" - covered by R.A.F. fighters).
24-27 Aug.	British forces occupied Persia			
17 Sep.	British & Russian forces occupied Teheran.	Sep. Increased air offensive against enemy shipping by Malta aircraft.	17-27 Sep.	Relief of further Australian troops at Tobruk by British troops (Op: "Supercharge": assisted by R.A.F)
		20 Sep. First sorties in the Mediter- ranean by fighter- bombers (Malta Hurricanes)	Sep.	No. 201 Group re-formed as No. 201 (Naval Co- operation) Group.
		25-28 Sep. Successful British convoy from Gibraltar to Malta (Op: "Halberd" assisted by R.A.F.)		
		Oct. A.S.V. Wellings- tons sent to Malta.	Oct.	Final relief of Tobruk Australian garrison by British 70th Division (Op: "Cultivate": assisted by R.A.F)
		16 Oct. F.A.A. reinforce- ment to Malta (Op: "Callboy")		
		16-17 Oct. First use of 4,000 lb. bombs in Mediterr- anean theatre (during R.A.F. Malta attack on Naples)		
		21 Oct. Formation of Naval (cruiser) Force "K" at Malta.		
		9 Nov. Destruction of enemy convoy by Force "K" (assisted by R.A.F.)		

/10/12 Nov.

GENERAL

MEDITERRANEAN

GIBRALTAR

RED SEA

Central Basin  
(Malta)

Eastern Basin

10/12 Nov. Fighter  
(Hurricane)  
reinforcement  
of R.A.F. Malta  
(Op: "Perpetual")

Nov. "Sink at sight" powers further extended in  
Central and Eastern Basins.

18 Nov. Opening of  
"Crusader"  
offensive  
(Cyrenaica)

27 Nov. British  
captured  
Gondar: End  
of Abyssinian  
campaign.

7 Dec. Japan attack-  
ed British  
and U.S.  
forces (Pearl  
Harbour etc)

8 Dec. Great Britain  
and the  
U.S.A. declar-  
ed war on  
Japan.

11 Dec. Germany and  
Italy de-  
clared war  
on the  
U.S.A.

10/11 Dec. First bombing  
of Benghazi by  
Malta aircraft.

15-18 Dec. Passage of the Breconshire (supply ship) from  
Alexandria to Malta with fuel supplies.  
(R.A.F. co-operated from Egypt and Malta).

19 Dec. H.M.S. Queen Elizabeth  
and Valiant (battle-  
ships) disabled at  
Alexandria by  
"human torpedoes"

24 Dec. British forces  
recaptured Benghazi.

26-29 Dec. Successful British convoy from Malta to  
Alexandria (covered by R.A.F. and F.A.A.)

13/14 Nov. H.M.S. Ark Royal (a/c  
carrier) torpedoed and  
sunk off Gibraltar.

Nov. Extension of R.A.F. runway  
at Gibraltar begun.

Nov.- Dec. Increased anti-U-boat  
measures employed by  
R.A.F. Gibraltar and  
Naval destroyers.

Dec. Formation of Air H.Q.  
Gibraltar (No. 200 Group  
disbanded). R.A.F.  
reinforced).

1942

20/21 Jan. End of  
"Crusader"  
offensive:  
counter-  
attack by  
enemy.

R.A.F. and F.A.A. shipping strikes and  
attacks on enemy ports and bases.

16-19 Jan. British convoy from Alexandria to Malta under  
cover of No. 201 Group's Beaufighters.  
3 merchant ships out of 4 reached Malta).

22/24 Jan. Air attacks on  
Italian convoy:  
Italian troop-  
ship Victoria  
sunk.

24/27 Jan. Successful (small) British two-way convoy  
from Alexandria to Malta and vice-versa  
(under cover of R.A.F. fighters).

29 Jan. Axis forces re-  
captured Benghazi

R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. shipping strikes  
and attacks on enemy ports and bases.

R.A.F. convoy escorts, searches  
and anti-submarine patrols.

/9 Feb.

## GENERAL

## MEDITERRANEAN

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## GIBRALTAR

## RED SEA

9 Feb. British  
retreat to  
Gazala  
(Cyrenaica)

	Central Basin (Malta)	Eastern Basin
R. A. F.	12-15 Feb. British two-way convoy from Alexandria to Malta and vice versa. Despite considerable R.A.F. support 2 merchant ships to Malta sunk and the third disabled by enemy air attacks.	21-23 Feb. Unsuccessful R.A.F. attacks on enemy convoy to Tripoli.
and		20-2 Feb. British convoy from Alexandria to Tobruk (Op: "Onset") 2 merchant ships out of 3 lost in spite of R.A.F. co-operation.
F. A. A.	5 March Luftwaffe began intensive attacks on Malta.	
shipping	7-30 March Arrival of Spitfires at Malta in a/c carrier <u>Eagle</u> .	14-15 March Combined Naval and R.A.F. operation (Op: M.F.8) against Rhodes.
strikes		12-17 March Two Brit. convoys moving troops Egypt-Cyprus (Op: "Installation": R.A.F. co-operated).
and	20-23 March British convoy from Alexandria to Malta (Op: "Fullsize") Combined operation staged (including feint attack by ground forces in Desert) to safeguard passage of convoy. 3 out of 4 merchant ships (including the <u>Breconshire</u> ) and 2 destroyers lost.	
attacks		29 March Two Brit. convoys moving troops Cyprus to Egypt (Op: "Scalford") R.A.F. co-operated.
on		
enemy	Apl. Peak period of Luftwaffe "blitz" on Malta.	13/14 Apl. Unsuccessful air operations against enemy convoy from Italy.
ports		15-16 Apl. Destruction of Wireless station at Kupho Nisi I. (Op: "Lighter") R.A.F. co-operated.
and	20 Apl. Arrival of Spitfire reinforcements at Malta in U.S. a/c carrier <u>Wasp</u> .	
bases		

R. A. F.

and

U. S. A. F.

shipping

strikes

and

attacks

on

enemy

ports

and

bases

R. A. F.

convoy

escorts,

searches

and

anti-

submarine

patrols

3 Apl. Extension of R.A.F. runway at Gibraltar to 1,150 yds. completed

Apl. Further extension (to 1,550 yds.) begun.

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GENERAL		MEDITERRANEAN		GIBRALTAR	RED SEA
		Central Basin (Malta)	Eastern Basin		
	R. A. F.	9-10 May	Arrival of further Spitfires at Malta	R. A. F.	
	R. A. F.	10 May	Arrival of H.M.S. Welshman at Malta with ammunition supplies.	R. A. F.	
	and			May	Construction of new Combined R.N. and R.A.F. H.Q. (tunnel in the Rock) begun.
26 May	F. A. A.			U. S. A. A. F.	convoy
Axis offensive opened ("Battle for Egypt").					escorts,
15 June	shipping	14-18 June	Attempt to sail British convoys to Malta concurrently from Gibraltar and Egypt (Ops: "Harpoon" and "Vigorous") with R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. support. 3 out of 4 merchant ships from the west reached Malta; convoy from the east forced back by enemy air and surface threats. (H.M. cruiser <u>Hermione</u> and 4 destroyers lost; Italian cruiser <u>Trento</u> sunk and battleship <u>Littorio</u> put out of action for some months.	shipping	searches
Retreat of Eighth Army begun.	strikes		20 June		
	and		Axis forces re-captured Tobruk.		
6 July	attacks	1-8 July	Second attempt by Luftwaffe to neutralise Malta.	strikes	July
Eighth Army stabilised at Alamein	on				Formation of special aircraft erection party at Gibraltar
26-27 July	enemy	10-13 Aug.	British convoy from Gibraltar to Malta (Op: "Pedestal") with strong Naval and air support. 5 merchant ships out of 14 arrived and helped to relieve Malta's precarious supply position.	and	and
Eighth Army staged attack.	ports	16 Aug.	Further reinforcement of Spitfires to Malta in a/c carrier <u>Furious</u> (Op: "Baritone").	attacks	anti-submarine
31 Aug.	and			on	
Enemy opened new offensive against Eighth Army but withdrew after heavy tank losses.	bases			enemy	
		15-14 Sep.	Unsuccessful combined Naval and R.A.F. operation on Tobruk (Op: "Agreement" - Destroyer <u>Zulu</u> , 4 M.T.B.'s and 2 M.L.'s sunk.)	ports	patrols
				and	
				bases	

GENERAL

MEDITERRANEAN

GIBRALTAR

RED SEA

Central Basin  
(Malta)

Eastern Basin

23 Oct. Eighth Army's victory at Alamein; retreat of Rommel's "Afrika Korps" begun.

2 Nov. Anglo-American landings at Cassablanca, Oran and Algiers (Op: "Torch") (Capture of Arzeu and Tafarui- (Oran) and Maison Blanche and Blida (Algiers).

8 Nov. Capture of Port Lyautey (Oran)

10 Nov. Armistice with French North African forces; Germans occupied unoccupied France. Allied occupation of Bougie.

11 Nov. Allied occupation of Bone.

12 Nov. Allied occupation of Djidjelli.

14-29 Oct. Final attempt by Luftwaffe to neutralise Malta. (Estimated enemy losses: 118 a/c destroyed, 50 probables and 137 damaged).

28 Oct. Destruction of enemy convoy to Benghazi by R.A.F. Malta.

29 Oct. Further reinforcement of Spitfires arrived at Malta.

25-26 Oct. Destruction enemy convoys to Tobruk by No. 201 (N.C) Group's a/c (assisted on 26 Oct. by U.S. Liberators).

31 Oct- 1 Nov. by U.S. Liberators).

1-2 Nov. by U.S. Liberators).

1 Nov. Extension of R.A.F. runway at Gibraltar to 1,550 yds. nearing completion, (in readiness for Op: "Torch").

5 Nov. Combined Naval and Air H.Q. established at Gibraltar (for Op: "Torch")

14-19 Nov. 4 U-boats sunk (3 by R.A.F., 1 by R.A.F. & F.A.A.; Gib.)

15 Nov. Eighth Army recaptured Tobruk.

16-20 Nov. Successful British convoy to Malta from Egypt (Op: "Stoneage").

17 Nov. Italian tanker Giulio Giordani (10,534 tons) torpedoed by Malta a/c (Sunk next day by submarine).

19 Nov. Eighth Army recaptured Benghazi.

R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. shipping strikes and attacks on enemy ports and bases

R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. shipping strikes and bombing attacks on enemy ports and bases.

R.A.F. convoy escorts, searches and anti-submarine patrols.

/27 Nov.

GENERAL	MEDITERRANEAN	GIBRALTAR	RED SEA
	<div>Central Basin (Malta)</div> <div>Eastern Basin</div>		
27 Nov. French fleet scuttled at Toulon.	R. A. F. and U. S. A. F. F.	R. A. F.	
28 Nov. Allied forces occupied Djedeida (there after Allied advance on Tunis held up).	1-5 Dec. Successful British Dec. convoy to Malta from Egypt (Op: "Portcullis").	convoy	
	Dec. Three successful British convoys to Malta from various Egypt (Ops: "Quadrangle, A, B, & C". - dates) Final relief of Malta.	escorts,	
15 Dec. Rommel withdrew to Buerat.	13-14 Dec. Successful attack by F.A.A. Swordfish on Ferryville (one 6,000-ton ship sunk)	searches	
24 Dec. Adml. Darlan assassinated	strikes and		
Dec. Op: "Torch" stalemate (last week or) period began.	"intruder"		
1943			
14 Jan. Casablanca Conference opened.	operations and	bombing attacks	
15-16 Jan. Rommel evacuated Buerat.	22 Jan. Combined Naval and R.A.F. bombardment of Zuara.	on	
	23 Jan. Eighth Army occupied Tripoli.	enemy	
6 Feb. Rommel crossed Tunisian frontier.	attacks on	ports	
19-20 Feb. (1) Med. & Levant Naval Commands (2) 18th Army Group. (3) Med. Air Command in- cluding North- west African Air Forces (Strategic, Tactical & Coastal Air Forces).	21 Feb. Italian tanker Thorsheimer (9,955 tons) sunk by Malta torpedo- bombers.	and bases	
1 Mar. Formation of Air Defence H.Q. Eastern Mediterranean (formerly Air H.Q., Egypt).	Mar. Successful Allied air attacks on enemy convoys (various resulting in several ships sunk and/or dates) damaged.	patrols	
6.199912/JLL/6/48		/6 Mar.	

GENERAL	MEDITERRANEAN	GIBRALTAR	RED SEA
	<div>Central Basin (Malta)</div> <div>Eastern Basin</div>		
6 Mar. Rommel's last attack on Eighth Army.		R. A. F.	
Mar. Resumption of "Torch" forces forward operations.		convoy	
26 Mar. Eighth Army captured Mareth line.		escorts,	
6 Apr. Eighth Army pierced Rommel's Akarit defences.	5 Apr. Op: "Flax" against enemy transport a/c (40 enemy a/c shot down over Sicilian straits, and 161 destroyed on ground).	searches	
	10 Apr. U.S. bombers sank Italian cruiser Trieste and disabled cruiser Gorizia at La Maddalena (Sardinia).	and	
10 Apr. Allied forces occupied Sfax.	10 Apr. Repeat of Op: "Flax" (53 enemy a/c shot down)	anti-submarine	
12 Apr. Allied forces occupied Sousse.	Apr. R.A.F. Malta destroyed their 1,000th enemy a/c since beginning of war.	patrols	
	Apr. Heavy Allied (Various bombing attacks dates) on Naples, Palermo and Trapani.	18 Apr. Allied fighters shot down 58 enemy transport a/c (JU.52's & 16 escorting a/c - over Gulf of Tunis)	
		22 Apr. Allied fighters shot down 28 enemy transport a/c (ME.323's and RE.2001's & 9 escort- ing a/c).	
3 May Allied forces captured Mateur	4-11 May Combined Naval and Air operations preventing enemy evacuation of Tunisia (Op: "Retribution").		
7 May Allied forces captured Tunis and Bizerta.	5-6 May Heavy Allied air attacks on enemy convoys, shipping and harbours, causing wide-spread damage.		
12 May Capture of Von Arnim			
13 May Surrender of Italian First Army.			
14 May End of Tunisian Campaign.			

SECRET

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RESTRICTED

R.A.F. NARRATIVE

(First Draft)

THE R.A.F. IN MARITIME WAR.

VOL.6.

THE MEDITERRANEAN AND RED SEA.

Air Historical Branch (1)

Air Ministry.



THE MEDITERRANEAN AND RED SEA.I N T R O D U C T I O N

(To 10 June, 1940)

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INTRODUCTIONEFFECT OF AIR POWERS ON THE STRATEGIC PROBLEMAircraft Control of the Seas

A proper understanding of the significance of the air-sea campaign and the complexity of operations all over the Mediterranean and Red Sea requires that one should trace back some years before the war, to see how the R.A.F. shaped its policy, and to look at the way the strategic problem was affected by the growth of air power. In three years of hard fighting, the strategic situation underwent a series of bewildering changes, largely brought about through the application of air power. The struggle for Mediterranean mastery provided a conclusive lesson in how the air element could control the sea - a lesson not demonstrated solely by the ultimately successful protagonist.

It was in the air that the battle for control of the Mediterranean - a protracted one - was decided. As in the Northern European theatre, the sea war was waged without a major fleet battle, and throughout the struggle naval movements were largely influenced by air strength.

This narrative deals mainly with the R.A.F.'s support for naval operations and the part played by the air in the war of supplies. But strategy was three-dimensional, for it became clear that whichever side controlled the land was well on the way to controlling the waters and communications by exercise of air power. Thus while studying the air-sea war one must constantly bear in mind the situation on land.

It was in the Eastern Basin that the war for control was mostly fought. Every part of this "battlefield", which is some 1,500 miles long and at its widest (across the Gulf of Sirte and the Ionian Sea) is 700 miles, could be covered by shore-based aircraft. Hence the development in aircraft range caused the pattern of the air-sea war to be strikingly

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different from that of the 1914-18 war, when the Royal Naval Air Service with seaplanes and carrier-borne aircraft contributed in a useful, though often largely experimental, way to a variety of campaigns.

In 1939, few people outside the R.A.F. could have visualised the R.A.F.'s role in the Mediterranean as what it became - not an ancillary to Army or Navy but the dominant and determining factor in strategy. The Navy, which had hitherto held pride of place in keeping these seas open, could no longer sustain that position.

#### Air Power and the Supply Routes

Aircraft range and the possession of air bases had changed the face of Mediterranean strategy well before hostilities opened. No longer could powerful fleets establish control over a sea in which nowhere is it possible to be more than about 200 miles from any land. And as the war developed, as it did for us at one stage, with nearly all the enveloping land in hostile or neutral hands, the Navy's task became difficult indeed, and would have been a hopeless one without R.A.F. protection. The occasions when the Navy gallantly ran the gauntlet without proper air cover, such as during the Greece and Crete evacuations or to beleaguered Malta and Tobruk, only served as a grim reminder of the potency of land based aircraft operating over narrow waters.

For three years the Mediterranean was virtually closed to us, at the cost of prodigious extra effort, material, manpower and shipping to take supplies and reinforcements by alternative routes. Those extra exertions were forced upon us by the enemy's air power, and not always the active exercise of it either, but the threat, since the mere possession of airfields commanding the Narrows was in itself a powerful deterrent to our ships. For example, the geographical position was sufficient to dissuade the R.A.F. and the Navy

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from fully exploiting Malta at the opening of hostilities with Italy.

Fortunately, we were not alone in having to make extra efforts through interdiction of a supply route. Our counterblows at Axis communications played a notable part in throwing the enemy out of North Africa. Our triumph owed much to the fact that while the enforced use of the Cape route involved a tremendous extra effort, the supply was steady and reasonably certain. In that sense the safety of our Atlantic communications exerted a profound influence on the issue.

While the armies were locked in battle, while fortunes in the Desert ebbed and flowed, while the armies were reinforcing during periods of quiescence, the war of supplies continued without abatement. The whole campaign was one of supplies. Air-sea power, in the way it affected supplies, influenced the position on land as the combatants swayed back and forth; and air-sea power was in its turn affected by what happened on the land. The fate of armies depended on what could be brought to them by sea; what could be brought by sea depended on the ability of air power to protect it, and on the ability of the Army to secure and protect air bases.

## Strategy Changed by Italy's Policy

The metamorphosis in the naval strategical situation had come about in the years before the war through the alignment of Italy in the Axis, political developments in the Balkan countries and Near East, and progress in air striking power, particularly the radius of aircraft action. During the 1914-18 war, the Mediterranean route was maintained in the face of U-Boat menace from the nests in the Northern Adriatic.<sup>1</sup>

/Aircraft

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1. When Mediterranean air-naval co-operation was expanded early in 1918, Wing Captain A.M. Longmore became the Senior Air Service officer on the C-in-C's staff. Perhaps it was more than a coincidence that the outbreak of war with Italy found this same officer, now Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, as A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East.

Aircraft from carriers and shore bases helped to keep the submarines in check and played a part in the working of the famous Otranto "barrage" - a system of nets and air and sea patrols aimed at preventing the egress of U-Boats from the Adriatic. In that war, much of the naval co-operation work by aircraft was done from carriers, as the application of air power was restricted by range and weight carrying limitations. Then, air power was largely reliant on the reach of the Navy. From 1940 onwards that position was reversed, and it became painfully obvious to the sailors that their ability to operate depended on the cover provided by aircraft.

The serious consequences to the Mediterranean route inherent in Italy's entering the war were foreseen well before 1940. The growth of Italian air and naval strength meant that even if the French were with us, operating from Algeria and Tunisia, maintenance of the route would be a hazardous, if not impossible, undertaking with Sicilian airfields and Pantellaria overlooking the narrows. It was obvious that the Eastern and Western Basins would be divided, while on the other hand the Italian Navy had easy access to both, through the Strait of Messina. In the Eastern Basin, Italy had a strong position through the Dodecanese bases. The only reasonably safe naval base available to us in that Basin was Alexandria.

#### G/C. Harris' Warning

As early as 1935, the Deputy Director of Plans, G/C. A.T. Harris, had produced a paper showing that increases in aircraft speeds and ranges, coupled with instrument flying, had profoundly altered the whole conception of sea power and the security of sea communications. Here are some of his observations (which are of special interest in the light of events):-

"Only a year or so ago, the air threat to sea communications could have been adequately pictured on a map as a 200-mile shaded fringe round the coastlines. Today all this is altered by technical progress, and tomorrow the 'wide open spaces' will have virtually ceased to exist

/as

as an argument tending to prove the impotence of aircraft in affecting 'sea power' ..... The time has come, and indeed is overdue, when the truth of the statement that 'the Navy is the first line of defence of our sea communications' is due for test .....

Although Germany has no fleet to speak of and no submarines at all, she possesses beyond doubt a lasting memory of past experience, an efficient air force, an aircraft industry superior to most, and the knowledge that the third dimension which provided a way of evading our sea power in the last war exists not only below but also above the surface of the sea, where it can be exploited with a force and simplicity far beyond the wildest dreams of her submarine war days. Our Fleet may perhaps be considered of some value for protecting our sea communications against German submarines and against surface raiders, which Germany is unlikely to waste time in employing; but by no stretch of the imagination can our Fleet be considered capable of protecting our sea communications against shore-based air attack. It is this method of attack, and in my opinion this method only, which Germany intends to exploit against us in the next war. It is, in fact, the only method by which she can defeat us, and it is in fact under existing circumstances the only sure road to our undoing..... Some years ago the Air Staff drew a few aircraft range circles on a map of the Mediterranean. From that moment it has been tacitly accepted by all except fanatical reactionaries that in a war against a Mediterranean Air Power our sea communications through the Mediterranean have virtually ceased to exist."

## The Navy's Attitude

The changed strategical situation through air power was appreciated by the Royal Navy well before hostilities began. In his conclusions on a night reconnaissance exercise carried out in August 1937 by the Mediterranean Fleet and two flying boat squadrons, the C.-in-C. Mediterranean observed: "It was desired to investigate the risks to which a slow convoy is exposed. The exercise showed convincingly that the Mediterranean, with its narrow waters and short distances from air bases, is no place for moving slowly."

## Uncertainty on Axis Intentions

Our planning in the Mediterranean before September, 1939,

A.M.  
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Ibid:

1. During this exercise an incident occurred which might have had international repercussions. A reconnaissance aircraft from the carrier Glorious reported in error an Italian destroyer. Acting on this, the Glorious despatched most of her striking force on a mock attack. "Fortunately for the peace of Europe", observed the Director of Staff Duties in a minute, "the mistake was discovered in time."

1939, was complicated through having to consider a variety of contingencies, as there was uncertainty as to the nature of the combination against us and direction of the blow. There were the possibilities of a single-handed war with Germany or Italy; a combination of both, with the support of Spain; or a German thrust to the Middle East through the Balkans. There was the possibility that Germany might stand on the defensive in the West and dispatch considerable forces to Libya. To ensure its communications in such a plan, the Axis would have to neutralise our naval power, which might be largely effected by bombers. Then reinforcements to Libya could be built up so as to outnumber overwhelmingly our forces in Egypt. Our counter to such a plan would be to strike at the enemy air bases, which could only be done with long range bombers.

Early in 1939, the Director of Plans, Air Ministry, Air Commodore J. Slessor, recommended the Director of Operations to consider the sending of six heavy bomber squadrons to the Middle East by August 1939, even though bomber strength at home was far from satisfactory. His view was that this reinforcement plan held out one of the few hopes of really useful offensive action in the Mediterranean area, and his object was "to ensure that if we do by any evil chance have to do something of this sort we shall not be caught completely napping."

As the antagonists-to-be sized each other up in 1939 and calculated their chances in the coming conflict, it was obvious that Italy appreciated the weak link in her chain of communication. The fate of her North and East African empires hung on the security of the sea link with Libya, astride of which lay Malta. Italy had no alternative supply line, as we had round the Cape.

The Italian naval intention was disclosed in a document purporting to be a directive to naval commanders in the conduct of operations. This document, which came into the hands of the French General Staff in the Spring of 1939, gave Italy's immediate naval objective as:- Cutting communications  
/between

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S. 50147  
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HQ. Med.  
S. 247/83/Air

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between the East and West Mediterranean; isolation and neutralisation of Malta; protection of sea transport to land forces against Egypt from Cyrenaica, and against Palestine from Italy and the Dodecanese. (This document was considered by the Admiralty to be genuine).

/ MALTA



MALTA POLICY UNCERTAINTIESDefence Limitations

With the surge of Italy's imperial ambitions in the 'thirties, Malta assumed an increasingly strategical importance. It possessed the only fully equipped Fleet dockyard in the Mediterranean, the destruction of which would considerably hamper our Fleet operations. Policy about reinforcement of the island vacillated before the war because of exposure to heavy air attack from Sicily. The air defence problem arose through lack of suitable airfield space on this rocky island of 98 square miles, which prevented the employment of sufficient squadrons to counterbalance the heavy scale of attack which Italy could launch. The Navy was loth to give up use of the island as a base, regarding it as a useful outpost for chopping Italian communications with North Africa.

To the Air Staff, Malta's geographical position put the island at the mercy of an unrelenting bombing onslaught which could be unleashed from Sicily. Thus, during the international crises which arose before the war it became the policy to remove Malta's aircraft to more distant bases.

Air Staff Views

As early as 1926, the Air Staff considered that unless adequate counter measures were provided, the increased scale of air attack which Italy could mount would not only render Malta practically useless as a naval base and dockyard, but would also constitute a serious menace to British shipping in the vicinity of Malta and Sicily. It was considered that no strength of air defence at Malta could give complete immunity from air attack. The main weakness in Malta air defence was lack of "depth" to provide adequate warning of enemy approach. <sup>1</sup> /In

A.M.  
25180  
Note by  
Air Staff

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1. When hostilities developed, this drawback was largely overcome by the employment of Radar.

In 1934, Air Vice-Marshal Ludlow Hewitt, Director of Operations and Intelligence, informed the Joint Overseas and Home Defence Committee:-

A.M.  
S. 571  
E.26

"A recommendation by the Air Staff for the provision of a nucleus air force at Malta must not be taken as an expression of opinion that Malta could be successfully defended from Malta alone against the full scale of air attack which Italy could bring to bear. It is not a feasible operation, without effective support from other air bases, to defend the small island area within effective range of the main Metropolitan air force of a great Power."

The Joint Planning Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. in 1936 recommended that "air facilities up to the full capacity of the Island should be provided as soon as possible", adding: "We cannot, however, pending war experience of A.A. defence, rely upon the full facilities of Malta being available for the Fleet in war."

J.P.164

(C.O.S.500)

Representations to Air Ministry

A.M.  
S. 39977  
4A

When the A.O.C. Malta, Air Commodore P.C. Maltby, suggested modification in the organisation of his Command, the Director of Organisation replied in February 1937 stating that "the organisation and provision of additional measures of defence to deal with the possibility of a threat to Malta must necessarily depend upon policy decisions consequent on the recent agreement with Italy."

A.M.  
S.41415  
10A,11A

Malta's function in war was worrying Mediterranean commanders in the Summer of 1937, when conversations were held between the Governor, Lt.-Gen. Sir Charles Bonham-Carter, the A.O.C. Mediterranean, and the C.-in-C. Mediterranean. All were anxious to avoid the island being caught by a crisis while in a low state of preparedness, and this subject formed the basis of representations which the A.O.C. made to Air Ministry in July. By this time the Navy was fairly certain that Malta would be untenable as a Fleet base in a war with Italy, and was considering measures to transfer the Fleet to the Eastern Basin in such a contingency.

The R.A.F's dilemma was inability to operate offensively  
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without strongly protected airfields - protection which did not then exist. The A.O.C. thought that marked results could be achieved with protection, but without it our forces "would not survive long enough to justify their being sent." Air Ministry agreed with this view generally, but thought, in view of the need for reconnaissance in the early stages, a few flying boats might be made operable, as there would be wide dispersal at moorings.

Ibid:  
19A

In August, Anglo-Italian relationships were considered by the Committee of Imperial Defence, but there was cold comfort in their recommendations for commanders in the Mediterranean. The Committee thought it would not be justifiable to adopt measures to improve our strategical situation in the Mediterranean from the air aspect if they had to be taken at the expense of the air defence of Great Britain. The Air Council was thus restricted to such increases in the Middle East and Mediterranean as could be provided without depleting war reserves at home. The C.I.D's first consideration in the event of war with Italy was to direct the efforts of the three Services mainly to the Defence of Egypt, but it was intended to defend Malta against any attempt to capture it.

Ibid:  
21A

HQ.Med.  
S.210/AIR  
E1

The following April (1938), Air Commodore Maltby made further representations to Air Ministry about the functions and scope of his Command in the event of war, as its responsibilities between the Eastern and Western Basins did not seem clear. He wanted his command to embrace the Western Basin, including Gibraltar, and outlines a plan for transfer of his H.Q. from Malta, in the event of war. The argument in support of this was that in war with Italy "Malta will become an invested fortress no longer tenable as a naval base and useless for my Command to exercise control from, either in the Eastern or Western Basins.

/Furthermore,

Furthermore, the defence of Malta virtually becomes a political rather than a military necessity, the object being to prevent the island being captured. This is a military problem in which the R.A.F. has a very small part, so small that it does not justify my H.Q. staff remaining in the island for the purpose. It would be better employed in controlling air operations either in the Eastern or Western Basin. It would of course be necessary for a small staff to remain in Malta to deal with the air defence of the island." Accordingly the A.O.C. proposed that in war his H.Q. should move to the Western Basin, continuing to exercise such control in Malta as would be practicable.

Disagreement with Navy

Sharp disagreement between the R.A.F. and Navy about the value of Malta became marked at a joint conference in London in April 1939. Strong naval arguments were advanced for air reconnaissance in support of their plan for striking at Italy by operating light forces against communications with Libya. This project hinged on the use of Malta. The sailors' views were resisted by Air Vice-Marshal Peirse, D.C.A.S., who explained the Air Staff view that the Italians could cripple Malta if they wished, as it was not big enough for sustained fighter defence. Vice Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, D.C.N.S., disagreed on the ground that Malta's military targets were too small to bomb accurately and that experience in the Spanish Civil War showed the Italians lacked courage.

In July 1939, the C.I.D. authorised "Scale B" of defence for Malta - 112 A.A. guns, 60 light A.A. guns, 24 searchlights and four fighter squadrons - as the Navy was anxious to operate from this base. The Air Staff, however, thought that even "Scale B" would not allow the Fleet to use the island.

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S.1157  
2B

C.I.D.  
370th  
meeting  
1939  
Paper 506C  
by J.O.H.D.  
Committee

**SECRET**Air Staff Doubts Remain

A.M.  
S.44534  
114A

In June, 1939, Air Commodore Leckie, the new A.O.C. Mediterranean, urged Air Ministry to modify its attitude to the usefulness of Malta, emphasising its value for central Mediterranean reconnaissance. In view of the increased A.M. protection of the island and the projected reinforcement by fighter squadrons, he considered that the location of a proposed new land-based GR/TB squadron, No.212, which was earmarked for the Mediterranean, should be Malta, not Egypt.

Ibid:  
115A

But the vulnerability of the island to air attack was still very present in Air Ministry minds, and the Air Commodore's proposal was rejected on the ground that the anticipated scale of air attack would not permit the effective operation of a land-based squadron until an even higher scale of defence was reached. It was, however, considered that it might be possible in war to operate two flying boat squadrons from the island, as the mooring dispersal of such aircraft would give them a better chance of survival in air attack than land aircraft. It was also considered better to wait and gauge the air threat to Malta under war conditions than to risk the loss of valuable squadrons.

H.Q. Med.  
S.198/AIR  
38A

Although the outbreak of war found Malta without a fighter squadron, this was not to say that there was any lack of intention to provide fighters. In the Spring of 1940 the D.C.O.S. Committee reaffirmed the decision to station four fighter squadrons eventually in Malta. The main object in defence of Malta was to make it secure as a base for naval operations but Air Ministry had misgivings about the chances of making it secure as a base for capital ships. The Admiralty wanted G.R. squadrons on the island to assist in operations against

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the Italian Fleet and Libya-bound convoys, but as Air Commodore  
Ibid: Coryton, Director of Operations (Overseas), stated in a letter  
 to the A.O.C. Mediterranean on 16 May, 1940: "Air Ministry  
 opinion has been that whatever defences are provided for Malta,  
 it will be impossible, on account of Malta's geographical  
 position, to make it usable as a Fleet base" - a view which  
 was confirmed by events. He added: "For the present, while we  
 are so short of fighters to defend other vital areas, we are  
 simply unable to provide any for Malta, as from the wide point  
 of view, unless we can make Malta usable, we should not in fact  
 waste our meagre resources."

#### Air Base Development

Policy uncertainties had delayed air base construction  
 programmes for some years before the war. In 1930, Malta  
 was a base for Fleet Air Arm aircraft and a flying boat  
 squadron (No.202). The accommodation was the seaplane base  
 at Kalafrana (used in the 1914-18 war), with good workshop,  
 storage and torpedo maintenance facilities, an auxiliary  
 mooring site for seaplanes at Cala Mistrà and a landing ground  
 at Halfar. The restricted size of Halfar led to a further  
 site for an aerodrome being recomitted at Takali, and this  
 was under construction in 1936. Authority for steps to secure  
 a third aerodrome site, at Luqa, was given by the C.I.D. in  
 July, 1936.

In June, 1938, the A.O.C., Air Commodore Maltby,  
 described the existing organisation at Malta as having grown  
 up illogically, all the units being still appendages of  
 Kalafrana. Halfar, he considered, was too dependent on  
 Kalafrana. He recommended that the projected seaplane base  
 at Marsa Xlokk should be built as soon as possible, to relieve  
 Kalafrana. The trouble, as the Director of Organisation,  
 Air Vice-Marshal Portal, pointed out in a demi-official reply,

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A.M.  
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A.M.  
 S. 39977  
 22A

Ibid:  
 25A

**SECRET**

was that "policy has been changed or not decided: and that consequently all our plans have been upset before they could be implemented. The future of Malta was decided in July 1937 on the basis of the ultimate re-equipment of No.202 Squadron with landplanes. Ten days ago it was 'finally decided' that the unit should continue to have boats. I need not tell you what the effect of this has been on our building programme."

The plans drawn up in 1937 for construction of a seaplane station at Marsa Xlokk were approved by the Treasury early in 1939 and work on the lay-out of buildings began in July, 1939.

When war broke out in 1939, Malta had two small grass airfields - Halfar, mainly used by the Fleet Air Arm, and Takali, then being used as a civil airport. After that, work went ahead on the construction of Luqa, which was completed with four runways 800 yards x 50 yards in May, 1940.

Policy, however, remained to "wait and see" before committing squadrons to Malta. The island's defencelessness in the air sense, apart from A.A. guns, caused the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East, Air Chief Marshal Sir A.M. Longmore, to voice the speculation in a demi-official letter to Air Ministry a few days before Italy entered the war: "Perhaps already the loss of Malta is accepted by the Chiefs of Staff in their minds."

#### GIBRALTAR AIR BASE DIFFICULTIES

##### One Small Landing Ground

The British intention in regard to Gibraltar was to base anti-submarine forces there and to close the Straits to the enemy. Gibraltar, covered by Allied naval dispositions, was regarded as a secure naval base so long as Spain remained neutral. Its distance from Italian bases - a 1,400 miles round trip from Sardinia - meant that the Rock would be virtually immune from sustained or crippling air attack. But Gibraltar could be made unusable as a naval base, even though we continued to hold it, if hostile land and air /forces

HQ. Med.  
S.105/AIR  
69 & 103

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War History

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11th  
meeting  
1939

forces operated from Spanish territory. However desirable it was to station reconnaissance and fighter squadrons there, the problem of air defence was complicated by the impossibility of operating adequate air forces from the Rock. Through topographical limitations, there existed in 1939 only one small emergency landing ground and there were very limited facilities for flying boats. Meteorological conditions, partly due to the situation of the Rock, also created special difficulties for air operations from Gibraltar.

#### Key to Reinforcement Route

It had not been possible to make an adequate air base by the outbreak of war even though the Chief of the Air Staff, in a memorandum in 1935 on the importance of Gibraltar and Malta to an air reinforcement route between Britain and the Middle East had stated: "Gibraltar is the key to the route, and therefore to the whole strategic conception of Imperial air defence. On the provision of an adequate intermediate air base at that port depends our ability to bridge the gap in our air communications for many years to come. An air base is also essential at Gibraltar for the operation of landplanes and seaplanes engaged in trade protection and air defence."

Gibraltar's naval importance was enhanced through the likelihood of Malta's being untenable as a naval base in the event of war with Italy. Enlargement of the dry dock to take capital ships was due for completion early in 1940, which would make Gibraltar the only naval base in the Mediterranean with adequate docking facilities for a Fleet and free from the threat of sustained air attack (assuming Spanish neutrality).

#### LESSONS OF 1938 CRISIS - REINFORCEMENT

##### Steps to Improve Preparedness

The general subject of dispositions and war readiness was raised by the Czechoslovakia crisis. On 4 October 1938,

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D.D. Plans  
IIA/1/38  
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S.46838  
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the Air Council asked its members to produce reports on the experience gained during the emergency and to make suggestions for improving war preparedness. About the same time the Committee of Imperial Defence also called for a review by all departments of the measures taken during the crisis, for any defects to be pointed out, and for suggestions to remedy them.

To this the A.O.C. Mediterranean replied that the transfer of No. 202 Squadron (London flying boats) to Egypt during the crisis denuded Malta of all effective sea reconnaissance at a time when it might have been most urgently required, and that the Governor and the Commander-in-Chief were perturbed at the civil reaction to and concomitant military effect of this, and at the absence of fighter aircraft.

Ibid:  
8A

In his reply, the A.O.C. Aden expressed the view that the aircraft available were inadequate to keep down the Italian air threat to convoys at the southern end of the Red Sea, even though supported by Sudan and Kenya squadrons. Nor were they capable of providing the extensive assistance required by the East Indies Squadron. The needs were a general reconnaissance squadron based at Aden and a flying boat squadron for naval reconnaissance.

Ibid:  
15A

A little later, in October, the A.O.C. Mediterranean suggested as a future emergency plan the formation of a Coastal Command to assist the A.O.C. Middle East in directing operations of disembarked or shore-based units allocated for operations over the sea.

HQ. Med.  
S. 210/Air  
9A

#### Overseas Command Conference

All these and other problems were crystallised at a /conference

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1. In September, in response to Admiralty representations, it had been decided to send 202 Squadron, located in Malta, to Gibraltar to co-operate with the Fleet in case of an emergency. When the crisis arose, however, this intention was changed, and the result was that the London flying boats were transferred to Alexandria on 27 September. With the passing of the crisis, the squadron returned to Malta in October.

A.M.  
S. 44534

Overseas  
Command  
Conference  
Report

conference of Overseas Commands at Cairo early in November 1938.

As a result of this, an extensive series of policy and administrative recommendations were embodied in a report. Their substance as affecting naval co-operation matters amounted to this:-

An additional striking force squadron to be provided in Egypt, preferably of the G.R. type. An additional fighter squadron for Aden to protect the Fleet base and Red Sea communications. A fighter unit to be permanently located at Malta to protect it as a naval base. A permanent operational air base to be made available for the Fleet Air Arm in the Eastern Mediterranean. It was proposed to maintain in Egypt the major portion of the war reserves, stores and maintenance facilities for G.R. squadrons which in the event of war with Italy would be moved from Malta. Provision of a Combined War H.Q. at Malta, delayed through conflicting views among the Services, was held to be a matter of urgency.

It was expected that on the outbreak of war the G.R. squadron in Malta would move to Egypt, so the Conference recommended that H.Q. Mediterranean should arrange for creating in the Middle East a group headquarters formation to administer and operate this and any other G.R. squadrons in the Middle East and disembarked F.A.A. units except fighters. This group headquarters would also be able to administer any units which might under other circumstances move to Gibraltar.

#### Conference on Navy's Calls

The impossibility of fulfilling, on a short-term basis, all the Navy's G.R. requirements became obvious in the Spring of 1939, when several inter-Service conferences were held. The Navy wanted all the Eastern Basin under reconnaissance from Malta and Alexandria, but it was a case of making a little go a very long way, as the R.A.F. had not the necessary aircraft. If our light naval forces could operate from Malta, with the French Navy working from Bizerta, the Italians would be forced

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to institute the convoy system, and this would be welcomed by the Navy as leading to fruitful operations by the Fleet based on Alexandria. But our naval operations depended on air reconnaissance.

"Minimum war requirements" for reconnaissance and security in the Central Eastern Mediterranean were defined by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean as one G.R. landplane squadron and two fighter units at Malta; Group H.Q., two G.R. landplane squadrons, eight flying boats and two fighter units at Alexandria. But at that time all the R.A.F. had available for reconnaissance and naval co-operation was one squadron of London flying boats, with the promise of another squadron during the year. However, the Air Staff view was that the Mediterranean could not be considered apart from the whole problem of Middle East defence, a view in which Sir Andrew Cunningham, V.C.N.S. concurred. Although the Navy admitted that opinions in the Mediterranean might be "parochial" in the light of the whole Middle East problem, it was emphatic in its regard for this area as the best for striking a blow at Italy. The only way of meeting the Navy's call for immediate reinforcement was to accept a reduction in the first line strength allotted for naval co-operation from Home bases. This was done in May, with Admiralty approval, by the transfer of No. 228 Squadron, which had just been equipped with Sunderlands, from Pembroke Dock to Alexandria, with the S.S. Dumana as a depot ship. No. 202 Squadron (Londons) remained at Malta, but on a mobile basis, having survived a proposal that it should be re-equipped with landplanes. In June, four Londons of No. 202 Squadron carried out a training cruise of the Greek islands, under Wing Commander E.A. Blake.

Despite the reinforcement, the G.R. forces were inadequate to fulfil the Navy's plans which were outlined

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Ibid:  
1B

Ibid:  
2B

Ibid:  
12A

H.Q. Med.  
198/Air  
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A.M.  
S.44534  
122.

to the R.A.F. Director of Plans, Air Commodore J. Slessor, at a conference in Malta in July with the Admiral and the A.O.C. Mediterranean. There were not enough aircraft to perform even the routine patrol work envisaged by the Navy, let alone fulfil special calls; and there were the additional complexities of range, having regard to the bases and extensive areas of sea to be covered. Then there was the question of suitability, for single flying boats could not be expected to face the considerable opposition at strongly defended ports.

Ibid:  
129B

The model system of patrols and tasks for a G.R. force set by the Navy provided for a continuous coverage of the Malta to Cephalonia line (350 miles); the eastern entrance to the Aegean, covered from Egypt (350 miles distant); the western entrance to the Aegean, covered from Malta or Alexandria; protection of advanced surface forces; offensive anti-submarine operations; occasional sightings of enemy ports; long-range reconnaissance for the Fleet; shadowings of sighted enemy forces and investigations of reports. The Navy calculated that the full scheme would need 36 G.R. aircraft based on Malta and 10 on Alexandria. These were in addition to the Fleet Air Arm aircraft.

But, as the Navy ruefully admitted, the number of aircraft available was nowhere near the theoretical requirement. At that time the R.A.F. had only nine flying boats in the Mediterranean. The Fleet Air Arm had 36 carrier-borne aircraft (excluding fighters) and 11 catapult aircraft, but these were incapable of carrying out most of the functions mentioned above. There were loopholes, too, in the Navy's scheme. For instance, coverage of the Eastern entrance to the Aegean would ensure that enemy vessels did not enter the Eastern Basin by day undetected. During the night, a 30-knot ship could reach almost any position in the Eastern basin.

In cutting its coat from the skimpy material available,

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the Navy was prepared to reduce the Aegean entrance patrols to a low priority, but rated the Malta-Cephalonia patrols as of paramount importance.

Meeting the Navy's needs, plus the vexed question of control and disposition of forces, was indeed a staff headache for the R.A.F. The problem was tied up with the use of Malta as a war-time base, about which there were still misgivings in Air Staff minds. As the Navy attached so much importance to Central Mediterranean reconnaissance, Malta was the obvious base. But its position in the "bull's eye" area caused the Director of Plans in his report on the Malta conference to suggest that the use of Tunisian bases should be examined as an alternative.

Ibid:  
122A

As a result of the Malta conference, the reserve Sunderlands of No.228 Squadron, retained in Britain, were ordered to the Mediterranean.

Ibid:  
123A

#### Long-term aims

Eventual build-up of G.R. strength, to co-operate with the Navy in the Mediterranean or Red Sea, to eight squadrons was envisaged in a Chiefs of Staff recommendation late in 1939, with the provision "as soon as resources will permit" of shore base, storage and depot facilities. The Fleet Air Arm was to have two carriers, operating six squadrons. The disposition of the squadrons contemplated by an Air Ministry conference in February 1940 was:-

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2 G.R. Flying Boat Squadrons and  
1 TB/G.R. Squadron at Malta

1 G.R. landplane squadron at Gozo or Tunisia

1 G.R. flying boat squadron at Gibraltar

1 G.R. landplane squadron in Morocco

2 G.R. landplane squadrons in Egypt.

But this programme was very much of the long-term order,

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as there were more pressing priorities, and it was emphasised by the Director of Plans that none of the personnel or equipment could be expected in the Middle East "in the near future."

War Dispositions - Formation of Nos. 200 and 201 Groups

The plans had been formulated mainly on the basis of a war with Italy, but when the situation arose of war with Germany alone and intensive submarine activity in the Western Approaches and North Atlantic, hasty redispositions were made.

On 8 September, No. 228 Squadron was recalled to Britain and No. 202 Squadron was transferred from Malta to Gibraltar, the latter remaining under command of the A.O.C. Mediterranean.

Thus the week after the outbreak of war with Germany found the R.A.F.'s G.R. strength in the Mediterranean down to six London II flying boats. The Fleet Air Arm, of course, had its carrier-borne and disembarked aircraft.

To operate the G.R. force at Gibraltar, No. 200 Group was formed under the command of Group Captain F.M.P. Barrington.

Although the Eastern Basin was denuded of G.R. aircraft, it was decided to retain a Headquarters formation at Alexandria.

Consequently, No. 201 Group was formed on 18 September 1939, under Group Captain H.W. Penderel, to operate torpedo spotter reconnaissance aircraft disembarked at Alexandria while the Fleet was not there, and any future G.R. reinforcements.

No. 200 Group's personnel from Malta arrived at Gibraltar on 9 September in H.M.S. Hostile. The Group's function was to control the operations of No. 202 Squadron and No. 3 A.A.C.U. Detachment (Swordfish), and liaison with the naval and military authorities at Gibraltar. To assist this Group, which became immediately engaged in anti-submarine work and convoy protection, mainly in the Atlantic, No. 86 Wing was transferred with the depot ship Dumana from Alexandria to Gibraltar in December.

A serious shortage of flying boats at this time,

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A.M.  
S. 44534  
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Air Order  
No. 152

No. 200  
Group  
O.R.B.

A.M.  
S.44534  
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coupled with urgent requirements in Home waters, precluded the sending of contemplated reinforcements to Gibraltar - a shortage which in fact, evoked an Air Ministry instruction in December that no unnecessary flying should be done.

#### Training Difficulties

H.Q.  
Med.  
S.198/Air  
23

The desirability of more G.R. aircraft training cropped up in February 1940, when Admiral Cunningham, C.-in-C. Mediterranean, expressed concern at the possibility of U-Boat action in the Mediterranean, pointing out that German submarines had the necessary endurance for such voyages and might arrange for unobtrusive refuelling at obscure Spanish or Italian ports. Recognising the value of air patrols as in the forefront of effective anti-submarine measures, the Admiral was anxious that preparations should be made to train crews at Malta for this type of work, and that in the event of U-Boats appearing Malta should be reinforced with flying boats. It was true, as he pointed out, that the air forces available for anti-submarine work east of Gibraltar were almost non-existent.

Ibid:  
24

His proposal had the backing of the A.O.C. Mediterranean, who supported it as "a practical proposition worthy of serious consideration whether the submarine menace becomes apparent in the Mediterranean or not."

Ibid:  
26

But the R.A.F. Middle East had neither the aircraft nor the crews to spare for any special training, and the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East had to reject the suggestion on the ground of economy of flying hours, shortage of aircraft nor the crews to spare for any special training, and the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East had to reject the suggestion on the ground of economy of flying hours, shortage of aircraft and spares, and the fact that no G.R. aircraft were available.

The uneasy period in the Mediterranean between the outbreak of war with Germany and the entry of Italy

/provided

provided a breathing space for re-study of the strategic situation and tightening up of measures to meet the Italian threat. This respite enabled air-sea co-operation exercises and anti-aircraft preparations to proceed at Malta. Fleet and Army anti-aircraft training, however, had not been all that those Services desired, through the lack of target towing aircraft. Catering for this need, there was only No. 3 A.A.C.U. (Swordfish) at Malta, and this had been weakened by the detachment of three aircraft for anti-submarine patrols from Gibraltar. This operational use was dubbed "misemployment" by the Director of War Training and Tactics (Air Commodore R.P. Willock) during correspondence in May, 1940, with the A.O.C. Mediterranean on a Navy request for faster towing aircraft such as Henleys and the provision of a separate flight at Alexandria in view of the reinforcement of the Mediterranean Fleet. Explaining to the Admiralty why no reinforcement of the A.A.C.U. could be expected through a serious shortage of towing aircraft and equipment, the Director said he had been seriously disturbed by the misuse of the aircraft on anti-submarine patrols. The reason for this misuse was that the detachment happened to be at Gibraltar for training when the war started, and was used to supplement the flying boat effort, with Air Ministry concurrence.

H.Q.Med.  
S.93/Air  
12A

Ibid:  
14A

#### Operations Between 3 September 1939 and 10 June 1940

202 Sqdn.  
O.R.B.

Six days after the outbreak of war with Germany, No.202 Squadron was ordered to transfer from Kalafrana (Malta) to Gibraltar, and on 11 September the first operational patrols were carried out by two of the London flying boats. Thereafter the squadron did anti-submarine patrols and convoy escort work assisted by No.3 A.A.C.U. detachment. Most of their flying was done over the Western Approaches to the Straits. Submarine sightings

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were rare, and in the Western Mediterranean there were none at all. A few attacks were made in the vicinity of suspicious oil patches, without visible result. In the first few months of operations, trouble was experienced with bombs. Half of the bombs dropped during operations and tests between October 1939 and February 1940 failed to explode. Another difficulty in the early period of the war was lack of servicing facilities at Gibraltar; the Londons had to fly to Malta for overhaul.

The flying boats devoted considerable attention to reconnaissance of Spanish ports, where German merchant ships were identified from time to time.

Intensive watch was kept over the Straits for four days beginning 20 April 1940, in consequence of a report that some Italian submarines had left for Germany, but no sightings were made. Although we were still at peace with Italy, the aircraft were ordered to attack such submarines on the high seas or in Spanish territorial waters, if they were submerged or on the surface without escort. Under the terms of an agreement with Italy, her submarines must not be outside exercise areas without escort.

Ibid:  
Cpl. Order  
W/192/40

During the period between the outbreak of war with Germany and Italy's entry, there was little call for anti-submarine patrol in the Mediterranean. The fear that submarines were operating near the Maltese islands in April, 1940, led to No. 3 A.A.C.U.'s Swordfish, based on Halfar, being put on an operational basis for a brief spell, but there were no sightings during the few patrols carried out.

In the lull afforded by Italian neutrality, the Mediterranean was tranquil. The expected U-boat menace did not materialise. The French Navy assumed responsibility for the Western Basin, a British destroyer force guarded the Straits of Gibraltar, and the Mediterranean Fleet, after a

/period

Admiralty  
Account of  
War in E.  
Mediterranean

period based on Alexandria, went to Home waters, the C.-in-C. hoisting his flag ashore at Malta. A few vessels sufficed to carry out contraband examinations in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean. When the initial tension arising from the war with Germany had relaxed, merchant shipping proceeded without escort. Italy had limited the area of her submarine patrols and made no fleet movements.

By the end of March, 1940, however, it was plain that Italy was only biding her time before throwing in her lot, so the Battle Fleet returned to the Eastern Mediterranean, reinforced by cruisers from the East Indies, and in May was joined by a French squadron. The few weeks remaining before hostilities gave opportunity to weld this collection of warships into a fighting fleet.

#### G.R. Reinforcements Arrive

H.Q. Med.  
S. 198/Air  
37A

In May 1940 the Admiralty, still planning to use Malta, asked Air Ministry to send a flying boat squadron to the island. This again raised the issue of the vulnerability of squadrons based on Malta without adequate fighter protection. Although dispersal offered some protection for flying boats, the anchorages were outside the effective range of A.A. coverage. The A.O.C. Mediterranean, taking the view that G.R. aircraft could not operate with only A.A. defence on the island, urged that if no fighters were to be made available, a G.R. squadron to cover the Central Mediterranean would be better based on Tunisia. The Air Ministry reiterated its view that G.R. units would be unable to operate for any length of time from the island in war.

No. 201 Gp.  
O.R.B.

When, early in May, the Eastern Basin was reinforced by Sunderlands from the Far East, the squadron, No. 230, did not go to Malta, but to Alexandria, based with the depot ship Dumana, which had been removed from Gibraltar in April.

/When

No. 228 Sqdn.  
O.R.B.

When it became clear that Italy's entrance into the war was only a matter of days, orders were given for another squadron of Sunderlands to reinforce the Mediterranean. So on the day that Italy took the plunge, an echelon of three Sunderlands of No. 228 Squadron, from Pembroke Dock, led by Wing Commander G.E. Nicholletts, carrying 42 personnel and a large quantity of stores, was winging its way to Alexandria. Two of them made a night stop at Malta, leaving next morning shortly before the sirens heralded the first of the many attacks which the island withstood.

The G.R. organisation at Alexandria was that Nos. 230 and 228 Squadrons came under control of No. 201 Group. This group also took over No. 101 Wing, which earlier, as No. 86 Wing, had fulfilled an administrative function for the units at Gibraltar and had transferred to Alexandria with the ss. Dumana. The two squadrons were based too far away to fulfil the Navy's requirement for reconnaissance of the Malta - Benghazi - Cephalonia triangle, but the policy of "wait-and-see" about Malta had forbidden their operating from the island for the time being. The A.O.C.-in-C. thought it a pity that the G.R. reinforcement was not one of a long-nosed Blenheim or Hudson squadron which could operate from a shore base in the Western Desert.

H.Q.M.E.  
DO/AML/2  
15A

#### Final Plan to Meet Italian Threat

Co-operation with the Navy in its task of interrupting Italian communications to Libya and preserving the Red Sea convoy route appeared as one of the R.A.F.'s main roles when the new Middle East Operational Plan was issued a fortnight before Italy entered the war. Under the revised Initial Outline Plan issued about the same time, H.Q. Middle East had been assigned the command and general control of all air operations in the Middle East, Mediterranean, Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan, Aden, Kenya, and Somaliland, /with

with power to transfer units from one operational area to another. Thus right from the start of war against Italy the A.O.C.-in-C. was able to exercise the desideratum of applying the weight of air power at the place it was most needed and avoid the wastage inherent in segregation and specialisation.

In the Plan, the neutralisation of the Italian air threat to Egypt was regarded as a principle of primary importance, but at the same time it was recognised that direct support for naval forces by bombing might at times have prior claim on our air effort. Co-operation with the Navy in the Mediterranean would primarily be reconnaissance work.

Bombing to reduce the threat to Malta, Tunisia and Algeria was visualised, but in this connection the naive reservation was made that "These offensive commitments pre-suppose the provision of the requisite aircraft" and "there are no indications that these will be forthcoming in the near future, even if war breaks out with Italy." It was emphasised that replacements and wastage could not be readily effected in the immediate future owing to heavy commitments elsewhere; and so, until the measure was taken of the opposition, plans for attack should give due weight to the conservation of aircraft.

#### CONTROL ARGUMENTS

##### Role of G.R. Group

The vexed question of control of G.R. operations which was to continue well into the war period, arose sharply early in 1939, when the new Combined Plan for the Defence of Egypt and the R.A.F. Middle East Operation Plan were formulated. During the September 1938 crisis, the A.O.C. Middle East had agreed to a request from the C.-in-C. Mediterranean that the flying boats transferred from Malta to Egypt should be under his operational control.

When the Combined Plan for the Defence of Egypt was  
/drawn

Combined  
Plan for  
Defence  
of Egypt  
1939

drawn up in February by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean, the G.O.C. Egypt and the A.O.C. Middle East, the role of the G.R. Group which it was proposed should operate from Alexandria, composed of formations transferred from Malta, was defined as follows:-

"Oversea reconnaissance to a line midway between Alexandria and Malta and covering the coast line Mersa Matruh to Haifa. Aircraft of the landplane (G.R.) Squadron may also be used for long distance operations in the Western Desert. Any G.R. aircraft allocated by the A.O.C. for overseas reconnaissance will be under the general direction of the C.-in-C. Mediterranean who will exercise control through the O.C. general reconnaissance group."

#### Navy Direction Resisted

These proposals, also embodied in a draft operations plan for R.A.F. Middle East, evoked a protest from the A.O.C. Mediterranean, Air Commodore R. Leckie, who observed in a letter to Air Ministry:-

A.M.  
S.47862  
12A

"I must emphasise that the necessity for the formation of this group-Headquarters has been submitted as a result of a close study of the circumstances existing in this Command during the last two or three years and of lessons learnt in recent emergencies. It has become increasingly evident that, on the departure of units from Malta to another theatre, there is a necessity for setting up an R.A.F. Command to direct operational activities without which operational control will inevitably drift into Naval hands, as has happened before."

The Air Commodore warned that the detailing of G.R. squadrons exclusively for Fleet purposes precluded their employment in a wider strategic role.

Just afterwards, commenting on the revised version of the Combined Plan, Group Captain Drummond, of H.Q. Middle East, in a D.O. letter to the Director of Plans, stated:

Ibid:  
13A

"You will also observe that we appear rather to have handed over our control to the navy. At the conference, the A.O.C. (Middle East) was disposed to give the Navy even greater control, and it was only as a result of my rather heated protests and some bickering with the Admiral that we arrived at the present wording, which was acceptable to

both parties, and which I think more or less conforms with the wording of the Manual of Coast Defence. The A.O.C. feels that whatever we may appear to have given away in the wording, in practice it would work satisfactorily."

Group Captain Drummond added that he was by no means happy about the arrangement. "The A.O.C's view is that he will not argue with the Admiral, and if the wording employed in defining the role of the G.R. and fighter squadrons is not agreed by you, it is for you to take it up with the Admiralty."

#### Air Ministry Revises Plan

The apparent capitulation to the Navy's demands for control did cause some concern at Air Ministry, and the divergence of opinion between the R.A.F. and Navy was taken to a higher level when the Air Ministry revised the M.E. Initial Outline Plan. The disputed clause relating to role of the G.R. Group was amended to read:-

"Operational control in conjunction with C.-in-C. Mediterranean, through the medium of Area Combined Headquarters, of G.R. units and disembarked F.A.A. T.S.R. aircraft. Overseas reconnaissance in co-operation with the Navy in the Mediterranean. G.R. aircraft of landplane type if available may also be used for long-distance operations in the Western Desert."

A.M.  
S.47862  
24B

The Air Council view was that the Combined British and Egyptian air defence resources necessitated a comprehensive organisation which would ensure the most flexible and economical employment of units and which would make possible the maximum defensive concentration at any threatened point.

Ibid:  
24A

The Navy, however, stuck to its guns and insisted that the C.-in-C. Mediterranean should exercise general direction over overseas reconnaissance while the number of available aircraft was so small. The Admiralty were prepared to relax the condition only when the number of aircraft was sufficient for daily routine long-distance

Ibid:  
26A

/reconnaissance

SECRET

31.

reconnaissance as well as for co-operation in naval operations.

Final Control Directive

A.M.  
S.47862  
36A

The plan for control and dispositions was resolved after the revised Defence of Egypt Plan had been through the alembic of Air Ministry and the Chiefs of Staff. The relevant portion dealing with naval co-operation provided that:-

"The A.O.C. Mediterranean will be under the command and general direction of A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East, but will deal direct with C.-in-C. Mediterranean in regard to the operation of all aircraft allotted for naval co-operation (including T.S.R. aircraft disembarked for operations). HQ. R.A.F. Mediterranean to be located at the Fleet base whenever practicable."

There would be an operational H.Q. from Malta at the Fleet base. A group H.Q. would be formed at Malta from the remainder of the staff and administrative services in Malta, and its commander would be responsible for local air defence and for the operation under the general direction of the A.O.C. Mediterranean of all G.R. units at Malta. There would be a group H.Q. at Alexandria, formed from wing H.Q. in the depot ship Dumana, to be amalgamated with the operational H.Q. when the A.O.C. Mediterranean was at Alexandria.

When the G.R. landplane squadron was formed, its war station would be Egypt.

Ibid:  
39A

A.M.  
S.44534  
M.116

The final revised Plan, in which the R.A.F. gained its point in the control controversy, was issued to Commands in August 1939 after consideration by the Chiefs of Staff. This was the solution of what the D.C.A.S. had rightly termed "a complicated problem."

HQ.ME.  
O.R.B.  
Appendices  
June 1940

Revision and modification of the Air Force Initial Outline Plan, on 7 June 1940, defined more precisely the roles and dispositions of formations. The main modifications as affecting naval co-operation were:-

"H.Q. R.A.F. Mediterranean would be located "initially at Malta and later possibly at the Fleet base whenever practicable."

/The

The A.O.C. Mediterranean would deal direct with the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean regarding the operation of all aircraft allotted for naval co-operation "other than those based at Alexandria."

H.Q. Mediterranean would control No.209 (G.R.) Group at Gibraltar, under which came No.202 Squadron (London flying boats).

The Group H.Q. located at Alexandria, No.201, composed of No.101 Wing and No.230 Squadron (Sunderlands) would be controlled by H.Q. Middle East. No.201 Group would conduct all operations of aircraft allotted for co-operation with the Navy and based in the Alexandria area, including T.S.R., aircraft disembarked for operations while the Fleet was absent from Alexandria, but not bombers and fighters.

### Naval Command Difficulty

While the R.A.F. and Army had unified command in the Middle East and Red Sea area, the Navy had not fallen into line in this respect by the time Italy entered the war, although representations had been made to the Admiralty by the other Services. The desirability of unified naval command was pointed out to the Admiralty in August 1939 in a note by the Deputy Chief of Air Staff and the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff. By this time<sup>1</sup> the Air Ministry and War Office had agreed on the necessity of a Commander-in-Chief for each service to co-ordinate plans and operations in the Middle East and Red Sea areas, but the Naval forces were still operated independently - the Mediterranean under its C.-in-C. and the Red Sea under the C.-in-C. East Indies. As the security of the Red Sea route was of direct concern to all commanders responsible for conduct of the war in the Mediterranean and Egypt, and inter-Service consultation would be difficult with divided naval control, the Army and Air Force were anxious to have one naval command in the area. It seemed essential

/that

1. In the Spring of 1938 the Air Council decided that in war the A.O.C. Middle East would become A.O.C.-in-C. to exercise higher control and co-ordination over all the air forces in the Middle East, embracing Egypt, Palestine, Sudan, Kenya, Iraq, Malta and Aden. In July 1939, the War Council took a parallel decision concerning the responsibility of the G.O.C. land forces.

A.M.  
S.1708

A.M.  
43149  
58A,15D



that the A.O.C.-in-C. should be in a position to co-ordinate air-naval activity with one naval commander having authority over both the Mediterranean and Red Sea. In addition, there was always the difficulty that both naval commanders might be at sea when decisions were required.

These representations were revived at the time Italy entered the war by the C.-in-C. Middle East and A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East in a message to the Chiefs of Staff urging that "naval responsibility for the Red Sea and Aden be placed immediately under the C.-in-C. Mediterranean so that the spheres of operation of the three C's-in-C. here may coincide." The Army and Air Force commanders stated that joint planning experience so far had met "very considerable difficulties" through the division of naval command. Through the entry of Italy into the war, the planning inconvenience "might become a serious danger." The representations, however, did not have the desired effect.

A.M.  
S.43159  
115B

#### PLANS TO SAFEGUARD RED SEA

##### Air Danger from East Africa

In 1939, misgivings had developed about the security of our Red Sea line of communication in face of the Italian threat from East Africa, although it was obvious that unless Italy could obtain control of the Suez Canal her East African possessions would be virtually isolated. An Italian seaborne attack against Aden seemed unlikely without command of the sea, but there was the possibility of strong air attack if Italy reinforced her air forces from Libya. As our reinforcements moving to the Middle East by sea were liable to air attack in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, plans must be made for completing the overland route via Basrah, improving the route via Mombasa as an alternative, and for co-ordinating the passage of convoys, with simultaneous offensive action

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1939  
(British  
Strategical  
Memorandum  
164-7)

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by our air forces from the Sudan and Aden against Italian bases in Eritrea.

While in 1938 and 1939 the Navy was seeking greater G.R. strength in the Mediterranean, the same thing was happening in the Red Sea area. In the autumn of 1938, the C.-in-C. East Indies, whose command embraced Aden and the Red Sea, put forward a scheme of air patrols and escorts which would involve 12 flying boats, 12 medium bombers and 12 dive bombers on naval co-operation work alone. In the light of actual war experience and what was achieved by the use of much smaller forces, the C.-in-C's requirements seem excessive. But his plan, envisaging the use of an "umbrella" of six dive bombers in the air at a time five hours before a convoy was due to reach Aden, reflected the uneasiness felt at the Italian air threat to shipping in the Red Sea.

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A.F.C.(J)  
6th meeting  
1939

During the Anglo-French Staff Conversations in London in April 1939, Captain Danckwerts, Director of Plans, Admiralty, emphasised that steps would be taken to ensure that at no time would the Italians have control of the Red Sea by surface ships. The Navy's only anxiety was the risk to shipping from air attack in the narrower part of the Red Sea. The R.A.F's primary task in this area, as defined by Group Captain Slessor, Director of Plans, Air Ministry, was to attack Italian air forces and bases in East Africa to reduce the scale of enemy attack.

#### Allied Air Weakness

The contingency which would arise through Italian intervention closing the Mediterranean route threw the role of the Red Sea life-line into sharp relief when Anglo-French Staff Conversations were held at Aden between 30 May and 3 June, 1939. This conference concluded that the Red Sea, forming the line of communications of land, sea and air /forces

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Para. 5

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forces operating in and around the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean, was vital to the Allies. Allied control must be established without delay, to ensure supplies and reinforcements for our own forces and to deny supplies to the enemy.

Para.8 Although air attacks on our shipping were the greatest threat, there was the consolation that this was a specialised form of warfare in which the Italians might not be too well practised.

Ibid:  
App.C.1 Compared with the enemy, the Allied air forces to meet the threat were weak. For naval co-operation there were available No.8(B) Squadron (Blenheims) and a fighter flight of Gladiators at Aden. A G.R. Squadron of Beauforts (No.229) was due to form at Aden in November 1939. Stationed in Iraq was No.203 (F.B.) Squadron (Southamptons), which might be switched to Aden. In the Sudan were No.47 Squadron (Vincents), due to re-equip with Wellesleys, and No. 223 Squadron (Wellesleys). The Navy attached considerable importance to air reconnaissance while convoys App.C.6 were between longitude 50 degrees East and latitude 18 degrees North, and also wanted reconnaissance of enemy bases, of the coast and islands at the southern end of the Gulf of Aden and in the Gulf of Aden. It was thought that if No.203 Squadron reinforced Aden, the routine reconnaissance requirements could be met.

The conference recommended this move, suggested that Section II this squadron should be re-equipped with G.R. landplanes, 6(XI) and asked for the formation of No.229 Squadron at Aden to be expedited. It also concluded that: "The naval and air Section II forces immediately available for operations in the Red Sea 6(i) are at present so small that, at the outset of hostilities, control of the Red Sea, and to some extent, of the Gulf of Aden, will be in the hands of the enemy. While this state

/lasts,

lasts, not only would the flow of Allied shipping through the Red Sea have to cease, but the enemy's supplies would continue to arrive, and he would be able to operate in the Gulf of Aden against the Allied bases at Aden and Djibouti. Moreover, there would be little chance of preventing raiders and submarines breaking out into the Indian Ocean."

"Offensive Defence" Plan

R.A.F.,  
M.E., Operational  
Plan 1940

"Offensive defence" was the keynote of the Middle East Operational Plan, 1940, to meet the Italian threat to our Red Sea communications, Sudan and Aden. The security of the Red Sea route was regarded as of paramount importance.

"Security of our Red Sea communications and of Aden constitute the principal commitment of the British forces in this (Aden Command) theatre of operations. In general, the primary role of our air forces is the neutralisation of the enemy air forces, especially during the actual passage of convoys through the Red Sea and entrances to the Gulf of Aden." Naval and air forces operating from Italian East Africa were regarded as the greatest threat to the Red Sea life-line.

Such was the measure of importance attached to Red Sea security that the A.O.C. Aden was instructed, when considering provision of close support to land forces in an emergency, to be guided by the principle that the maintenance of the security of convoys in the Red Sea and of our bases at Aden must have primary consideration: "Direct support to Allied troops in critical situations will not be afforded if by doing so the maintenance of the security of the Red Sea communications and of Aden will be seriously jeopardised."

The Plan laid it down that naval co-operation such

as reconnaissance and escort duty in the Red Sea would be provided by Aden Command and No.254 (Sudan) Wing. Aden Command would also carry out bombing operations to counter air, sea and land attacks against Aden, Sudan and Red Sea communications. The role of the Air Force in Iraq was to include co-operation with naval forces in maintaining security of sea communications through the Persian Gulf.

#### Air-Naval Conference Decisions

H.Q.254  
Wing  
S/12/1/Air  
4A

Detailed plans for R.A.F. action in the Red Sea were formulated at an air and naval conference at Port Sudan on 4 May, 1940. The need for conservation of resources imposed the policy that in the early stages, at any rate, offensive air operations would not be undertaken against the Italians in Italian East Africa unless they attacked our vital interests. But there would be air attack on the Italian air forces during British convoy movements through the Red Sea. As well as convoy escort, sea and port reconnaissance and anti-submarine patrols were necessary, and to undertake these there were No.14 Squadron (Wellesleys), which had been earmarked to operate from Port Sudan, and No.203 (G.R.) Squadron at Aden, composed of long-nosed Blenheims. The conference recommended that the Blenheim squadron should be converted to fighters for convoy protection.

Ibid:  
8A

The need for economy in the use of aircraft led to the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East on 24 May rejecting a proposal from the Rear-Admiral Fourth Cruiser Squadron for a daily routine air reconnaissance from Port Sudan. The Rear-Admiral's request arose from the lack of anti-submarine defences at Port Sudan (except two 6-inch guns) and the fear that enemy submarines would easily be able to waylay shipping and lay mines in the approaches. The best the R.A.F. could promise to meet this danger was reconnaissance on special /occasions.

occasions.

ANGLO-FRENCH UNDERSTANDINGS

Plans to Control Mediterranean

Joint plans for retaining control of the Mediterranean were discussed at the Anglo-French Staff Conversations in London in March and April, 1939. The British view was that the extent to which Italian air forces would be able to

A.F.C.(J)15 interfere with our naval operations was conjectural. "At the  
1939  
Par.22 worst, risks from submarine and air attack might severely restrict operations of Allied Fleets in the Central Mediterranean. We are not prepared to accept this latter situation as the basis for our plans. Moreover, our latest intelligence indicates that the training of the Italian Air Force is backward as far as attack on warships is concerned, and it is understood that they possess no torpedo bomber aircraft."

However, the available British naval forces would not  
Para.23 by themselves be adequate for operating continuously in the Central Mediterranean in view of the distance from Alexandria, but if conditions enabled us to use Malta as a base for the main naval forces we could then exercise a stronger control. Meanwhile, if the French concentrated strong light forces on  
Para.24 Bizerta, co-operating with what light forces we could operate from Malta, it should be possible to maintain a serious and constant threat to Italian communications.

We were depending on the French Navy to control the Western Basin, and considered that when France was able to  
Paras.25 develop offensive measures against the long western sea-  
and 26 board of Italy, its bases and communications, she would be able to effect a sufficient dispersion of Italian naval and air forces to give the Allies general control of the Mediterranean.

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A.F.C.1  
1939  
British  
Strateg-  
ical Mem-  
orandum  
136

British naval forces based on Alexandria would ensure control of the Eastern Mediterranean, although it was recognised that "the presence of Italian naval and air forces based on Leros would present us with difficulties, and we might in the initial stages have to operate outside the Aegean, between Greece and Crete."

A.F.C.(J)15  
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Para.2

We considered that in view of the capital ship position Italy was unlikely to risk a major naval action and would aim at reducing our capital ship superiority and at the same time securing her communications with Libya by use of her large force of submarines, her cruisers, destroyers and m.t.bs and Air Force.

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ical Mem-  
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Pt.II. 130

Para.132

The general objects of the Allies were defined as to secure their interests in the Mediterranean and Middle East and to knock Italy out of the war as soon as possible. This would entail offensive naval action from the outset, wherever possible, against Italian naval forces, coasts and bases. As to the role of air forces: "The provision of the necessary air forces to co-operate with the Allied naval forces in the Mediterranean will be an important factor in achieving the Allied object, but it is unlikely that it will be possible to divert any air forces from the main theatre to Southern Europe, anyway in the initial phase."

#### Air Objectives

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S.1183  
22A

Further Anglo-French conversations relating to air co-ordination took place in 1939 - at Rabat, Algiers and Tunis in May and at Cairo in October - and in January 1940 at Cairo. At the May conversations, General Tetu, G.O.C. the French 5th Armée de l'Air, took the view that the objectives of major importance for air attack were Italian air bases in Sicily, the Italian mainland, Sardinia and Pantellaria, and that the destruction of Italian air forces

forces would have a decisive bearing on the whole Mediterranean situation - it would go far towards eliminating Italian aggression against Egypt or Tunisia.

The general direction of operations by French and British air forces in North Africa was laid down by the respective Air Ministries as follows:-

Ibid:  
25A

French air forces would be directed against:  
Italian lines of communication to Libya;  
depots and reserve stores in Libya;  
Italian supply convoys;  
support of ground and naval forces.

British air forces in Egypt would operate:

- (a) In defence of Egypt, which would include action against Italian air forces, mobile columns and lines of communication, convoys and air and other bases in Libya.
- (b) In co-operation with the Royal Navy against Italian communications to East Libya, though with the aircraft available at that time this action would be virtually confined to occasional night raids on Benghazi.

At the January 1940 talks, when the war with Germany was in a quiescent state, it seemed obvious that French policy in the Mediterranean was one of "wait and see". The French appeared to be directing their attention to a possible intervention in south-east Europe; their air forces, owing to a change in equipment, were available for war in the Mediterranean only on a reduced scale.

Ibid:  
55B



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**SECTION I**

(10 June 1940 to 10 November 1940)

STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE PERIODMain Features of First Five Months.

When Italy flung in her lot, she had the opportunity to make the Mediterranean "Mare Nostrum" a reality instead of an oft-voiced Mussolini phrase. Why she never achieved this, despite holding all the strategic aces and having the later aid of German forces, will be seen in subsequent sections. But she failed from the start, even when she held the initiative, had the power to sever our Mediterranean communications by her geographical position, and was relieved by the French disintegration of any threat to her western flank.

Enterprising British action on land, sea, and in the air, in fulfilment of a policy of limited offensive, and the fact that Italy's action did not match her trumpeted ambition, gave us a breathing space to readjust our strategy after the calamitous effects of the French collapse. The battle of supplies and communications, which became the main preoccupation of the Mediterranean campaign, and was bound up with the substitution of air power for sea power, did not develop in the first five months of hostilities. From the aspect of air-sea war, these early months were marked by the following factors:-

Our lack of air power over the Central Basin, which limited reconnaissance.

The Royal Navy's seizure of the initiative, in defiance of inferior numbers and speed.

Reluctance of the Italian Fleet for battle.

British control of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Survival of Malta and its partial exploitation as a reconnaissance and offensive base.

Safe conduct of supplies to Malta.

Use of Italian air forces on a large scale against the Navy at sea.

Enemy success in maintaining supplies to Libya.

The start of a bombing policy against Italian and Libyan ports.

A crippling blow to the Italian Fleet at Taranto.

Our hold on the western gateway at Gibraltar.

Preservation of our Red Sea supply route.

R.A.F. Intentions and "Charter".

Italy's weakness - the vulnerability of her communications with Tripoli and Libya - was appreciated by British planning staffs, but the fact that in the early stages we were unable to affect her sea traffic was due to the remoteness of our air and naval bases from the supply routes. However, air action against enemy supplies, shipping and communications occupied a prominent place in the intentions of the R.A.F. Middle East. To implement the Air Council's directive that the R.A.F.'s primary role in the Middle East was the defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore decided that his objectives should be:-

- (a) Offensive action against air bases.
- (b) Offensive action against ports, to destroy or damage submarines, shipping and facilities.
- (c) Destruction of resources in Italian East Africa, where it was anticipated no replacements could be made.
- (d) Full support of British armies.
- (e) Strategical reconnaissance for naval, army and air information.

The priority of these depended on circumstances as they arose.

In a "charter" communicated from Air Ministry the day after the outbreak of war with Italy, the A.O.C. Middle East was given command of R.A.F. units in a wide area, much of which was affected by sea communications - The Mediterranean,

ACM Longmore  
Despatch  
Part I.

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Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Egypt and the Sudan, Palestine and Trans-jordan, East Africa, Aden, Somaliland, Iraq and adjacent territories, Cyprus, Turkey and the Balkans. He was made responsible in conjunction with the Naval C-in-C. Mediterranean, Naval C.-in-C. East Indies and the Commander-in-Chief Middle East for the preparation of plans for the employment of the units under his command.

Effect of French Defection.

The defection of the French, on whose Navy we had relied to hold the balance of sea power in the western Mediterranean, transformed the strategic situation overnight. It placed Italy in a dominant position in the Central Basin, relieving her of any diversion of forces to meet a serious threat from the West. The best we could hope to achieve for some time was to keep the Axis foot from the Suez and Gibraltar gateways.

Our Fleet, heavily outnumbered, had to operate from Alexandria - at least 800 miles from the route Italian supplies to Libya were likely to use. Naval forces based on Gibraltar were even more handicapped; Malta became virtually isolated and at the mercy of air attack from Sicily.

The loss of French support in Tunisia swept away our hopes of gaining control of the Narrows. Italian sea and air power divided the Mediterranean in two and compelled us to maintain separate naval forces in the Eastern and Western Basins. The Italian Fleet had a safe and easy passage from one basin to the other through the Straits of Messina, and the Italian bases in the Dodecanese were a thorn in our eastern flank.

In the Red Sea area the position was more hopeful, because as long as we held the Suez Canal the

Italian East African forces were isolated and deprived of substantial reinforcement and supplies. It was imperative that we should preserve intact the Red Sea route - now our only supply line - but even so the voyage from Britain to Port Said via the Cape occupied, in favourable circumstances, some 60 or 70 days. Thus, Eastern Mediterranean ports were more remote from England than any important port in the world was before the closing of the Mediterranean, and the round voyage was about two-and-a-half times longer than before.

The gravity of the situation which faced us after France's collapse lay in the fact that Italy, though vulnerable in several senses, represented by her geographical position the greatest threat to our Imperial communications, particularly if stiffened by German assistance. Sir Percy Loraine<sup>1</sup> summed up the issue in a memorandum to the Chiefs of Staff thus:-

"Our lengthwise communications in the Mediterranean cannot co-exist with Italian north-south communications in the same sea in war. If we lose this issue it is the first step towards a disruption of the British Empire in the East. In order to win, we have got to cut Italian communications with N. Africa; in order to cut Italian communications with N. Africa we have got to destroy Italian sea-power, and therefore we must also free the Mediterranean from the depredations of shore-based aircraft under Italian control".

#### Doubt About Fleet Disposition.

The odds against us were indeed heavy - so much so that on 17 June the Director of Plans, Admiralty, considered that from the point of view of purely naval strategy,

<sup>1</sup> High Commr. for Egypt and the Sudan 1929-33; Ambassador to Turkey 1933-39, and to Italy 1939-40.

COS(40)  
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COS(50)  
183rd  
meeting

the position of the Mediterranean Fleet at Alexandria was unsound; the Mediterranean Fleet should, in his view, be transferred to Gibraltar as soon as it was apparent that French control of the Western Basin was about to be lost to us. The arguments against keeping the Fleet in the Eastern Basin were:-

It did not lie between the Italian Fleet and our vital Atlantic trade routes;

With France out of the war, an increasingly heavy scale of German and Italian air attacks could be brought to bear on the Fleet at sea or in harbour;

Alexandria lacked adequate repair facilities;

The Fleet would be a wasting asset and unable to reinforce vital areas at home and in the Atlantic.

However, the Chiefs of Staff Committee,

COS(40)  
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considering the altered balance of naval strengths in the Mediterranean and the possibility of active French hostility against us, decided in June to reinforce the Mediterranean. They recommended maintenance of the existing Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean, the establishment of a capital ship force at Gibraltar and immediate action to improve the defences of Malta.

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Our retention of Gibraltar became even more important through the loss of French support, since there was no possibility of our naval forces using Oran, Casablanca or Dakar as alternative bases if the Rock became untenable. Consequently the capital ship Force H was formed at Gibraltar at the end of June. Its prime function was to deal with enemy raiders in the Atlantic, but it retained our footing in the Western Basin as well. Force H quickly asserted itself by the action at Oran, which immobilised the battle cruiser Dunkerque.

This, and the immobilising of a French battleship, five cruisers and three destroyers based

at Alexandria, somewhat redressed the naval disparity, but we were still very much at a disadvantage in naval strength, particularly if the French turned hostile. Tunisia represented an additional threat to Malta which would make reinforcement of the island difficult.

Middle East Security Plan.

Despite the loss of the Mediterranean supply route and the danger of the isolation of Egypt by our Red Sea lifeline being cut, evacuation of our position in the Eastern Mediterranean without a struggle was unthinkable. Such a course would have left the Balkan States to their fate, made it easy for Italy (who was vulnerable to economic blockade) to obtain grain and oil from Black Sea ports, left open the gateway to India and brought about a grave loss of confidence in Britain by Turkey and the Middle East countries.

The Chiefs of Staff took the view that the retention of our position in the Middle East was of the utmost importance to successful prosecution of the war, particularly in view of our policy of economic blockade of Europe. In a signal to the Middle East Commanders-in-Chief on 3 July, they emphasised that security of the Middle East hinged on the defence of -

- (a) Egypt and Sudan, where our main forces were based, communications centred and Suez Canal controlled.
- (b) Iraq, from which we must control the oil of Iraq and Iran and safeguard the Baghdad - Haifa route.
- (c) Palestine, the most northerly defensive position, containing the western terminus to the Baghdad route.
- (d) Aden, essential to the Red Sea line of communications.
- (e) Kenya, second line of defence in Africa, and containing an alternative line of communication to Egypt via Mombasa.

A.M.  
S.5461  
Enc.6A.

/This

This signal emphasised the importance of rendering secure as soon as possible the Red Sea route. (By that time, considerable success had been achieved in reducing the Italian air and submarine threat in that area). Our policy, it was laid down, must be generally defensive for the present, although every chance of local offensive action must be taken. It was considered that our forces were sufficient to deal with any purely Italian attack on Egypt as long as we could retain the Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The fear was of German participation in air attack on Egypt, and that Alexandria might be rendered untenable as a Fleet Base, but it was intended to retain the Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean as long as possible. Replacement Difficulties.

Preoccupation with home defence held out little prospect of substantial reinforcement in the Mediterranean. The Italian threat had to be met for some time with what resources existed. The R.A.F.'s problem, as Sir Arthur Longmore pointed out on 21 June, lay in a correct allocation between effort for Aden, Sudan and Kenya, designed to keep the Red Sea inviolate, and conserving resources for the defence of Egypt against an Italian offensive from Libya. Supply of replacements in the early stages bristled with difficulties. On 19 July the A.O.C.-in-C. signalled Air Ministry:-

"Existing shipping arrangements appear chaotic. For instance, spare engines for Sunderland flying boats of 230 Squadron which were shipped from Singapore at the beginning of June have been mislaid somewhere east of Suez and cannot be traced". 1

Royal Navy's Offensive Policy.

The determination of the British Fleet to maintain //old

AM  
S.5461  
Enc.2A.

Ibid:  
13A

Ibid:  
16A

1. On 24 July H.Q. M.E. was informed that the ship containing the engines was expected to sail from Bombay for Suez about 5 August.



old traditions and "lie close to the enemy" was manifest from the moment Italy entered the war. Our warships counterbalanced their inferiority in numbers and speed with a resolution to get to grips which so impressed the enemy that only once in the first few months did he risk a clash of battle fleets - on 8 July - and what he received on that occasion very quickly decided him that his units were far safer in harbour. Even when overwhelmingly superior, as on 30 September - when he had five battleships out to the Royal Navy's two - his morale was still low.

So the British warships had to content themselves with protecting convoys, hunting submarines, and rounding up Italian shipping at sea; <sup>1</sup> and their success owed much to the operation of No.228 and No.230 Squadron flying boats from Alexandria, Aboukir and Malta; and No.202 Squadron Londons operating from Gibraltar. The Italian timidity meant that our warships could sweep the seas under the enemy's nose and take the opportunity of getting convoys through the Mediterranean and to Malta, which was done several times. But the distance of the Alexandria base from the scene where action could be expected with the Italian Fleet was too great to permit our Fleet to operate effectively. The practice became for the Battle Fleet to put to sea when convoy movements were in progress, to protect the supply ships, and hope that the enemy would be tempted far enough from his bases to enable us to give decisive action.

/The

Admiralty  
Daily  
Summary  
of Naval  
Events.

1. Through its Government's elementary oversight of failing to give adequate warning, the Italian mercantile fleet suffered heavily on the outbreak of hostilities. About 33 ships were left to their fate in British ports, and 140, totalling some 784,000 tons were in neutral ports, mostly outside the Mediterranean, with no prospect of reaching home.

The Italians risked their Fleet only to cover convoys between Italy and Libya, and this they did when fairly certain that the British Fleet was at a safe distance. Then, too, their supplies could slip by way of the Pantellaria channel at night and hug the coast the rest of the way to Tripoli or Benghazi. At any rate, in this early period they did get supplies through, and it was the realisation of this which led the Admiralty to agitate for Malta to be fortified strongly enough to permit its use once more as a naval base. Malta, in fact, was the solution to the cutting of the enemy's supply route on which the fate of the land struggle in North Africa largely rested. Efforts to make it a base for offensive action were triumphantly indicated by events described later.

A significant pointer in this early phase was the disclosure of Italy's reliance on aircraft to keep our Fleet at bay. That she was not successful in employing her air resources properly led the Navy to treat the early air attacks with some contempt. It was a very different story when the Germans arrived on the scene in the New Year.

#### Restrictions on Shipping Attacks.

Action against enemy shipping in the first few months was complicated through the limitations imposed in Admiralty and Air Ministry instructions about the conditions under which shipping at sea could be attacked. The procedure to be followed

/by

by aircraft in dealing with vessels was complex.

When the war against Italy opened, the instructions

HQ.No.201  
Group  
S.10180  
HQ.Med.  
S/161/Air

governing air action against shipping were those communicated to the Middle East Command in February and April 1940.<sup>1</sup> Under these, aircraft could not attack at sight any vessels except those definitely identified as enemy warships, troopships, minelayers, minesweepers, patrol vessels, or vessels forming part of an enemy fleet. Merchant ships in convoy were not regarded as part of an enemy fleet. Aircraft could not challenge vessels unless the aircraft were engaged in contraband control operations or had been ordered to search for particular merchant ships. A complicated procedure existed for dealing with ships under contraband control operations or with suspicious vessels. Attacks could be made on such ships only if they failed to comply with the aircraft's orders, which had to be repeated three times.

HQ.MED.  
S/161/Air  
Encl.15.

On 4 August 1940, as the Italians had issued a warning that all vessels navigating within 30 miles of enemy territory in the Mediterranean did so at their own risk, the Air Ministry's instructions were modified. These provided that aircraft could sink at sight and without challenge any vessel within 30 miles of the Libyan coast and any identified Italian ship within 30 miles of any Italian territory in the Mediterranean provided that this did not infringe Turkish territorial waters. As the war progressed, the limitations on attacks on shipping were relaxed still further, as will be seen in subsequent Sections.

Effect of Limited Seaboard.

Our lack of seaboard to give sufficient air  
/cover

1. See Appendix "A". Also R.A.F. Narrative "The work of the R.A.F. in Naval Co-operation 1939-45" (Part I - Sept. 1939 - April 1940).

SECRET

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HQ. ME.  
O.R.B.  
App.31  
Sept.1940

cover to ships by land-based aircraft was felt from the start of hostilities with Italy. To protect itself from bomber attacks when outside the range of our land-based fighters, the Fleet had to rely mainly on its carrier-borne fighters - and carriers could not be everywhere at the required moment. When the Fleet was operating along the coast, for instance during bombardment, cover was given by Western Desert aircraft. The effect of land bases on control of the seas became even more obvious at the end of September, after the Italians had pushed to Sidi Barrani.<sup>1</sup> It meant that our fighters could not be based west of Maaten Bagush. It had been the practice during Fleet coastal operations for the R.A.F. to attack airfields in the vicinity to ground the Italian bombers (this was dubbed a "fumigation" operation). The new situation meant that such operations could not be undertaken against Libya, as our bombers would be exposed to a heavy scale of fighter opposition without fighter protection. In pointing this out to the C.-in-C. Mediterranean on 26 September, the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. asked that "fumigation" operations would not be sought unless most essential. "In any case they would have to be limited in scope, as we could not afford to risk unduly our bomber force".

/Lack

HQ.M.E.,  
S.45616

1. At the time of the Italian push, combined defensive plans were formulated by the three Services as a precautionary measure for withdrawal of the Fleet Base from Alexandria to Port Said and Haifa in case the enemy reached the Mersa Matruh line. The plan, which visualised making Port Said the main base, Haifa the secondary base and Alexandria an advanced refuelling depot for light forces, involved additional A/A defence and movement of fighter squadrons, but, fortunately, the contingency never materialised, though some precautionary dispositions were made in the way of A/A defence.

Lack of Air Striking Power.

The R.A.F.'s striking power over the Central Mediterranean was negligible in the first few months, through lack of suitable aircraft, distance of bases from the area where the enemy was to be encountered, and the policy of not risking numbers of aircraft on Malta while the island could not be properly defended from air attack. At the outbreak of hostilities the Fleet's air striking force was provided by the 20 years old and rather slow carrier Eagle, with torpedo-carrying Swordfish, but these could operate only when the Fleet was at sea. The Fleet Air Arm also retained No. 830 Squadron Swordfish land-based at Malta, which for some months remained our only air striking force in the Central Basin and by a series of courageous sorties against targets in Sicily pointed the way to the offensive potentialities of Malta.

Naval Strengths.

In September the Fleet was reinforced by the new aircraft carrier Illustrious (23,000 tons), which had a speed of 30 knots. At the other end of the Mediterranean, Force F had the Ark Royal to operate its air striking force. The enemy fleet consisted of six battleships, about a score of cruisers and about 30 destroyers, but perhaps the greatest danger lay in their submarines, of which they had over 100 when they joined the war. By reinforcement from east and west, the British Mediterranean Fleet was built up gradually so as to reduce the disparity in naval strength, and by mid-October it disposed four battleships (Warspite, Valiant, Malaya, Ramillies), two aircraft carriers, two anti-aircraft cruisers (Calcutta and Coventry), seven other cruisers, 25 destroyers and 16 submarines. At Gibraltar we had the battleships Renown and Barham, two

HQ. MED.  
S.247/49/Air

/cruisers

cruisers and six destroyers.

But naval strength alone was not the answer to the problem of controlling the Mediterranean. Our naval units when in the central sea always moved under threat of Italian air attack, and when his bombing proved ineffective the enemy resorted to torpedo attack from the air. Although unskilled in this to begin with, the Italians persisted, and in September and October damaged two cruisers by this method - successes which emphasised the ascendancy of air power over the Mediterranean. Possessed of bases straddling the Central Basin and stretching along the entire Libyan coast, the enemy saw that in air attack lay the cheapest and most effective way of preserving control over the central sea.

Stronger Grip on Eastern Basin.

Italy's onslaught on Greece, began on 28 October, again enforced a hasty alteration in our strategy, while its distractions stretched still further our attenuated forces. The danger in the enemy's overrunning Greece was that he would gain naval and air bases to dispute our control of the Eastern Basin and so improve his oil supply from Black Sea ports. He had to be forestalled, and there were compensations in our getting a footing in Greece and Crete. It tightened our grip on the Eastern Basin, cutting off the Dodecanese, and gave better access to the central sea. The Italian Fleet was still "in being" however, and if we became preoccupied with movements to and from Greece the enemy fleet might become more venturesome in ensuring his supply route to Libya. As the Navy saw it, the strategical necessity was to smite Italy afloat, and in the circumstances that meant seeking him in his lair.

COS(40)  
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The consequence was the Fleet Air Arm's crippling blow at the battleships sheltering in Taranto - a blow which put us more on a par with the enemy in naval strength.

THE CENTRAL BASINMalta's Improvised Defence

Devoid of air protection when Italy entered the war, Malta was able to withstand the Italian air raids without much discomfort through the build-up of a fighter force and the discovery that airfields could operate efficiently under the scale of attack which the enemy mounted. This fighter force owed its origin to the improvisation of a flight of three sea Gladiators left in store by the Navy at Kalafrana - a legacy from the carrier Glorious. In May, Air Commodore Maynard obtained the Naval C.-in-C's permission to use these aircraft, but there were no fighter pilots available. Training began of pilots whose experience was mainly of flying boats, and by 4 June the fighter flight, with six pilots, was formed. The three Gladiators, which came to be known by the islanders as Faith, Hope and Charity, alone gave battle to the formations of bombers which attacked the island in the first three weeks. Operating from Halfar, they broke up the bomber formations and after a fortnight had forced the enemy to send fighter escorts. Against this added disadvantage the Gladiators continued to fight, and at the end of June help arrived - just in time, as two of the Gladiators were unserviceable through accidents. The reinforcement was four Hurricanes which called at the island on passage to the Middle East. These were retained by permission of the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East, and assumed the main burden of defence, operating from Luqa. They quickly discouraged the enemy, who after a month of war changed his tactics and for a period of five weeks resorted to sporadic night raids. In that period no bomb was dropped in daylight, and the enemy's daylight effort consisted of sending offensive patrols of about 20 fighters in an attempt to lure our tiny fighter force to battle. This ruse failed, but the Italians' next

HQ MED  
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1/Air



phase presented more difficulty. This was the sending of 10 to 15 bombers escorted by 20 to 25 fighters. The Hurricanes tackled this with determination, and for some reason the enemy did not continue this disconcerting tactic, and replaced it with dive-bombing by Ju.87's. This type of attack was quickly discouraged, for on the third such raid two bombers and a fighter were shot down. Early in August, 12 more Hurricanes from the U.K. reinforced the island, and by September enemy air activity had considerably decreased.

From the outbreak of war to 11 October, Malta had an average of  $6\frac{1}{2}$  fighters and 10 pilots available daily. They made 74 interceptions, destroyed 22 enemy aircraft for certain, with 9 probably destroyed. Anti-aircraft fire accounted for three confirmed and three probably destroyed. Our losses were two pilots killed, three aircraft destroyed in the air and six on the ground.

The fact that Malta was not neutralised in the first four months of hostilities was largely due to the enemy's lack of persistence - an omission which he came to regret very bitterly later. The A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. did not see how, if the Italians had laid on a sustained and full scale offensive, perhaps assisted by the Germans, they could have avoided destroying all the aircraft in Malta.

#### Malta: the Key to Reconnaissance

The significance of Malta's successful defence was not lost upon the Mediterranean commanders and Air Ministry. It opened the way to the employment of other aircraft, notably for reconnaissance. Without Malta, effective reconnaissance of the Central Basin and south Italy ports was impossible. So, gradually, the cautious policy which dictated the withdrawal of aircraft from the island gave way to an experimental frame of mind, inspired by the necessity of cutting Italian sea communications to hamstring a land offensive against Egypt. Then, too, naval sentiment clung tenaciously to Malta, and

/though

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though the Fleet had been withdrawn under threat of heavy air attack, the sailors hankored after putting the island's defences in a good enough state to enable the Fleet to be based there again. The Chiefs of Staff Committee favoured increasing Malta's defences "in view of its importance to the Fleet and as a point from which we can strike at Italy by air".

Sunderland Reconnaissance Extended

HQ ME  
O.R.B.  
App.49  
June

As a result of an offensive sweep of the Central Mediterranean by the Fleet immediately after Italy's entry into the war, the need of air reconnaissance between Malta, Corfu, and Cephalonia became apparent to the Navy. The C.-in-C. suggested that this could be provided during specific operations by the flying boats being refuelled at Malta. This suggestion was adopted, Nos.228 and 230 Squadrons using the island as a calling point. Their cover of the Ionian sea was thus improved, and led to successes against submarines and the location of enemy surface forces. But this occasional use of the island was not enough to give the cover of the Central Basin which was necessary to detect how and by what route the Italians were shipping their reinforcements to Libya. Misgivings about the effectiveness of Central Mediterranean reconnaissance were felt after only a few weeks' operations, and the suitability of the flying boats for the variety of tasks involved began to be questioned.

DO/AML/2  
94A

Air Ministry, concerned with the difficulty of replacements, warned HQ M.E. on 30 July that although the Army's and Navy's reconnaissance requests were difficult to resist, the employment of Sunderlands on daylight reconnaissance of such strongly defended harbours as Augusta and Syracuse might lead to a high wastage rate which could not be met. It instructed that unless the information was of vital consequence, Sunderlands must be used only where a light scale of opposition was expected.

/Submarine Sinkings

Submarine Sinkings

Italian submarines were very active in the Eastern and Central Mediterranean from the outbreak of war, but incurred heavy losses within a few weeks through the combined efforts of Navy and Air Force. They suffered particularly at the end of the June, when they were apparently concentrated in the Ionian Sea about the time that our light naval forces were covering a convoy from Malta to Alexandria. It was during this operation that the first confirmed submarine sinking by the R.A.F. was effected. Three flying boats worked from Malta to cover our ships and in one way and another had an eventful three days. To begin with, on 28 June a flying boat of No.228 Squadron unsuccessfully attacked a submarine from low level, but the same day a flying boat of No.230 Squadron damaged a submarine with two 250 lb bombs which fell abaft the conning tower in a dive attack. (1). Two Sunderlands also located three Italian destroyers south-west of Zante, and as a result of their report our cruiser force was able to intercept. It sank one of the destroyers at long range as they fled in the failing light.

Next day, the flying boat of No.230 Squadron which had attacked the first submarine sank a Rubino class submarine while patrolling the approaches to the Straits of Messina and the Gulf of Taranto. (2) Two direct hits and two near misses were registered in this case. The flying boat alighted and picked up four survivors but had to abandon further search through heavy seas. Twenty-five minutes later, the flying boat found another submarine, but, having no bombs left, had to be content with machine-gunning the conning tower. About the same time, a Sunderland of No.228 Squadron attacked another submarine, but the first four bombs failed to explode. The submarine remained surfaced and fired on the flying boat. In a second attack, two bombs fell 20 yards ahead of the submarine.

Admiralty } (1) This submarine was officially assessed as "probably slightly damaged"  
 monthly } (2) This was confirmed.  
 Anti-Sub. }  
 Reports }  
 CB.04050/43(8)

The following day (30 June) a Sunderland of No.230 Squadron unsuccessfully attacked two destroyers outside Port Augusta. Three submarines were destroyed by a destroyer flotilla during this phase.

#### Clash of Battle Fleets

July was marked by a clash of the Battle Fleets, but it was an inconclusive affair and only served to emphasise the Italian Navy's reluctance for a fight. Two convoys were bound from Malta, one with evacuated women and children and the other with stores. To protect them, the Mediterranean Fleet sailed from Alexandria on the 7th in three forces: A cruiser force of five, with the flotilla leader Stuart; the battleship Warspite, screened by five destroyers; the battleships Royal Sovereign and Malaya, the aircraft carrier Eagle and a screening flotilla. All next day, Italian bombers from the Dodecanese swept over the Fleet in waves, and seven unsuccessful attacks were made on the Warspite. The other battleships had about 80 bombs aimed at them, but none was hit. The only hit registered in all the bombing, from high level, was on the cruiser Gloucester, which sailed on.

Flying boats of Nos.228 and 230 Squadrons were carrying out reconnaissance ahead of the Fleet, and at 10.45 on the 8th, as a result of a report from a British submarine, another Sunderland left Alexandria to locate the Italian Fleet, which was known to be at sea. At 15.00 hours this Sunderland found the enemy about 200 miles east of Malta, and shadowed the force, which consisted of two Cavour class battleships, six cruisers and seven destroyers. The flying boat had to break off at dusk and alight at Malta. Meanwhile, the British Fleet held its course, to interpose between the enemy and his base, and more Sunderlands were despatched from Aboukir.

At dawn on the 9th the Eagle's aircraft went up to

/reconnoitre

O.R.Bs  
228 Sqdn  
230 Sqdn  
201 Group  
Admiralty  
Account  
of Naval  
War in  
Mediterranean

reconnoitre, but the first re-sighting of the enemy fleet was made at 05.30 hours by a Sunderland which had taken off from Malta a quarter of an hour earlier. The enemy, who was probably returning from covering a convoy, was then about 180 miles north-east of Malta and travelling towards the toe of Italy.

Other Sunderlands from Malta also sighted the enemy about 07.14 hours and shadowed the force continually. Later, six more Italian cruisers and 11 destroyers were sighted to the east of the enemy's main fleet, and seven cruisers to the west. At one period, 39 Italian units were counted, and it was suspected that more were in the vicinity. At noon, when the Italians were about 90 miles west of our forces, a striking force went off from the Eagle, but failed to locate the quarry. A second mission from the Eagle was more successful and scored a hit on a cruiser.

Meanwhile, the British Fleet was working round to the north of the enemy, although there was some confusion about the enemy positions, due to numerous sighting reports. About 14.15 hours it seemed that we had cut off the enemy from Taranto.

Soon after 1500 hours, British Naval forces sighted enemy cruisers, and just after that the cruiser Neptune had the privilege of signalling "Enemy battle Fleet in sight" for the first time in the Mediterranean since the Napoleonic wars. The British 6-in. gun cruisers, outranged, came under heavy fire, and the Warspite, ignoring the odds against her, went to the support of the cruisers. A few salvos from the Warspite seemed to discourage the enemy, who turned away. After a short lull, the Warspite and Malaya engaged the two Italian battleships, and the Warspite hit the Cesare at the enormous range of 26,000 yards. Then, while the enemy battleships fled behind a smoke screen, Italian destroyers made a half-hearted attempt to deliver a torpedo attack. When the

/British

British cruisers and destroyers went to meet them, the destroyers also disappeared behind the smoke.

Bombing attacks then began from the Italian coast, about 100 aircraft taking part. Undeterred, the British Fleet continued the chase, but had to give up when the coast of Calabria was in sight, as the enemy could not be intercepted before reaching Messina.

In the confusion of the enemy's retreat to Messina, Italian aircraft were twice observed to bomb their own warships. One enemy aircraft tried to bomb a Sunderland. No fighter attacks developed on the flying boats, but while shadowing they experienced heavy A/A fire. During the operation, a Sunderland of No.230 Squadron attacked and damaged a submarine with a direct hit abaft the conning tower. (1)

No.230 Squadron  
and No.201  
Group  
O.R.B's.

As a result of the naval action, the convoy sailing was delayed. On the 10th, Sunderlands patrolled between Sicily, Corfu and Zante without finding any sign of Italian warships. A few cruisers and destroyers located in Augusta harbour were attacked by the Fleet Air Arm, which sank a destroyer and a depot ship.

After fuelling at Malta, the Fleet protected the eastbound convoy to Alexandria, beating off air attacks on the way. The air attacks against the Fleet between the 8th and the 12th, all from high level, were by far the heaviest Italian air effort of the war so far. An estimated total of 889 bombs fell in the vicinity of the Warspite alone.

#### More Sunderland Successes

Sunderlands had several offensive successes to enliven their patrol work in July. On the 12th, a flying-boat of No.228 Squadron claimed a submarine between Sicily and the Ionian Isles. The first stick of three bombs fell close to the stern and the second stick hit the U-boat as it was <sup>(2)</sup>submerging. Another /submarine

No.228 and  
No.230  
Squadron  
O.R.B.

Admiralty  
Monthly  
Anti-Sub.  
Report.  
CBO4050(43)8

1. This was officially assessed as "probably damaged(B)". (i.e. Damage sufficiently severe to cause the submarine to abandon operations and return to harbour).
2. This was officially assessed as "probably slightly damaged".

submarine was bombed four miles off Valetta on 19 July, but there was no evidence of destruction. Four days later, a Sunderland of No.230 Squadron dispersed a convoy of six merchant vessels off Cape Spartivento by bombing and machine-gunning.

The flying boats acquitted themselves well in air combat several times towards the end of July. After bombing a submarine unsuccessfully on the 28th while on patrol from Malta, an aircraft of No.230 Squadron was attacked by three Macchi 220's one of which was shot into the sea, the second damaged and the other driven off after an engagement lasting 15 minutes. The same day, another Sunderland from Malta on a reconnaissance of Syracuse was attacked by four Macchi 200's in an engagement lasting nearly an hour, during which time three gunners were wounded but continued at their posts. Explosive and incendiary bullets did extensive damage to the Sunderland, but a fitter, L/A/C D.A. Campbell, remained in a wing plugging holes in tanks until rendered unconscious by petrol fumes. The account of the incident naively added that he "was revived by bullet splinters" and gave him much of the credit for the aircraft's safe return. On alighting at Malta, the Sunderland was beached in a sinking condition. The Sunderlands were little affected by Italian bombing in July, only one being slightly damaged.

#### Need of Striking Force

The Sunderlands, however useful for long sea reconnaissance, had their limitations in other directions such as in offensive action against ships. The lack of a striking force to disrupt the enemy's sea communications was painfully obvious, and the solution that commended itself was an aircraft combining striking power with ability to do reconnaissance, e.g. Beauforts. Malta's offensive possibilities were demonstrated by swordfish of No.830 Squadron F.A.A., which for the first few months were the only striking force based on the island.

/Starting

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HQ MED  
S.247/36/  
1/Air

Starting in July, they made several sorties with torpedoes against shipping, and with bombs against Augusta oil refineries. They were daring raids for such slow aircraft against well-defended targets, but in an attack on shipping at Augusta on 13 August three Swordfish were lost out of a formation of nine.

HQ MED.  
S.198/Air  
45

A.M.  
S.5804

In August, the A.O.C. Mediterranean urged upon Air Ministry that "one complete TB/GR squadron of 15 aircraft would produce results here out of all proportion to numbers of aircraft involved", suggesting Seafoxes or Hudsons. The A.O.C.'s proposal was strongly backed by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean, who described the air reconnaissance at his disposal as most inadequate. At this time, if there was any sudden call for reconnaissance, the R.A.F. in Malta was hard pressed to fulfil it, for, apart from the flying boats (which were mostly on pre-arranged patrols) there was only one aircraft, a Hudson, to hand.

#### Glen Martins Arrive

A.M.  
S.5804  
11A

The urgency of reinforcements for air reconnaissance was pressed by G/Capt. H.E.P. Wigglesworth, of H.Q. M.E. at an Air Ministry conference on 8 August, and the upshot of Air Ministry deliberations was a decision to provide Malta with three Glen Martins - subsequently known as Marylands - which had a range of over 2,000 miles. Because of the difficulty of providing spares, three further Glen Martins were to be sent and used on the "cannibal" system. The crews of the first three aircraft were derived from No.22 Squadron, Coastal Command, and the aircraft were flown out with their crews.

The first three Glen Martins upon arrival were formed into No.431 (G.R.) Flight, taking over the establishment of No.3 A.A.C.U., which was disbanded on 19 September and its

/Swordfish



Swordfish transferred to No.830 F.A.A. Squadron. No.431 Flight was officially formed at Luqa on the same date. The intention was that No.830 F.A.A. Squadron should be regarded as the striking force to be used on shipping until a torpedo-bomber - general reconnaissance squadron was available. There was some delay in fitting out and modifying the second three Glen Martins in England, and while this was being done in October Air Ministry decided to bring up No.431 Flight to seven aircraft with five reserves, to be flown in.

#### Reconnaissance Improvisation

Malta's reconnaissance effort in the first four months of war would have been much less had it not been for the exercise of some ingenuity in finding odd aircraft which would serve the purpose. At times, in addition to the flying boats and Glen Martins, a Hudson, a Latécoère (French seaplane), two Blenheims and a Skua were pressed into service. Between 11 June and 11 October the reconnaissance effort from Malta was: 31 anti-submarine searches, 104 visual reconnaissances, 7 photographic reconnaissances and 8 other sorties. All these sorties involved 1,320 hours flying, and the casualties were seven aircrew missing or killed and two aircraft lost. That the R.A.F. in Malta was able to maintain its operational efficiency in the early period owed much to improvisation in repair and maintenance.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the aircraft mentioned above, the repair organisation had to cope with Hurricanes, Gladiators, Seals and Fulmars.

/Call

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1 One notable example of repair was the making good of a Sunderland airscrew which appeared irretrievably damaged, yet the aircraft flew safely back to Egypt. Through the addition of overload tankage, two Londons were enabled to fly direct from Malta to Gibraltar, although the non-stop flight had never before been attempted by these aircraft.

Call for Torpedo Aircraft

The provision of three Glen Martins did little to satisfy those whose task it was to answer the many calls for sea reconnaissance. On 17 September the A.O.C. Mediterranean, in a signal to H.Q. M.E., defined the whole problem of Central Mediterranean reconnaissance in the light of experience and urged the speedy provision of a torpedo aircraft striking force.

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"Arrival of three Glen Martin in Malta has not materially changed scale of systematic long distance reconnaissance that can be carried out in Central Mediterranean", he stated. "Small experience of aircraft shows that high degree of unserviceability can be expected almost immediately unless comprehensive range of spares, of which there are none here, is made available. Glen Martins appear unsuitable for continuous and protracted periods of reconnaissance over the sea, as pilot has no relief and no automatic pilot, while each member of crew is separated from others. Consider therefore:

- (A) Ionian Sea reconnaissance best carried out by Sunderlands. To make reconnaissance water-tight, necessary to maintain daily patrol of three aircraft. Minimum of five aircraft required for this task, the additional two being either under inspection at or on passage to or from Alexandria.....
- (B) Occasional reconnaissance of Italian ports. Glen Martin excellent for this type of reconnaissance.....
- (C) Reconnaissance Malta-Tunisia. Most probable route of shipping is between Cape Bon and Pantellaria. This represents extreme range of Swordfish reconnaissance aircraft, leaving no margin for search. Extreme striking force range of Swordfish is 150 miles and therefore useless against shipping following this route. Reconnaissance of this route best carried out by Glen Martin and offensive action by TB/GR aircraft.
- (D) Consider at least one squadron of 14 I.E. land-based G.R. aircraft of Beaufort type required to maintain action envisaged at A. B. and C., but reconnaissance portion of C could probably be carried out by 3 I.E. plus 3 I.R. Glen Martin depending on reasonable serviceability ration.
- (E) Control of reconnaissance in Central Mediterranean. Consider direct communication between C.-in-C. Med. and myself of reconnaissance operations in Central Mediterranean and not directly affecting immediate defence of Malta essential.....

Suggest best and direct method of meeting C.-in-C. Med's requirements is to press now for early addition Beaufort squadron to Mediterranean Command. This would avoid unsatisfactory aspect of Sunderlands on loan from you wasting flying hours on passage Malta-Egypt for servicing

/ or

or exchange.....Moreover, consider G.R. landplane type, apart from striking force aspect, would allow economy in reconnaissance effort. This is important in a blockaded garrison whose supplies especially petrol are seaborne and uncertain."

#### Malta Base of Sunderlands

Meanwhile, as Malta had shown that it could withstand Italian air attack and the scale of raids had diminished, the step was taken of using the island as an advanced base for Sunderlands. Three flying boats of No.228 Squadron were transferred there from Alexandria on 22 September, the practice being to return to Alexandria for major repairs and replacements. This system, however, involved many extra flying hours between Malta and Alexandria which could ill be spared, and consequently the risk was taken later of operating a complete squadron from the island. No.228 Squadron was transferred to Kalafrana on 6 November and its personnel were the first to occupy the buildings at the new Marsa Klok station. At the end of October, a system of daily patrols of the Ionian Sea was introduced by the Sunderlands.

#### Convoy to Malta: Fleet Reinforced

The first few days of September were marked by a delicately timed and successfully executed naval operation, the object of which was reinforcement of the Fleet in the Mediterranean and the convoying of ships to Malta from the West. It was the first occasion on which our forces on any scale passed the narrows between Sicily and Cape Bon. To reinforce the Fleet, the battleship Valiant, the new aircraft carrier Illustrious and the anti-aircraft cruisers Calcutta and Coventry passed through the Mediterranean during 30 August to 5 September, supported as far as Sardinia by Admiral Somerville's force H and met south of Sicily by the C.-in-C's

/fleet

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Squadron  
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fleet from Alexandria.<sup>1</sup> On the return, the Mediterranean Fleet covered a convoy from Malta to Alexandria. On the way to Malta, one of the convoyed ships, S.S. Cornwall, was set on fire and holed below the waterline in a bombing attack. A magazine exploded, and the fire spread to the hold, and the steering gear was disabled, but the fire was subdued, the leak stopped and the ships reached Malta safely.

During the second day of the passage of the British warships and convoy, the Italian Fleet was spotted at sea by a Sunderland of No.228 Squadron. It was in the Ionian Sea, steaming north-west in three columns, and consisted of four battleships, 10 cruisers and 16 destroyers. It made no attempt to contact our naval forces and could not be located the following day. During the period of the convoy operation, patrolling Sunderlands were attacked several times by fighters, but they were half-hearted efforts. On the 4th, while the convoy was in the vicinity of Crete, bombing attacks were made from Egypt against enemy air bases in Eastern Cyrenaica to discourage enemy air action against the Fleet. The Illustrious asserted her presence in the Mediterranean by turning aside to enable her aircraft to attack the air base at Calato, Rhodes, while the Eagle's aircraft bombed Maritza aerodrome, Rhodes.

#### Loopholes in Co-ordination

An incident on 30 September showed that there was room for improved co-ordination between the naval operations staff and R.A.F. Headquarters, as the Mediterranean Fleet, constantly seeking to bring the elusive Italian Fleet to battle,

/found

<sup>1</sup> During these operations, a Hudson from Malta while on reconnaissance west of Sicily on 1 September was shot up by a section of Skuas from the Illustrious. The Hudson, which reported one engine damaged and fuel tanks holed, was unable to reach Malta and had to land in Tunisia, where the crew were interned. The Admiralty expressed regret for the incident, stating that the Fulmar section leader was entirely to blame for failing to establish the character of the aircraft before attacking.

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found too late that the enemy was at sea. The incident arose out of a convoy operation in which the battleships Warspite and Valiant, the new carrier Illustrious, cruisers and destroyers were protecting reinforcements from the Middle East to Malta. Afterwards the C.-in-C. Mediterranean complained to the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East that: "Our present shore-based reconnaissance failed to locate the enemy though he was at sea with his entire fleet, and it was left to Fleet reconnaissance to do so. Moreover, it has to be admitted that our Central Mediterranean reconnaissance has so far been a failure. We have not yet succeeded in spotting a single convoy on its way across to Libya. We suspect that they may be going to dribblets via Pantellaria channel, Tripoli, and other coasting to Benghazi, but this is still supposition. No convoys have been found going straight across from Eastern Italy".

The circumstances leading to the Admiral's complaint were:

The Sunderlands and Geln Martins at Malta were ordered to provide continuous reconnaissance on the line Malta - Cephalonia, working north to a line Corfu - Cape Colouna - Cape Spartivento and Cap Passero. On 29 September, our warships were bombed twice, only minor casualties being caused, and an unsuccessful attack was made by torpedo aircraft on the Illustrious. The Admiral's report stated:

"No further incident until 1126/30 when duty aircraft from Illustrious sighted 7 cruisers and 7 destroyers about 100 miles to northward. This was followed by report bringing enemy force to four or five battleships, 11 cruisers and 17 destroyers at 1210. After a cast to northward, report showed that main body of enemy was much too far off to make contact, particularly as it was steaming northward at high speed. This, coupled with the fact that enemy was at sea in full strength, decided me to resume course to westward to carry out my object of passing troops into Malta. At 1812 a small force of enemy off Calabria broke off to south-westward but as no more was seen of them by air reconnaissance a.m. 1st October, presume they were making for Messina".

/ Sir

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Sir Andrew Cunningham in his report to the Admiralty stated:

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3/Air  
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"A feature of these operations was fact that enemy was discovered by Fleet air reconnaissance within 100 miles of our Fleet before there was any inkling of their presence. This underlines again the inadequate scale of our shore-based reconnaissance in Central Med. If I am to bring this fast enemy to action at a point reasonably far from his bases and shore air support, the earliest knowledge of his movements is essential".

Ibid:  
54 and  
56

The Admiral's charge was not well founded. What actually happened was that a sighting report was sent out by a Sunderland at 0950 hours and re-broadcast at 1028 hours, which meant that the Navy should have picked it up. A Glen Martin had made a sighting at 0640 hours but did not report it until landing, as the observer believed that what he saw was the British Fleet. This error was due to his inexperience, as he had not had the required training in G.R. and ship recognition.

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Sir Arthur Longmore complained to Air Ministry that the Admiral's letter to the Admiralty was sent without prior consultation with him or between the staffs, and he repudiated the imputation about the failure of reconnaissance. This impelled the Admiral to write to the A.O.C.-in-C. saying that although he feared "we have touched you on the raw", this was not meant; in fact he had hoped the representations were in some ways strengthening the Air Chief Marshal's hand. As to the 29 September incident, the Admiral retracted to the extent of saying that the paragraph was badly worded, but "it was primarily intended to convey that the reconnaissance was a failure and must be a failure until we have sufficient aircraft to cover the whole area effectually. Actually, the enemy fleet was located by shore-based aircraft who, however, made a slip in the drill by not reporting it. This fact was unknown to us when our message was written, and we thought the enemy had slipped through the reconnaissance". Sir Andrew added:

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"Our spheres of influence cross so much that I am particularly anxious that there should be nothing but the most cordial co-operation between us. Our juniors have certainly achieved this, as exemplified by our relations with 201 and 202 Groups".

The outcome of enquiries into the system of reconnaissance reporting was that measures were taken to ensure minimum delay in giving information to the Navy.

Co-operation with the Navy, however, was difficult from other aspects. As Sir Arthur Longmore pointed out to the C.A.S. in October, one difficulty was that the Admiral's command did not extend beyond the Mediterranean, the Red Sea being within the zone of the C.-in-C. East Indies, "who seems mostly tied to Ceylon". Then, too, Sir Andrew Cunningham adhered rigidly to naval traditions and remained aboard his flagship when at Alexandria. He was frequently days away at sea, and through the necessity for wireless silence could not be consulted at such times, though he left a naval captain to represent him at R.A.F. HQ in Cairo. "It will never be possible to fully satisfy the Navy", Sir Arthur Longmore pungently observed to the C.A.S., "for they still hanker after control of all shore-based reconnaissance".

#### Navy Agitation for Stronger Malta

About the end of September, with the threat of a further Italian push into Egypt, the supply-chopping problem was discussed in detail by the Admiralty and the C.-in-C. Mediterranean. To the naval mind, the final answer was to base the Battle Fleet at Malta, but this step could not be risked. Still, the Admiralty thought it possible to sever the Italy-Libya line if the Navy had sufficient light forces based on Malta, backed by adequate air reconnaissance and A/A defence. The C.-in-C. was anxious for prompt reinforcement because he believed the war was swinging in the direction of the Mediterranean. "The scale of air attack when enhanced by

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HQ MED.  
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HQ M.E.  
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HQ ME  
DO/AML/6  
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Ibid:  
19A

German aircraft is likely to be very serious against Malta and might well bring the whole of our policy of using the island to nought unless we act quickly". His solution was a force of about 10 I.E. and 6 I.R. reconnaissance aircraft at Malta, not more than half of which should be flying boats, and a striking force such as torpedo Beauforts. An air striking force was the only sure way of hitting at enemy heavy ships when our Navy could not reach them and would also force the enemy to lengthen his route to evade attack, giving a better chance to the Royal Navy to intercept. Admiral Cunningham advocated acceptance of the risk of operating light naval forces from Malta, which could be minimised by surface ships entering harbour only at night. He wanted a heavier scale of bombing on Libyan ports and the maximum number of fighters up to four squadrons that could be spared for Malta.

Ibid: 22A

The Navy's optimism about the chances of using Malta was probably inspired by the Italian Air Force's failure to neutralise the island. Sir Arthur Longmore warned the Admiral against under-estimating the enemy's air potential, in a letter on 11 October stating:

"Even if all the aircraft we have asked for were forthcoming, I am still very much in doubt whether the Italians, perhaps supported by the Germans, would not concentrate on completely blotting out all air facilities at Malta, not to mention such facilities as you require for your light forces. Hitherto, raids have been relatively insignificant, but a full scale offensive would be a very different matter".

The Admiralty remained undeterred by such arguments, believing that unless the Navy used the island and had effective air reconnaissance, we could not hope to stop the traffic to Libya. It made an effort to force the issue early in October, when the Chief of the Naval Staff produced a memorandum stating:

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"The Admiralty feel that there is a reasonable chance

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that we could so defend Malta as to make it usable as a Fleet base, and the advantages of getting the Fleet back there are so enormous that they consider the experiment must be tried.....The first requirement is to get adequate air reconnaissance established so that we can establish the facts as to where Italian shipping is moving".

The memorandum urged that as a matter of first urgency steps should be taken to bring Malta's defences to a scale of 112 heavy A.A. guns, 100 light A.A. guns and six fighter squadrons.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, it was proposed to re-establish cruisers and destroyers at Malta as soon as possible. These would be subject to the risk of meeting superior Italian forces but the risk would be diminished by adequate air reconnaissance. The Admiralty wanted the necessary air reinforcements sent without delay. But reinforcements could be sent only to the detriment of urgent needs at home, and Britain was still in peril.

On 14 October the C.A.S. outlined proposals to increase Malta's existing Hurricane flight to a full squadron of 16 I.E. aircraft and to bring the Glen Martin unit to 7 I.E. and 5 I.R. At the same time the Prime Minister added his views. He rated the reinforcement of Malta as of first urgency - by Hurricanes flown in, by the addition of one or two battalions and the largest A/A outfit that could be carried by a convoy then in course of preparation. But he considered the movement of the Fleet to Malta must await the strengthening of the A.A. and air defences. "It is, however, a needful and profoundly advantageous step", he continued. "I welcome the possibility of even basing light forces upon Malta, as they immediately increase its security. I understand it is intended they shall sally forth by day and only lie in harbour as a rule at night.

/Apart

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<sup>1</sup> In August the Chiefs of Staff considered increasing the defensive strength of Malta because of its great potential value as a naval base and agreed in principle to increase the A/A defences to the approved scale of 112 heavy and 60 light A/A guns by April 1941. Fighter strength would be augmented to a total of four squadrons "as soon as circumstances permit".

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Apart from the stake being higher, it is not seen why, if light forces can be exposed in Malta harbour, well armoured and well armed ships cannot use it, too".

#### More Enemy Naval Losses

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Convoy operations proceeded steadily between Alexandria and Malta in the autumn, the enemy Fleet refusing to be tempted to battle even when the odds were heavily in its favour. This was not surprising in view of what happened when there was an encounter at sea. For instance, a night action on 11 October cost the enemy three destroyers. Returning from a convoy operation to Malta, the cruiser Ajax ran into several Italian destroyers at close range. Her fire quickly blew up two of the enemy and left another on fire. Two others escaped under cover of smoke. Next morning, a Sunderland from Malta found the burning destroyer, the Artigliere, in tow of another destroyer. The location was given to the Navy while the Sunderland shadowed them. Upon sighting the flying boat, the towing vessel abandoned her charge and fled. When the cruiser York reached the Artigliere, she dropped rafts for the crew, but, bearing in mind that the Havock was bombed while rescuing survivors from the Bartemeo Colleoni in July, did not pick up the Italians. After the crew had left their ship, the Artigliere was sunk by gunfire. Further search by the Ajax and by a striking force of Swordfish failed to locate the fugitive destroyer. The survivors remained afloat on their rafts about 90 miles east of Malta for three days and were eventually reached by an Italian hospital ship, which was directed by a Sunderland.

HQ M.E.  
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But if Italy's Fleet was impotent, its Air Force was not, and an incident on 14 October showed that the enemy continued to put his trust in the air arm to exercise power over the sea. On that date an S.79K was successful in hitting

/H.M.S.

H.M.S. Liverpool with a torpedo in a moonlight attack and causing damage to her bows.

#### Fighter Challenge to our Reconnaissance

In October and November, the enemy reacted more vigorously with fighters to our central Mediterranean reconnaissance from Malta, which now extended to the west coast of Greece. The Glen Martins quickly proved their worth in reconnaissance and sturdiness in combat. On 12 October a Glen Martin survived an encounter with several fighters over the Ionean Sea, damaging two of them and continuing its reconnaissance after eluding five others. On 30 October No.431 Flight scored its first success in the air, when a Glen Martin shot down a Cant Z506 into the sea between Corfu and Southern Italy.

On 2 November a Glen Martin eluded an attack by three CR.42s near Brindisi, but was later damaged in an exchange of fire with a flying boat. Two days later, an Italian cruiser in the Gulf of Taranto sent up aircraft to chase away a Glen Martin. About this time, too, a Sunderland was lost on an Ionian Sea reconnaissance, and another lying in Marsa Xlokk Bay, Malta, was damaged by machine-gun fire from a low-flying CR.42. Another Sunderland on reconnaissance was damaged by a fighter attack 32 miles from Malta and two of the crew wounded.

#### R.A.F's Part in Taranto Exploit

The R.A.F's part in the Taranto operation on the night of 11 November was to provide the all-important photographic and visual reconnaissance. For several days previously, Glen Martins of 431 Flight and Sunderlands of No.228 Squadron had carried out this work, keeping close check on the approaches for arrivals and departures right up to the delivery of the blow. Taranto was the main base of the Italian Fleet, and it has been noticed, with some satisfaction, that the enemy tended to put all his eggs in one basket - five battleships in one

/harbour

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harbour together. For some weeks before, plans for a Fleet Air Arm blow had been considered, and at one time the attack was planned for 21 October, the anniversary of Trafalgar, but various other Fleet commitments caused its postponement.

The attack was made possible by the presence in the Mediterranean of the carrier *Illustrious* (Capt. D.W. Boyd), which, equipped with torpedo-carrying *Swordfish* and a squadron of *Fulmars*, more than doubled the Fleet's air striking power. The gallant old *Eagle* was comparatively slow, lacked adequate armour, and having been damaged by bombing, could not take part, but some of her aircraft were transferred to the *Illustrious*. The Fleet's movements for the operation were closely integrated with a series of other operations, including the passage of reinforcements from the West and convoys to and from Malta and to Greece and Crete. On 6 November the Fleet sailed from Alexandria and on the 10th was joined south of Malta by the convoy and reinforcements from Gibraltar.

Meanwhile, the R.A.F. in Malta was busy providing the all-important photographic and visual reconnaissance of Taranto and the Ionian Sea. This was done by No.431 Flight, whose reconnaissance disclosed that Italian warships were congregating in Taranto from 6 November onwards. On that date a *Blenheim* spotted three battleships, seven cruisers and twelve destroyers there. Next day, another battleship had arrived. The reconnaissances were not achieved without the enemy's knowledge, and his suspicions must have been aroused. On the 7th, a *Maryland* reconnoitring the base had a running fight with four *Macchi 200*'s but got back safely. On the 10th a *Maryland* was fired on by A/A guns and chased by a *CR.42* for 20 minutes, but returned with the information that there were five battleships, fourteen cruisers and twenty-

seven destroyers assembled. Two reconnaissances on the day of the 11th showed them still there, and the enemy was aware of our curiosity, as he fired on one of the Marylands.

When the *Illustrious* came within range, the latest photographs were flown to her by *Swordfish* from Malta, and the striking force took careful note of the warships positions and of the defences, which included balloons and anti-torpedo nets. On the 11th, R.A.F. H.Q. at Malta was able to signal the *Illustrious* that there was no alteration in the position of the Italian ships, so the waiting Fleet Air Arm squadrons completed their plans for the moonlight torpedo and bombing attack. After dusk on the 11th, a *Sunderland* of No.228 Squadron patrolled the approaches to Taranto in case the enemy units slipped their moorings, and saw another major unit enter the harbour.

At 1800 hours, the *Illustrious*, guarded by four cruisers and four destroyers, was detached from the Fleet, and her striking force took off when about 170 miles south-east of the target. The attack began about 22.45 hours, with flare-dropping. Then the *Swordfish*, met by a hail of A/A fire, twisted between the balloon cables and delivered their attack. Of twelve *Swordfish* engaged in the first attack, six dropped torpedoes against the *Littorio* and *Cavour* class battleships in the outer harbour, four dive-bombed cruisers and destroyers moored in the *Mare Piccolo*, and two bombed oil storage depots and dropped flares. In the confusion, the Italian cruisers fired wildly and damaged their own merchant ships.

An hour later, nine more *Swordfish* repeated the attack. Of the twenty-one aircraft taking part, only two failed to return.

Next morning a *Glen Martin* went from Malta to take photographs, which it secured despite pursuit of two *Macchis*.

/The

The results, as shown by this photographic reconnaissance, appeared to be one Littorio class battleship badly damaged, with her bows under water; one Cavour class battleship badly damaged, aground, and partly under water; one Duilio class battleship heavily damaged and beached.<sup>1</sup> Half the Italian battleships had been liquidated by 11 aircraft torpedoes. In addition, one cruiser and two destroyers were damaged.

The Navy expressed its appreciation of the R.A.F.'s contribution in the following letter to the A.O.C. Mediterranean from the C.-in-C. Mediterranean:-

"My Dear Maynard,

I hasten to write you a line to thank you for the most valuable reconnaissance work carried out by your squadrons, without which the successful attack on Taranto would have been impossible. I well know what long monotonous flying time they have had to put in, and I am very grateful to them. The work over Taranto has been particularly valuable and gave us all we wanted to know. Good luck, and my grateful thanks again for your co-operation.

Yours very sincerely,  
A.B. Cunningham."

A few hours after the Taranto attack, as if to emphasise the reassertion of British Naval Power in the Central Mediterranean, our light forces destroyed a convoy in the Straits of Otranto. Three merchantmen out of four, found steaming for Brindisi at 01.25 on 12 November, were sunk by our cruisers. The fourth, with a destroyer escort, escaped under cover of smoke.

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent information confirmed that the results were: three battleships (Cavour, Duilio, Italia) all severely damaged and all sank some hours later; one cruiser severely damaged; and two destroyers slightly damaged by near misses.

THE EASTERN BASINSunderland Patrols from Egypt.

The cautious policy which had denuded Malta of aircraft at the outbreak of hostilities meant that the two flying boat squadrons, Nos. 228 and 230, were available to cover the Eastern Basin from Alexandria. Their headquarters were with H.Q. No. 201 Group, which took over the Italian Yacht Club-house. On 12 June the petrol tanker "Pass of Balmaha" arrived at Alexandria from Malta, to act as refueller to the flying boats.

After a fortnight's operations, H.Q. No. 201 Group proposed to H.Q. R.A.F. M.E. that an additional flight of aircraft, say Ansons, should be provided for action against submarines in the approaches to Alexandria, as the Sunderlands were reserved for distant flights and their employment on short range work would be wasteful. The Fleet Air Arm dawn and dusk patrols from Alexandria had been unsuccessful in locating submarines. This proposal was rejected by H.Q. M.E. on the ground of shortage of aircraft. In July, however, when No. 228 Squadron moved its base to Aboukir, a Valentia was brought in to assist anti-submarine operations within 100 miles of that base.

Early operations included patrols in conjunction with naval sweeps, anti-submarine patrols, searches for mines, and watch on Libyan ports, but when the enemy's expected aggressiveness did not materialise, the risk was taken of using Malta as a calling point to enable closer cover of the enemy's reinforcement routes. Patrol work in the Eastern Basin was monotonous and generally uneventful except for occasional submarine sightings and the rather dangerous task of reconnoitring ports such as Tobruk, which were well protected by fighters. Routine longdistance patrols were not introduced in the first few months, as the flying boats were well occupied with

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special reconnaissances for the Navy and convoy patrols. The "shuttle" service to Malta, however, was useful as a patrol in the seas north of Crete and in the Central Basin. The flight between Malta and Alexandria was frequently lengthened to embrace the seas near Crete and Zante. It was on such a flight on 4 September that an aircraft of No. 228 Squadron shot down a Cant Z501 which was shadowing a British warship between Crete and Egypt. Sunderlands from Alexandria were often over Aegean waters, covering our light naval forces on anti-shipping sweeps.

Submarines were not sighted very often in the Eastern Basin by aircraft, but the Sunderlands found occasional targets to relieve the monotony of long patrols. One of No. 230 Squadron stopped a destroyer 70 miles north of Derma on 1 July with four bombs which fell near the stern. An interesting background attached to an attack on a submarine found resting on the sea bed off El Dhaba on 19 June. It was bombed by Blenheims and was believed to have been damaged, as there was a report the following day of a submarine being escorted away in this vicinity. Before the attack, repeated reports had been made by an R.A.F. A.M.E.S. of a submarine off-shore. The incident led to H.Q. Middle East suggesting to the C.-in-C. Mediterranean: "There appears to be no doubt A.M.E.S. can reliably detect submarines, and that this be confirmed by trials". On 30 September a 230 Squadron Sunderland finished off a submarine which had been severely damaged by depth charges from H.M.S. Stuart north-west of Alexandria.

A.S.V. equipment was introduced in the Mediterranean in October, but only one aircraft, a No. 230 Squadron Sunderland, had this device. After tests, it was used on a night search on 17 October in the seas off Ras el Tin, where a submarine's presence was suspected, but no contact was established.

/Tobruk

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Tobruk Patrol Dangers

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O.R.B.

A/C/M  
Longmore's  
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The first Sunderland encounter with enemy aircraft was on 20 June, when a flying boat of No.230 Squadron was attacked by four C.R.32's while on a reconnaissance of Tobruk harbour. It shot down one of the enemy and drove off the remainder after a 15 minutes engagement. The Sunderland's fuel tanks were extensively holed, but the leaks were plugged with plasticene. This incident occurred on the second reconnaissance of Tobruk, and provided a timely warning of the dangers at such points, but, since the Sunderlands' tasks were generally tedious, the crews welcomed the opportunity of an offensive display. They had to be warned against trailing the coast too close to Italian fighter bases. While these flying boats, with an armament of ten machine guns, gave a good account of themselves in combat, we could ill afford the loss of one, or even, from a maintenance aspect, to have one seriously damaged. A Sunderland which reconnoitred Tobruk on 3 July was attacked by two C.R.42's, but was not hit.

The loss of a Sunderland off Tobruk on 6 August raised the whole question of the use of flying boats over defended ports, and led to repercussions from Air Ministry.<sup>1</sup> In a message to the Admiral, the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E., referring particularly to this loss, deprecated very strongly the  
/employment

No.201  
and  
228 Sqdn  
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6 August.

1. The circumstances were that a 228 Squadron Sunderland reported a tanker, a destroyer and several merchant vessels near Tobruk. It bombed the tanker unsuccessfully. A few hours later, at the request of the C.-in-C., another Sunderland was despatched to shadow the force, relieving the first Sunderland. It was also intended to carry out a torpedo attack by three Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm, which were despatched to refuel at Maaten Bagush. The Sunderland continued to report the enemy ships' movements, but at 15.56 hours was recalled, as the Swordfish had only just reached Maaten Bagush. But four minutes later the Sunderland transmitted an S.O.S., as it had been shot down. One of the crew was killed and the others taken prisoner by an Italian destroyer after the Sunderland had alighted. The Swordfish did not carry out any attack.

employment of these aircraft within 30 to 40 miles of a known concentration of fighters. He hoped the Admiral would refrain from calling on No. 201 Group for co-operation involving this risk, pointing out that there were over 100 fighters concentrated in the Tobruk area.

This evoked a sharp reaction from Admiral Cunningham, who refused to "accept this limitation on reconnaissance by flying boats". It seemed to him that fighter concentrations were constantly changing their locations, and any limitation "would mean that no flying boat could approach the Italian coast". He considered that the reconnaissance on which the flying boats were sent was perfectly safe provided the officers in charge kept their object in view.

The Admiral continued:

"I suggest that the real reason for Tuesday's loss is that the officer in charge of the early reconnaissance that day departed from his object and attacked the convoy, thereby setting the coast alight, and, I may say, prejudicing the later operation which I had in view ..... The answer appears to be in stricter control of the officers in charge. I admire their offensive spirit, but their object is reconnaissance, and, if possible, unobtrusive reconnaissance, and they should have strict orders to bomb submarines only ..... These reconnaissances to find out about shipping movements along the Libyan coast, how far out they are routed and so on, will, I hope, enable me to make attacks on this line of **communication** and so prevent personnel and material getting to Libya. This is a contribution to the common cause which I am constantly trying to make, but you will appreciate how difficult it is to bring off without adequate long-range reconnaissance. Until Malta is reasonably secure I cannot keep a force constantly in the Central Mediterranean. It is too far from Alexandria. Incidentally, the Italians soon find out from their air reconnaissance when I move forces west, and they then just hold up shipping till I return. So you see the only way of getting at it is along the Libyan coast, and this is why these flying boat reconnaissances are so important to me".

But on the same day that the Admiral expressed these views, Air Ministry signalled H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.:-

"Your recent Sunderland losses are causing us concern. Understand you are fully alive to shortage of these aircraft".

/In

DO/AML/6  
4A

Ibid:  
5A

DO/AML/2  
Pt.I-62A

63A

In reply, Air Chief Marshal Longmore conveyed the Admiral's view and asked for consideration of the possibility of supplying a long-range G.R. land squadron in place of a flying boat squadron if Sunderland shortage became too acute to maintain two such squadrons.

#### Italian Cruiser Eludes Air Search

HQ ME  
Intelligence  
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On 15 July, extensive air reconnaissance was unsuccessful in locating an Italian cruiser which had escaped after an encounter with the Australian cruiser Sydney. The incident occurred north of Crete, when four of our destroyers were searching for submarines and the Sydney and destroyer Havock were looking for Italian shipping. At dawn, our destroyers sighted two Italian cruisers ten miles away and at that time the Sydney was 45 miles distant. The destroyers turned to draw the cruisers towards the Sydney, and were pursued and fired on by the enemy. As soon as the Italians came within range of the Sydney's guns, they turned away, but one cruiser, the Bartolomeo Colleoni, was repeatedly hit and stopped. The destroyers finished her with torpedoes while the Sydney chased her consort. The second cruiser, though damaged, outpaced the Sydney and got away. Meanwhile, Sunderlands of Nos. 228 and 230 Squadrons had taken off from Alexandria to join in the search for the surviving cruiser, but failed to find it, owing to incorrect information from the Navy, and a force of Blenheims sent from Egypt was equally unsuccessful. The British naval force was heavily bombed on its way back to Alexandria, but the only casualty was to the Havock, which was holed by splinters from a near miss.

#### R.A.F. Protection for Fleet

R.A.F. fighters protected the Fleet after three battleships and a cruiser had bombarded Bardia on 18 August.

Ibid.

Three hours after the bombardment, the Fleet was overtaken by a formation of S.79's. Gladiators of No.80 Squadron shot two of them into the sea and also destroyed a Cant shadowing aircraft. A quarter of an hour later, another formation of 25 S.79's appeared and was dispersed by a Hurricane, Gladiators and F.A.A. aircraft, which altogether disposed of at least six more of the enemy. The Italian bombing was ragged and achieved nothing. At one time, over 50 Italian fighters were hovering about, but they evaded combat and made no effort to screen their bombers.

Italians begin Torpedo Attack from the Air

Ibid.

The first Italian torpedo attacks from the air took place in August and illustrated the enemy's lack of experience in this form of warfare. A low wing monoplane believed to be an S.79K dropped a torpedo at a steep angle, aimed at a naval unit at sea. The torpedo did not explode and was presumed to have sunk immediately. On the 15th a torpedo dropped at night in Alexandria harbour ended up in the mud.

In September, as the Italians made their advance into Egypt, finally halting at Sidi Barrani, British naval craft and the Fleet Air Arm joined in harassing operations against coastal targets, while the R.A.F. made heavy attacks from Egypt on enemy aerodromes to prevent our ships being molested from the air. The Navy's only casualty was the cruiser Kent, which was attacked by bombers and torpedo aircraft off Bardia on the 17th. She was struck by a torpedo from an S.79, but was safely towed back to port at 5 knots, protected by R.A.F. patrols. The same day, a Sunderland of No.228 Squadron shot down a Cant Z.501 which was shadowing a British battleship south of Crete.

The enemy persisted with torpedo attacks from the air, but with no success. On 2 November four torpedoes were aimed at the battleships Ramillies and Valiant and the carrier Eagle 50 miles north of Mersa Matruh, but all went wide, as they were dropped prematurely, due to the warships' A/A barrage.

/Sunderlands

SECRET

85.

Sunderlands in Crete

H.Q., No.201  
Grp.,  
O. R. B.

Italy's attack on Greece, while involving us in heavy responsibilities, had the compensating advantage of giving the Royal Navy a stronger grip on the Central and Eastern Basins by the use of Crete as a base. To a lesser degree the same advantage fell to the R.A.F. --- lesser because we did not have the aircraft with which to exploit the situation. As Suda Bay was chosen as an advanced refuelling base for the Navy, it was convenient to base flying boats there, too. No time was lost in taking advantage of Suda Bay as a reconnaissance base. The day following Italy's declaration of war, a Sunderland took an advance party of R.A.F., personnel there to prepare facilities for flying boats and crews of No. 230 squadron. Stores followed by sea. Sunderlands carried out anti-submarine patrols for our convoys to Suda, which were mostly of tankers and included the R.A.F., tanker "Pass of Malnaha", to be used for Sunderland refuelling. Initial difficulties in establishing the flying boat base included interruption of the work by enemy air attack and lack of suitable boats for laying moorings. By 7 November the ground party had been augmented and tentage accommodation was available for 40 officers and men. There was a good quantity of stores, including spare engines.

One advantage of the Suda base was to enable the Sunderlands to provide better reconnaissance coverage of the Ionian Sea, notably the south-eastern portion, a system of patrols being integrated with those from Malta. No.230 squadron's first operations of this nature were carried out by two aircraft from Suda on 9 November. The Sunderlands also provided a useful link with our Allies in Greece, being employed to convey Staff Officers and important personages to and from Athens.

/Wellington

Wellington Unit to Counter Mines

To help the Navy in mine detection work in the Alexandria and Suez Canal areas, the R.A.F. had available a formation of D.W.I. Wellingtons, which began operating over Alexandria harbour and the Great Pass the day after Italy entered the war.

No.1 G.R.U.  
O.R.B.

It was No.1 G.R. Unit, formed at Ismailia from Nos. 1 and 2 G.R. Units, which arrived in Egypt from Harston - from where they had operated over the North Sea - between 22 and 27

May. The result of day and night work on modification and adaptation to local conditions was that three aircraft were ready on 11 June. Several sweeps of Alexandria harbour, Port Said and the Canal were carried out by the end of the month. To meet the characteristics of the magnetic mine, the aircraft had to fly in formation of three, but by July the maintenance position, through lack of spares, had become so acute that the C.-in-C. Mediterranean, under whose operational control the unit worked, instructed that flights should not be made unless there was real suspicion of mines being laid.

A compromise was reached by permitting occasional practice sweeps and training flights. On operations, the practice was to fly at heights between 50 and 70 feet above the water. The unit occasionally assisted with anti-submarine patrols in the approaches to Alexandria, but generally, in the period under review, flying was restricted to a minimum, for it was not until the New Year that enemy minelaying became troublesome. Good use was made by the unit of non-flying periods, on maintenance work, as the first few months of the unit's career in Egypt were marked by "teething" troubles. Great difficulty was experienced in keeping four aircraft serviceable, and the maintenance staff had plenty of practice in adaptation and improvisation. For instance, eight days in September were occupied in salvaging a Wellington which had force-landed

**SECRET**

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on soft ground at Ballah. The aircraft had to be moved 1,000 yards over planks to reach a take-off position.

After it had been flown back safely to Ismailia, repairs were necessary, involving removal of the magnetic ring - a job which had been done before only by civil contractors in England using special machinery.

THE RED SEA**SECRET**Economic Considerations

Our determination to hold Egypt gave the Red Sea an added significance as the shortest practicable reinforcement route. Quite apart from military reinforcement needs, the position in the Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean was important to economic warfare. It was desirable to keep open a door for mercantile trade, and the economic life of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Turkey could be adequately sustained only by ample shipping facilities. Egypt alone needed 100,000 tons of coal a month, and her economic prosperity depended largely upon export of cotton, cotton-seed and oil cake. If she were unable to find a market, her attitude to our cause might be serious. Two-thirds of our magnesite supplies, to which the War Cabinet gave priority, were derived from Greece. Bromine and other scarce materials were drawn from the Eastern Mediterranean, and we were substantially dependent on Near Eastern communications for flax supply. Britain was buying Balkan produce and drawing 33,000 tons of cotton-seed monthly from Egypt and the Sudan, 7,000 tons of pyrites from Cyprus and 6,800 tons of chrome ore from Greece and Turkey. So, in short, lack of shipping facilities would affect our war economy and have a serious effect on the resistance of the Near East countries to enemy penetration.

Enemy Unenterprising

The first five months of operations in the Red Sea area, despite the loss of British Somaliland, sufficed to remove real anxiety about the safety of this supply route; in

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S.5444  
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DO/AML/4  
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1. The events embodied in this and subsequent sections on the Red Sea form only a part of the wider operations in this theatre, described in R.A.F. Narrative "The East African campaigns, 1940 - 1941".



fact, the Italian effort to interrupt the flow of our reinforcements was surprisingly short-lived and feeble. More enterprising action by the Italian Air Force from Eritrea could have troubled the Red Sea supply line considerably. Their chief naval forces in this area consisted of about eight destroyers and eight submarines, which were mostly based on Massawa. Our chief fear was not of these but of bombing, yet this never materialised on any scale. This was due to our policy of offensive defence - attacking the enemy aircraft on the ground - and to the Italians' other distractions and commitments in pursuance of the land campaigns.

In the early stages, the Italians had fewer than 30 bombers in the Massawa area, about 26 in the Assab and Diredawa areas and 37 between Addis Ababa and the Kenya border. The last-named group was not suitably located for attacks either in the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden. Italian fighters in East Africa amounted to about 44, concentrated in the Massawa and Diredawa areas, and as all were of the short range type, they could not be used to escort bombers to the east side of the Red Sea. In the narrows of Bab-el-Mandeb, we could develop our best fighter effort, from Aden, with refuelling facilities at Perin. Another handicap to the Italians was that the maintenance of a check on our convoys required a more extensive reconnaissance effort than they could afford. Disconcerting attack on our convoys was only possible if the Italians were prepared to prejudice their other commitments, such as support of their land forces and internal security.

#### Convoy Protection Plans

Owing to the long distances involved, our arrangements for convoy protection in the Central and Southern Red Sea were an integration of anti-submarine patrols provided by Middle East

/ units

A.M.  
S.5544  
9A

H.Q. No.254  
Wing  
S.12/1/Air  
15A

units operating from the Sudan and by Aden Command. The danger to convoys lay in the area between longitude 49°E. and latitude 23°N., but fortunately we had bases enabling cover to be provided over most of this. As there was no G.R. squadron in the Sudan, the escorts from there had to be supplied by Wellesleys of No.14 Squadron. Their northern and southern limits of patrol were about 120 and 330 miles respectively from Port Sudan, which could be covered comfortably, but the use of single-engined aircraft involved some risk in protracted flying over the sea. This, however, had to be accepted, as also had the fact that fighter protection could not be provided from the Sudan against bombing attacks on shipping. In addition, heavy demands on the Wellesleys made it impossible to provide more than one aircraft on patrol at a time, as it was inadvisable to weaken the offensive effort against enemy aerodromes and supply centres.

Cover at the southern end of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden was provided by the Blenheims of No.203 Squadron, which, equipped as fighters, were able to deal with bombing attempts. No.8 Squadron Vincents also helped. The system was to pass a northbound convoy through the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, and where the danger of attack was greatest, just after dark, so that by daylight it was in the vicinity of Zubair Island, where it could be picked up by the aircraft from Port Sudan. The Blenheims were able to cover the Red Sea to a point 330 miles from Port Sudan in daylight if necessary.

To meet the danger from bombing, the plan was to attack enemy aerodromes flanking the Red Sea before and during the passage of convoys. Shipping in the near vicinity of Aden was protected from bombing by No.94 Squadron (Gladiators), whose main role was the defence of Aden. The danger of air

/ attack

attack was greatest when the convoy passed Massawa and Assab. The chief threat from submarines lay in the southern part of the Red Sea, and from surface vessels when passing the bases of Assab and Massawa.

#### Anti-Submarine Successes

The policy of eliminating the Italian threat to the Red Sea route by attacking aircraft and submarines in their bases was applied by the R.A.F. from Aden and the Sudan from the opening of hostilities. Macaaca airfield (Assab) and Assab satellites were persistently bombed by Blenheims from Aden by day and night with considerable success. The enemy's response by raids on Aden was feeble and ineffectual. From the Sudan, Wellesleys of Nos. 47 and 223 Squadrons hammered at Massawa and Asmara airfields. The first anti-submarine success came on 18 June, when Gladiators of 94 Squadron on patrol located a submarine 30 miles south-east of Aden. A Blenheim next arrived and bombed it, and the Gladiators machine-gunned the conning tower. As a result of the air action, a naval trawler was able to engage the submarine, forcing it to surrender. The submarine was captured intact and taken to Aden with all its crew. Blenheim reconnaissance enabled a close watch to be kept on Assab harbour, where towards the end of the month there lay six large and 40 small vessels, as well as a submarine. This submarine was dive-bombed by Blenheims, which scored near misses.

#### Shipping Ministry Representations

At the end of June, the Minister of Shipping urged on the Air Ministry that the freeing of the Red Sea route should receive special consideration as likely to be a necessary foundation for continuance of the general war effort on its economic and political side. In reply to this, on 8 July, the Air Council pointed out that the danger of air attack in the Red Sea lay mainly in the impossibility of fighter protection

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H.Q.M.E.  
Operational  
& Intelli-  
gence  
Summaries

A.M.  
S.5444  
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Ibid, 5A

to convoys except in the near vicinity of Aden. The Italian air forces in East Africa, however, were not conspicuously strong or aggressive and had already suffered considerable losses. It was expected that their other commitments would prevent their developing a heavy scale of attack on shipping. The situation in the Eastern Mediterranean was more difficult, since the Italian air forces in the Dodecanese were intact and could make shipping attacks their primary objective. But shipping facilities in the Eastern Mediterranean were less important, from the strategical aspect, than those in the Red Sea.

We waited until the first few days of July, after enemy airfields had been steadily bombed, before risking the first convoys through the Red Sea. They passed in both directions with complete immunity. After that, convoys proceeded at intervals of about three weeks, and during their passage bombing was carried out from Aden and the Sudan to keep the enemy air force quiescent.

#### Italian Air Forces Strained by Bombing

Persistent attacks on the enemy's key airfields during July, backed by the destruction of stores, ammunition and fuel, began to have a pronounced effect on his air organisation. The Aden squadrons continued day and night raids on Assab, and regular attacks on Macaaca aerodrome compelled the Italians to disperse their aircraft at satellites, which were in due course located and also bombed. Effective attacks were made by the Sudan Wellesleys on fuel installations at Massawa. By the middle of the month there was good evidence of a high percentage of unserviceability in the enemy squadrons and that our attacks were straining them to a marked degree. The Italian practice of exploiting mobility of squadrons also constituted an extra drain on fuel, and while the enemy could reinforce his air force by

HQ ME  
Operational  
and Intelligence  
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direct flight from Libya, he was cut off from bulk supplies. The consequence was that he had to conserve his resources. With the preoccupation of the land campaign and dislocation through bombing of his airfields overlooking the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, he was hardly in a position to mount the sustained effort necessary to watch the Red Sea closely and carry out heavy raids on shipping assembling at Aden for convoy to the Suez. Between 4 and 7 August, two small scale raids were made by Blenheims of No.45 Squadron from the Sudan to disturb the submarines in Massawa. In the first raid, from low level, one submarine was hit by a bomb. In the second, a destroyer of the Cacciatore class was damaged by a direct hit from a 250 lb bomb.

#### Protection for Berbera Evacuation

Ibid. The operations centred round our evacuation from Berbera fully occupied the Aden squadrons round about the 19th August. The Blenheims maintained effective protection of the ships. For the remainder of the month, the Aden squadrons harassed the enemy in British Somaliland and maintained close reconnaissance to guard against any Italian move across the Bab-el-Mandeb. The enemy's attempt to interfere with our shipping, however, originated chiefly from much further north, at Gura, near Massawa, where the Italians had about a dozen bombers left.

The evacuation of Somaliland provided a case in point where the R.A.F. had to set its face against the temptation to throw in considerable weight in close support of our ground forces.<sup>1</sup> Aden Command could not afford to lose sight of its

/ primary role

HQ ME  
O.R.B.  
App.22  
Aug.1940

<sup>1</sup> On 14 August the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. signalled the A.O.C. Aden: "You know our supply situation. Do what you can to cover Somaliland evacuation but do not waste aircraft in low flying attacks on Italian ground forces except to save some critical situation".

HQ ME  
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16B, 16C

role - protection of convoys and neutralisation of enemy air forces as far as possible to keep the Red Sea life line inviolate. As it was, the Somaliland support was the maximum that could be spared. To risk more might have prejudiced the more vital consideration. The difficulties under which our air support worked during the Italian push into British Somaliland included the lack of a protected aerodrome, which meant that our fighters had to be withdrawn, giving the enemy local air superiority. Our bombers were forced to operate from Aden, involving a 200 miles trip over the sea, and were continually attacked by enemy fighters. Nevertheless, Blenheims used on standing patrols during the evacuation of Berbera succeeded in keeping the port reasonably immune from air bombardment, and the support which the R.A.F. afforded drew forth the warm admiration of the Officer Commanding our forces in Somaliland.

A/V/M  
Longmore's  
Despatch  
Part I

By the time of the fall of British Somaliland, the enemy had lost half his submarines. Our steady bombing of airfields and dumps diverted the Italians' attention from shipping. Our attacks on Assab, intended to deny its use as a port and air base and to discourage dhow traffic, largely achieved their objective. Massawa's naval installations, airfields and fuel dumps were hammered from the Sudan by Nos. 223, 47 and 14 Squadrons, whose efforts led the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. to write:- "No praise can be too high for the work of the pilots and aircrews of these squadrons in their obsolescent single-engined Wellesleys".

#### Effect of Somaliland Loss

HQ ME  
S.45639

Despite our successes and the fact that the A.O.C.-in-C. did not consider the Italian Air Force would be a serious menace to Red Sea convoys, the Ministry of shipping remained perturbed about the dangers, particularly through the

A.M.  
S.5544  
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loss of British Somaliland. In a memorandum to the Air Ministry on 23 August, the Ministry of Shipping expressed the fear that the position had deteriorated, and that the assembly of convoys at Aden and their passage by Perim had been rendered difficult. The Ministry, troubled by delays inherent in assembly of convoys, was anxious to see the Red Sea freed to an extent which would make convoy unnecessary. "The maintenance of completely adequate communications would require that the Admiralty should clear the Red Sea of submarines and surface vessels, and that the Air Ministry and War Office should render incapable of attacks on shipping the enemy air and land forces in Italian East Africa", it wrote, although these desiderata had doubtless occurred to the commanders, since they were the prime objectives of the East African campaign.

The Air Ministry saw no reason why the Italian occupation of British Somaliland should materially affect the position. It was true that the danger zone for convoys had slightly extended, but the Italians had not acquired air bases nearer to our shipping routes than they held before, and what airfields they gained were vulnerable to attack from Aden. The enemy was in a better position to attack shipping in the Bab-el-Mandeb by continuing to operate from Assab and Diredawa.

#### Fighter Protection Difficulties

In August, when some air attacks developed on the Red Sea convoy route, the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. pointed out to Air Ministry that this had happened after publicity had been given to the immunity of the Red Sea convoys, so stinging the Italians into action. The A.O.C.-in-C. thought the necessity for an aircraft carrier with fighters for escort of these convoys was becoming apparent. This evoked a counter-suggestion from the C.-in-C. East Indies that the best solution was longer range

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Ibid: 12A

DO/AML/6  
10A

Ibid.: 11A

and faster shore-based fighters, using Kamaran as an advanced base. He considered that a vulnerable unit such as a carrier would be an attractive target in the Red Sea, and carrier borne aircraft had a comparatively low performance for convoy escort.

However, the situation never became beyond the capacity of the Blenheims to handle, and from our point of view was helped by the enemy's lack of enterprise. Although at certain periods there was a large assembly of shipping in harbour at Aden, the Italian raids there were half-hearted and achieved nothing.

#### Sudan Outline Plan

The R.A.F.'s objective in this theatre was reemphasised in the Sudan Outline Plan issued on 30 August in which it was stated:

HQ ME  
O.R.B.  
App. 38  
Aug. 1940

"At present the primary role of our air forces in the Sudan is to keep open the Red Sea communications. Until air resources for the replacement of wastage and the re-armament of squadrons becomes available, our limited forces must not be diverted from this primary role except in cases of grave emergency."

The role of the air forces in the Sudan, which were under the command of the A.O.C. No. 203 Group, was defined as:-

Bombing operations to counter Italian air, sea and land attacks against our Red Sea communications and the Sudan. Co-operation with and direct support as necessary of the land forces operating under the orders of the G.O.C. in the Sudan. Such sea reconnaissance for the support of naval operations and the passage of convoys through the Red Sea as is necessary and is within the scope of the units available for the purpose. Air defence of the Sudan. Co-operation with civil and military authorities in the internal security in the Sudan.

#### Anti-Submarines Patrols Reduced

So ineffective was the enemy effort against convoys that by the end of August the escort and anti-submarine patrol work from the Sudan was substantially cut, on the ground that the long hours of Wellesley flying were not justified, that these aircraft were unsuitable for the task and could be better employed on offensive operations. The matter was

/ vigorously



vigorously raised in a demi-official letter from Wing Commander Macdonald, C.C. No.254 Wing, to Air Vice-Marshal Drummond, H.Q., M.E., stating:-

HQ No.254  
Wing  
S/12/1/Air  
32A

"This convoy business is causing me a certain amount of misgiving. I cannot help thinking it is a waste of effort. In the first place, the Navy themselves have indicated that it is not submarines in the Red Sea they are so much afraid of - it is the air, and it looks as if this may shortly prove right. What is this submarine menace? A few weeks ago there was a maximum of three not very offensive submarines in the Red Sea. Since then we have planted a few A/S bombs near them and I should be surprised if they are all seaworthy. One appears to be lying in the deeper water in the harbour; there's no sign of the others. They may be serviceable, but is it advisable to divert 14 Squadron from its proper role and to reduce our effort accordingly against the more feared threat just because of the possible threat of two Italian submarines, working even at the best of times under most appalling conditions and against strongly protected convoys? Lately, 14 Squadron have been so involved with convoys that they have been practically lost to me as a striking force.....It seems to me that they could be better employed - quite apart from the strain, unfair, I consider, that this extensive flying over the Red Sea involves. One aircraft went in yesterday, and with one engine there is always this chance.....I feel that the sooner 14 Squadron reverts to its proper role the better.....Are we, in view of the change in the situation, to continue our main effort in keeping the Red Sea route open or to devote it to maintaining the security of the Sudan and our bases in it, if threatened?"

At the same time, the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. signalled the Senior Naval Officer, Red Sea, that anti-submarine escorts from Port Sudan for protection of convoys passing through the area 15°58'N. to 20°50'N. were no longer justified, and that the employment of the Wellesleys involved diversion from their primary role of attacking enemy aerodromes and so neutralising the air threat to convoys, the risk from which appeared to be more dangerous than submarine attack. He proposed to discontinue anti-submarine escort, but would reconsider it if the submarine threat increased and when No.14 Squadron was rearmed with twin-engined aircraft. The escorts from Aden in the southern Red Sea would continue.

Ibid; 33A

The Navy agreed to this, expressing the hope that the

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air effort thus released would also be directed against U-boats and other naval targets in the Massawa area. The consequence was that No.14 Squadron's escort work was limited to protection of convoys 20 miles from Port Sudan when ships were entering or leaving harbour.

#### Vigilance over Straits

The Italians made persistent but ineffective attempts to bomb Aden during September, and were foiled by Gladiator patrols. It was a period of constant vigilance over the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden by Blenheims of No.203 Squadron, but there were no submarine sightings. The sea patrols were uneventful, except on the 5 September, when one Blenheim enlivened its task by chasing five S.79's, scoring hits on two. From the Sudan there was an increase in bombing operations against Asmara, Massawa and Gura, necessitated by the arrival of Italian air reinforcements, which made attempts to bomb shipping. On 5 September, south of Zubair Island, a convoy was attacked five times by S.79's believed to be based on Gura, but no hits were scored.

#### Attacks Costly to Enemy

October was a period of busy convoy activity in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Air escort was provided on 24 days for a total of 157 ships, not one of which was damaged in the six enemy air attacks made on them. The Italians' increased effort to interfere with our convoys cost them a destroyer and several aircraft. The attacks began on the 14th, when two S.81's approached a convoy off Zubair Island. They were driven off by a Blenheim of No.203 Squadron without doing any harm. Next day, three S.79's attacked the convoy in the Perim Straits, but failed to do any damage. The Blenheim escort severely damaged one enemy aircraft, which later dived into the

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HQ ME Operational and Intelligence Summaries

Ibid.

sea, and then attacked the leader of the formation, which was driven off. On the 19th, one S.79 aimed bombs at a convoy in the Gulf of Aden, without success, and was chased for 60 miles by the Blenheim escort. Another lone S.79 attempted to bomb a convoy in the southern Red Sea on the 20th. The attack failed, and the enemy was eventually intercepted by a Blenheim south of Massawa. When last seen, the S.79 was losing height and black smoke was pouring from it. At midnight on 20 October, a northbound convoy escorted by two destroyers and two sloops was attacked in the southern Red Sea by two destroyers, which fired torpedoes and began shelling. The enemy retired rapidly when engaged by our escort. About two hours later our destroyers intercepted the enemy and engaged one of them. The result was that one Italian destroyer was torpedoed and ran aground on Harmil Island, being abandoned by her crew. One of our destroyers was hit in the engine room by fire from a shore battery, but was safely towed back to Aden by her companion destroyer, having survived a bombing attack on the way. The grounded enemy destroyer was later bombed by Blenheims of No.45 Squadron, which scored a hit on the stern. Reconnaissance later confirmed that she had sunk. On the 24th, a convoy in Port Sudan was attacked by two enemy aircraft from 15,000 ft., but damage was negligible.

Practically all our air effort from Sudan during early October was concentrated on Gura and Massawa, in exploratory bombing of suspected fuel dumps. We failed to find the main dump, but the bombing drove a good proportion of the Italian air force at Gura further inland.

#### End of Convoy Attacks

By the second week in November the air and under-water menace had been almost eliminated. Only one seaworthy submarine was believed to remain to the enemy, and his bombing

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attempts on shipping ceased altogether. On 2 November a British warship off Zubair Island was attacked by one aircraft, but the bombs fell in the sea. The last attack on convoys came on 4 November, when an S.79 aimed six bombs at ships north of Zugar Island, but the nearest bomb fell 100 yards from the target. The bomber was chased by the convoy's single Blenheim escort, which silenced the top rear gun position but had to break off through its own guns jamming.

A/C/M  
Longmore  
Despatch  
Part I

Between June and December, the R.A.F. escorted 54 Red Sea convoys and in that time ships on passage were damaged by bombs only twice. One ship was sunk, and the other reached port.

HE ME  
DO/AML/4  
28A

The cessation of attacks came at a convenient time, for H.Q., M.E., coping with urgent commitments in Greece, had to call on Aden for two squadrons as reinforcements. As Aden's main consideration was convoy protection, No.203 Squadron remained, and a sacrifice was made in the offensive effort over land. The A.O.C. Aden planned to meet the new situation by carrying out armed reconnaissances of aerodromes flanking the Red Sea route, to see that the Italians did not reoccupy them, and occasional raids on Assab to maintain the blockade.

GIBRALTAR**SECRET**Limitations on Air Effort

When Italy entered the war, Gibraltar was virtually unprotected in the air because of the lack of airfield facilities, and the difficulties in this direction were such as to rule out any hope of improvement for many months to come. The only fighter cover was from any aircraft carrier that might happen to be there. The landing ground at Gibraltar could hardly be classed as an aerodrome. It consisted of a strip running across the racecourse, on the narrow neck of land connecting the Rock with the mainland. This strip gave a run of 900 yards, but as one boundary was also the boundary between the British and Spanish neutral zones and the other was flanked by a cemetery and buildings, expansion was not possible without undertaking extensive work, and no proposals existed for this. We had also given Spain an undertaking that the landing ground would be used only for F.A.A. aircraft temporarily disembarked for training and maintenance, and that we would not have more than two squadrons there at any one time. Aircraft could be operated without infringing Spanish neutrality or territorial waters, although this involved making low turns.

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Gibraltar had little to fear from Italian bombing in view of the distance from enemy bases. The main fear was from the Vichy French and Spain, but the risk of sudden attack from either of these quarters had to be accepted. For air defence, the Rock was reliant on its 24 heavy and 10 light anti-aircraft guns and the guns of warships based there. In the sense of offensive air operations, Gibraltar could exert little influence on the Western Basin.

Since the operation of fighters and bombers was impracticable, the main value of the Rock to the R.A.F. lay in its use as a reconnaissance base, and for this function we had to rely on flying boats, seaplanes and Swordfish.

No.202 Squadron's London flying boats, on which we mainly depended to provide reconnaissance of the eastern and western approaches to the Straits, operated from an improvised base in the harbour, and their strength of six could not conveniently be increased because of congestion in the harbour. They were assisted by No.3 A.A.C.U. detachment, which had three Swordfish, and by a few disembarked Swordfish from H.M. Ark Royal.

#### No.200 Group Separates

No.200 Group, which controlled No.202 Squadron and the A.A.C.U. detachment, soon found itself operating under the handicap of inadequate repair and maintenance facilities, for it was impracticable to have servicing done at Malta, as had been the case before Italy entered the war. Malta's isolation from the west also made it impossible for H.Q. Mediterranean to continue administering No.200 Group. Consequently on 18 July the A.O.C. Mediterranean proposed to Air Ministry the transfer of No.200 Group to some other Command. This was accepted, and on 12 August the Group was handed over to Coastal Command for administration. Operational control remained with the Navy.

The servicing problem was solved by flying the Londons to England for major inspections and exchanges; meanwhile, arrangements were made to improve Gibraltar's servicing facilities. The absence of one aircraft almost continuously in Britain affected the squadron's operational commitments, and to mitigate this, permission was given for the Londons to do 240 hours flying before returning for inspection, instead of the normal 180. This was increased to 360 in October, when the weather broke, making the 16 hours trip to England very difficult.

/ Guard

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Guard on the Straits

Coastal  
Command  
H.Q.  
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No.200 Grp.  
O.R.B.

No.202 Sqn.  
O.R.B.

Operational activities in the early stages were largely governed by the fear that enemy warships would attempt to penetrate the Straits, but such a move never materialised. Nevertheless, long and monotonous patrols were necessary to guard against this contingency. Reconnaissance patrols were carried out most evenings as far as endurance would allow, to ensure that no enemy surface forces reached Gibraltar under cover of darkness. The patrol area went as far east as the meridian of 00 degrees 40 minutes west of Greenwich. There were anti-submarine patrols daily over the Straits and other operations to cover convoys, special searches for submarines in conjunction with naval units, and sweeps ahead of the Fleet. Despite persistent reports of submarines in the vicinity, sightings were rare. As Spain's attitude was uncertain, close watch had to be kept on Spanish ports and shipping movements and constant photographic reconnaissance made of coastal fortifications, in Spanish Morocco and the Southern extremity of Spain. The period of tension with Vichy involved close watch on French naval and shipping movements from North and West Africa and on ports there. In June, the Londons provided cover for several British merchant ships which left ports in the south of France upon the French capitulation and made their way to Gibraltar by way of the Spanish coast. Towards the end of this month, photographic reconnaissance was made of Oran - where lay French warships which we were anxious should not fall under German control - by a Sunderland of No.228 Squadron detached to Gibraltar. After Force H's action to incapacitate the French warships at Oran, this Sunderland, doing a reconnaissance of the North African coast, was attacked by three French Curtiss aircraft. The flying boat shot down two of the fighters and returned safely though holed in 40 places.

/ Gibraltar's

Gibraltar's flying boats subsequently reconnoitred French North African ports and dropped leaflets there. It was their job to ensure that French naval units did not slip undetected to the South of France. French naval units occasionally travelled west to Casablanca, passing the Straits through Spanish Moroccan Waters, but it was British Policy not to interfere with such moves.

Gibraltar was bombed by French aircraft on 24 and 25 September, presumably as a reprisal for the Dakar incident, and five of them were shot down. On 14 September a London on reconnaissance near Casablanca was shot down by French fighters, four of the crew being saved and interned.

By September, No.200 Group aircraft were flying over 600 hours monthly, despite deteriorating weather conditions and the difficulties of take-off and alighting in strong winds and turbulent air peculiar to the Rock. "Levanters" and sudden weather changes to which the Straits are subject, often involved the hurried recall of aircraft, and in September operations were curtailed on 13 days by meteorological conditions. Night operations were particularly dangerous through sea swells and dangerous air currents.

#### Submarine Sinkings

For the first four months, the anti-submarine patrols were uneventful, sightings were rare, and no sinkings were claimed, although suspicious oil patches were occasionally bombed. There were signs of increased U-boat activity in September, and in the following month Londons played a part in the destruction of two submarines. On 18 October a London bombed a position where air bubbles were seen, but the bombs failed to explode. A second London joined in the hunt, and her bombs exploded. Two destroyers were called, and their depth charges forced the Italian submarine



**SECRET**

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Durbo to the surface, in a badly damaged condition. The crew were rescued, and as a result of their information, special search was made in the area for the next two days by flying boats and destroyers. On the 20th a London sighted another submarine on the surface, and this was rammed by the destroyer Hotspur, 11 of the crew being saved.

PORT BOMBING**SECRET**Early Attacks on Tobruk

As already noted, offensive action against ports - a form of indirect support for the Navy - occupied a prominent part in the R.A.F.'s intention from the start of hostilities, but, due to the lack of aircraft (notably heavy bombers) our early efforts could hardly be described as strategic bombing. We had to confine ourselves to ports within comfortable range for the Blenheims, such as Derna and Tobruk. It was through Benghazi and Tobruk that the bulk of the enemy's supplies for his army build-up were received, but for the first three months Benghazi was immune from bombing.

No time was lost in striking at Tobruk, the main supply port for the enemy's advanced forces. On 12 June, in conjunction with a naval sweep, 32 Blenheims of No. 202 Group attacked Tobruk harbour and aerodrome, while the cruisers Liverpool and Gloucester shelled minesweepers off the harbour. The old cruiser San Giorgio (9,000 tons), used as a submarine depot ship, was the chief naval target, and was so effectively hit that it had to be beached. (it was later relegated to the role of an anti-aircraft battery). Two small ships and a transport were damaged. Blenheims of No. 55 Squadron bombed shipping in Tobruk harbour again on 21 June, when they hit one ship and drove off enemy fighters, two of which were badly damaged. At this period, three cruisers, three destroyers, three large transports and 29 other large ships were concentrated in the harbour. At the same time, the Navy bombarded Bardia, the R.A.F. providing fighter cover for the warships and spotter aircraft.<sup>1</sup>

Considerable damage and confusion was caused among shipping in Tobruk harbour during July, mainly through torpedo

1. This sort of commitment was not to the liking of the S.A.S.O: H.Q., R.A.F., M.E., Air Commodore Drummond, who in a letter to Air Commodore Collishaw (commanding No. 202 Group), emphasising the necessity for conserving resources at that stage, stated: "The Navy have asked for air support during their bombardment of Bardia, but this bombardment, strategically, is even more futile in my opinion than the raids by the Armoured Division".

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HQ 202  
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attacks by the Fleet Air Arm, supplemented by R.A.F. bombing. On 5 July Swordfish of No.813 Squadron scored eight torpedo hits in the harbour, including one on a submarine. Reconnaissance later by Blenheims of No.113 Squadron showed two 15,000 ton ships aground, one 8,000 ton ship down by the stern, and one of 6,000 tons on its side. This raid considerably disorganised the siting of the shipping as well. The attack was followed up on the nights of 13 and 14 July by six Bombays of No.216 Squadron, using 250 lb S.A.P. and G.P. bombs, but no confirmed successes were obtained. During June and July the Bombays also attacked Tobruk oil tanks without result. Two formations of Blenheims, after failing to locate a cruiser reported to be fleeing from our naval forces on 19 July, bombed shipping in Tobruk harbour, claiming hits on two small naval craft. Three torpedo hits were scored by F.A.A. Swordfish of No.824 Squadron in a night raid on Tobruk harbour on 19 July. Blenheim reconnaissance the next day showed two ships missing. On the nights of 21 and 22 July, Blenheims bombed Tobruk submarine jetty. Reconnaissance at the end of July disclosed that no serviceable warships remained in Tobruk and that the number of merchantmen had dwindled to six, suggesting the enemy had been discouraged from using the port as a base for light naval forces and that his supply effort was being impeded.

#### Need of Heavy Bombers

Meanwhile, Air Ministry minds were considering what could be spared in the way of heavy bombers for the Middle East, and on 30 July the Expansion and Re-equipment Policy Committee decided to send six Wellingtons a month as replacements for the Bomber transport squadrons. This was backed by a memorandum from the Director of Overseas Operations to the D.C.A.S., pointing out that to reduce air attack on Egypt we needed a force of long range bombers to attack the Italian air bases in Libya and their main harbours. Two squadrons of heavies were suggested in addition to the rearmad B.T. squadrons.

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D.O.O.  
M.E.1.

Ibid:

The broad strategical view at this time was influenced by two possibilities - a land advance by the enemy in Egypt and an attempt to eject our Fleet from the Eastern Basin. A successful land assault would have achieved the latter objective, which might have been gained separately by heavy air attack on Alexandria. The enemy's anxiety to remove the Fleet was inspired by oil shortage. As long as our Fleet was active in the Eastern Basin, there was little chance of the Axis transporting significant quantities of oil by sea to Italy and France from the Black Sea, and sea transport was imperative, since the Danube and railways were already working to capacity. The keys to an Axis land advance were Tobruk and Benghazi. "If we can make a Namsos out of these, we can hamstring any large scale land advance", was the view expressed in a Cabinet War Room minute to the Director of Plans on 7 August. But our existing bomber force could do little to reduce the scale of enemy air attack on Egypt.

It was not until 31 August that the first batch of six Wellingtons reached the Middle East. Six more arrived in late September.

#### Tobruk and Derna Damage

In the meantime, the M.E. Command did what it could with attacks on the ports of Tobruk, Derna and Bardia, using Blenheims and Bombays. Twenty Blenheims carried out a successful attack on Derna on 3 August as a result of reconnaissance by No. 113 Squadron's Blenheims (which subsequently performed a large number of port reconnaissances). Hits were scored on three ships, including the largest one present - about 400 ft long - and observation next day confirmed that this vessel was in difficulty. Another large ship of about the same size was set on fire on 9 August during an attack on Tobruk by three formations

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of Blenheims, which also hit the submarine jetty. On the 12th, Blenheims hit two small ships but failed to hit their main objective, the floating crane. About this time, reconnaissance showed a considerable decrease in Tobruk shipping, only one large and eight small ships being present. For the rest of August, single Bombays were left to deal with this port. Derma received a visit from 17 Blenheims on the 27th, when two ships were set on fire. Blenheims returned to Tobruk on 9 September with an attack of 20 aircraft.

#### First Blows at Benghazi

Then on 17 September the Fleet Air Arm mounted a night attack on Benghazi which signalled the beginning of a long series of bombings. Swordfish dive-bombed shipping and laid magnetic mines. This attack was very successful, a destroyer and 300 ft merchant vessel being sunk and two 400 ft ships set on fire. The following day, the Air Ministry signalled H.Q. Middle East hoping for an extension of attacks to port facilities at Benghazi, adding: "Fully realise you have other important targets, but we feel the key to the defence of Egypt is ultimately the prevention of further reinforcements reaching Libya". By this time the first delivery flight of six Wellingtons which had flown from England was established at Heliopolis as part of No. 70 Squadron, and as its first operation in the Middle East bombed targets in the Dodecanese on 18 September. The first air attack on Benghazi from Egypt was mounted on the night of 19 September, four Wellingtons carrying this out by using Fuka airfield for refuelling. They dropped 32 x 250 lb bombs on the quays and shipping, hitting two ships and starting a fire, and returned to the same target the following night.

On 6 October H.Q. No. 202 Group, under whose orders the Wellingtons had operated over Benghazi, suggested to H.Q. M.E. that German armoured forces might soon be sent to Libya, and proposed nightly attacks on Benghazi "to persuade the enemy that the undertaking will be dangerous". H.Q.M.E.  
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made three aircraft available each night for this project, and although it was not possible to visit Benghazi every night, the attacks were frequent. The weight of attack was light, but the raids came at the right moment to discourage the enemy, now established at Sidi Barrani, from attempting to extend his attenuated supply line any further. During October, Blenheims and Bombays joined in the night raids on Benghazi, and Tobruk continued to receive its share of attention. On the 4th, nine Blenheims raided Benghazi; during the second week of October 19 sorties were flown against this port, and 30 during the third week. Hits were scored on the mole, jetties and ships. On the 10th, Blenheims of No. 211 Squadron, bombing from 17,000 ft, hit two tankers and another large ship at Tobruk, where the enemy introduced balloon protection. On the night of the 17th, five Bombays hit two ships at Benghazi, and during the last week of October 25 daylight sorties were made against Tobruk.

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The A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East felt that the limited force available had been instrumental in forcing the Italians to use Tripoli very much more. This meant that the consequent road journey of 1,000 miles involved in carrying reinforcements and supplies to the front was subjecting Italian transport to great strain. The enemy always tried to use Tobruk for unloading whenever possible, because tanks travelling by road from Benghazi usually had their tracks worn out on arrival. There was no doubt that our attacks on Tobruk played an important part in bringing about enemy tank failure in subsequent land operations.

Wellington Reinforcements for Benghazi Attacks

Air Ministry policy had now turned towards a bombing programme as the best contribution to resolving the situation in our favour. The Blenheims, however,

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deprived of their advanced landing grounds, were operating over Benghazi at extreme range, and by the beginning of October there were only 15 Wellingtons available. It was, therefore, a heartening signal from the Chiefs of Staff on 11 October which informed Middle East commanders that immediate steps were being taken to accelerate and increase Wellington reinforcements.<sup>1</sup>

The signal also defined policy in the following terms:-

"With accumulating evidence of the passage of German mechanised forces southwards through Italy, Benghazi is regarded as the focus of prime importance for air attack. If Benghazi could be made unusable, any plans for large-scale Axis advance against Egypt would be seriously delayed, if not entirely dislocated. Our experience in Norway showed how extremely precarious the deployment and maintenance of an expeditionary force could become where limited port facilities could be kept under constant air attack, even on a harassing scale. The unique position of Benghazi, their sole major port in Western Libya, suggests a similar situation for the enemy might result if continuous air attack could be developed there."<sup>2</sup>

It is realised that sustained attack on Benghazi would entail all your available forces in Egypt with requisite range being concentrated on this task alone. As we view the situation from here, the latest reports of enemy intentions clearly indicate that this is the best way in which our air forces can make effective and possibly decisive contribution towards neutralising the probable enemy land and air threat to Egypt. Simultaneously, Tobruk should be kept under harassing attack by short range aircraft so far as your resources and other commitments permit".

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- 1 Twenty three Wellingtons were dispatched by air from England to the M.E. during October.
  - 2 Sir Arthur Longmore's private estimation of the results to be expected was rather different. "It is of interest to note the exaggerated view which was held as to the effectiveness of a comparatively few bombers operating at long range in stopping disembarkation of troops and supplies. It was probably based on our experiences in Norway, but in that case the aircraft were dive bombers in large numbers operating at comparatively short range which made the deployment and maintenance of an expeditionary force so precarious".

Offensive from Malta

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Malta's successful defiance of air attack made possible in November a plan to exploit the island's offensive potentialities and to hit the enemy supply line at the dispatching end. November 1st marked the start of a scheme whereby some of the Wellington reinforcements en route to the Middle East were retained in the island, at Luqa, to carry out a few sorties each against ports before proceeding.<sup>1</sup> The aim was to have about 16 Wellingtons always available in the island. The first targets were Naples and Brindisi, the idea being to interfere with the flow of enemy reinforcements to Albania. Air Ministry directed the first few of these operations, but on 6 November the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. was given this control.

During the first eleven days of November, twenty Wellington sorties were made from Malta, aimed at Naples railway station and oil refinery and the rail terminus at Brindisi. Fires were started at Naples, and the Italians admitted damage to Brindisi railway station. At the same time, attacks began on the unloading ports in Albania, to retard enemy supplies to the Greek front. For this purpose, a

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- 1 This was rather a reversal of policy formulated only two months earlier. An Air Ministry letter to the A.O.C. Mediterranean on 29 August stated that the Chiefs of Staff, having considered the use of Malta for offensive operations, had reached the following conclusions: "Malta is not a suitable base for bomber operations against Italy in present circumstances because most important targets are in north-west and are nearer to U.K. than to Malta..... Malta is a valuable staging point for reinforcing aircraft, and we do not wish to take action which would precipitate attacks on a scale likely to prejudice this. We shall be unable for some time to provide fighter and A/A defences on scale necessary to give reasonable protection against scale of attack which almost certainly would result from heavy raids based on Malta....We have no intention of stationing a bomber squadron at Malta at this stage of the war". In September, too, when the Ministerial Committee on Military Policy in the Middle East suggested consideration of the development of Malta for offensive air operations, the Air Staff temporarily rejected the idea. Its objections were the difficulty of reinforcing the island in view of aircraft shortage, and that the use of Malta as a bomber base would provoke a heavy scale of retaliation which could not be withstood until the defences were stronger.

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detachment of No.70 Squadron Wellingtons was transferred from Egypt to Elefsis, Athens. Their first operation, a daylight attack on Valona harbour, was unfortunate. The six aircraft ran into a standing patrol of Italian fighters in clear sky and two of the bombers were lost. One fighter was destroyed for certain and two damaged. To add to the discomfiture, the Wellingtons were fired on in error by Greek guns at Corinth and Patras.

**SECRET**

**SECTION II**

**(11 November 1940 to 31 May 1941)**

SECTION II(11 November 1940 to 31 May 1941)STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE PERIODAir-Sea War in Earnest

This period marked the ascendancy of air power over maritime power in the Mediterranean. It was not until the New Year, which heralded the Luftwaffe into Sicily, that the air-sea war was joined in earnest, and for the next six months the main successes in that sphere were enjoyed by the enemy, exploiting the influence conferred by land bases over narrow waters. From the aspect of air-sea warfare, our fortunes were influenced by the following features:-

- (1) Defeat of the Italian Air Force and Wavell's advance to El Agheila, giving our aircraft a stronger grip on the Eastern Basin, some influence in the Central Basin, and a link with Malta.
- (2) Arrival of the Luftwaffe, bringing intensified attacks on Malta and on our naval communications, strengthening the enemy's hold on the Sicilian Narrows and ensuring more safety for his reinforcement route to N. Africa.
- (3) Our inability to prevent an enemy build-up in Tripoli, partly through lack of an adequate striking force against his sea communications and ports.
- (4) Reduction of our forces influencing the situation in the Central Basin to meet the commitments in Greece.
- (5) The Axis offensive to the Egyptian frontier, isolating our forces in Tobruk and wiping out the advantages conferred on us by (1).
- (6) Successful British offensives against Italian E. Africa, which finally eliminated any threat to the Red Sea life-line.

- (7) The survival of Malta<sup>1</sup> as a base for offensive operations, and the start of a limited offensive from the island against shipping in transit.
- (8) Evacuation of our forces from Greece and Crete, involving the Navy in losses and damage on the scale of a major fleet action.
- (9) Decline in British naval power in the Mediterranean through enemy use of the dive-bomber, which hemmed our Fleet in the south-eastern corner of this sea and shook our hold on the Eastern Basin.
- (10) Persistent enemy mining of Malta Harbour and the Suez Canal by aircraft, which embarrassed our naval and shipping operations.
- (11) The conferment on our aircraft of much wider powers of "sink at sight".

#### Effect of Enemy Air Power on the Royal Navy

The arrival of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean at a moment when our position seemed very favourable - so promising, in fact, that our Middle East planning staffs were contemplating plans for the capture of Sicily - played a leading part in the strategic reverses of May and June. The sinking of the cruiser Southampton and the relentless hammering of the carrier Illustrious by dive-bombers in January were the beginning of a series of painful blows to the Royal Navy which reached their climax with the evacuation of Crete, gallantly carried out by our sailors at heavy cost in men and ships.

At the end of 1940, fortunately for the Italians whose Air Force was crumpled by our Desert offensive, the Luftwaffe began to establish itself in Mediterranean bases. Its primary task was attacks on our sea communications, including the closing of the Sicilian Narrows and the Suez Canal. The

/German

1. Sir Arthur Longmore described this survival as "unexpected".

R.A.F. M.E.  
Review No. 3

German bomber policy involved intensified attacks on our shipping, and the units included some which specialised in this form of warfare and were intended to weaken the Royal Navy's power in the Central Sea. In charge of the German operations against shipping was the famous shipping attack ace Major Harlinghausen. The Luftwaffe established itself first in Sicily, to operate over the Central Basin and Malta, and then in Cyrenaica to attack Egyptian ports, the Suez Canal and the northern end of the Red Sea. It may have also envisaged operations against our Red Sea shipping from Italian E. Africa, but these never materialised.

When Wavell's push gave us valuable air bases in Libya in January and February, the real battle of the Mediterranean was only just beginning. We were unable to exploit those bases fully against the enemy's sea communications because the pace of our push brought acute supply problems. The ship striking effort was left to the Fleet Air Arm, whose torpedo bomber range from Malta (Swordfish) was very limited. A.S.V. and other anti-shipping devices were available to only a small degree. The flurry of Spring events in the Mediterranean tended to overshadow the bright spot of East Africa, where the remaining potential danger to the Red Sea route was removed - a convenient success, as the Luftwaffe's arrival had dashed our hopes of getting traffic through the Mediterranean at will.

Our naval victory of Cape Matapan, which struck another crippling blow at the Italian Fleet's capacity to interfere with our shipping, was heartening. Yet, although hailed as a smashing success, it put the Royal Navy in little better position to affect the flow of Axis traffic from Italy to Libya, and the enemy was able to continue building a strong mechanised force. Nevertheless, the Royal Navy was not easily deterred. Despite heavy /bombing,

bombing, our destroyers persisted with efforts to operate from the Malta base and had some successes against convoys, but by the end of April Malta was almost untenable for our naval units. Though the Fleet occasionally ventured into the Central Basin, and bombarded Tripoli in April, the end of surface vessel power in the Mediterranean was then in sight.

#### Start of R.A.F. Shipping Attacks

The Spring was marked by an improved air reconnaissance effort from Malta, despite heavy bombing of the island, and its integration with the start of the R.A.F.'s offensive against shipping in transit, carried out by Blenheims sent from England as an experiment. This effort, at that time only "a cloud no bigger than a hand on the horizon", was the precursor of an anti-shipping campaign which eventually crippled the enemy and exerted a tremendous influence in bringing about our victories of Alamein, Tunisia and Sicily. The scale of air attack on shipping in the Spring and Summer of 1941 was insufficient to affect the position, and the preponderance of sinkings was still to the credit of the Navy, mainly through its submarines.

The combined air and naval effort, however, forced the enemy to increase his protective measures for supplies in transit and made him resort to circuitous routes. Unfortunately, our ability to effect further disruption of Axis supplies by bombing the ports of loading and unloading was still very limited, although this was a policy vigorously advocated by the Air Staff. The major part of the bombing was done by four Wellington squadrons, but the scale was hardly enough to embarrass the enemy. The squadrons could not operate under the best conditions and were constantly torn between target priorities. Changes in primary objectives for bombing, varying between Albania, Italy and N.Africa, tended to dissipate the effort. While mobility of the bomber squadrons was to some extent desirable, enemy bombing of Malta and our

retreat in the Desert imposed inconvenient changes of location. Before we could fully exploit the value of Libyan bases, conferred by Wavell's push, our bombing range was again cramped by having to operate from Egypt.

#### Temporary Disaster

The events of April and May were temporarily disastrous to our position. In this crucial period, the list of "priorities" communicated by the Prime Minister to the Cs-in-C. Middle East was: "Victory in Libya counts first; evacuation from Greece second. Shipping to beleaguered Tobruk, unless indispensable to victory, must be fitted in as convenient".

Our material losses in Greece and Crete were heavy<sup>1</sup>, including 200 aircraft and six cruisers. The enemy gained many air bases, and it looked as though he had a stranglehold. Hopes of naval dominance in the Mediterranean had been dissipated, for our ships could not travel more than 100 miles north and west of Alexandria without air protection. The Navy's main hope in the supply war lay with its submarines.

From this time onward, aircraft controlled the sea. The epilogue to this gloomy period was written by Air Marshal Tedder in a letter to the V.C.A.S. on 29th May:-

"The air has come into its own with a vengeance in the Mediterranean. I need hardly say I have refrained from saying 'I told you so'".<sup>2</sup>

From the wreckage of this disastrous period Malta had saved herself, and, though more isolated through the closing

/enemy

C.O.S.137th  
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17 April

H.Q. M.E.  
Corr.with  
V.C.A.S.  
29A

1. The part played by the R.A.F. in the Greece and Crete campaigns is dealt with in separate A.H.B. narratives.

2. The scale of enemy interference with our ships and Naval operations is reflected by the Navy's claims of aircraft destroyed. Between the Italian entry into the war and 31 May 1941, the Fleet in the Mediterranean claimed to have shot down by gunfire alone 78 aircraft, probably another 27, and to have damaged a further 69.

enemy 'pincers' in the Desert and Crete, was hitting back..

Under the stress of constant pressure, the foundation of an important base for air power had been laid. Malta's

survival held an ominous significance for the Axis in 1942 and 1943.



THE CENTRAL BASINThe Navy's Assertive Period

Admiralty  
Account of  
War in Med-  
iterranean

The effect of the F.A.A. blow at Taranto was that the Italians dispersed their Fleet to safer lodgings. The undamaged major units went to Naples, where they received further attention from the R.A.F. Then began a period of assertiveness by the Royal Navy which again proved the Italian Navy to be very shy. A sequel to the crippling of the Italian Battle Fleet was the passage of a convoy through the Mediterranean from Gibraltar, carrying stores and equipment for Malta and Alexandria. As usual, Force H provided the protection west of Malta. This operation was made the occasion for a number of subsidiary naval movements. The damage to the Italian Fleet enabled the British Fleet to dispense with two battleships for service elsewhere, so opportunity was taken to pass the Ramillies and cruisers Berwick and Newcastle westward. The battleship Malaya followed later. Four corvettes reinforced the Fleet under cover of the main convoy. Also in the convoy were the cruisers Manchester and Southampton, carrying Military and R.A.F. reinforcements. Other movements included a raid on the Dodecanese by the Illustrious' aircraft and another on Tripoli by aircraft from the Eagle, both on the night of 25 November.

Ibid and  
No.228  
Squadron  
O.R.B.

The convoy movement was marked on the 27th by a brush with Italian warships south of Sardinia in which a No.228 Squadron Sunderland from Malta played a useful part. At this time the Ramillies and her two cruiser consorts were through the narrows on their way west, and Force H, with the main convoy, was heading east. These forces had not yet joined when enemy warships were reported to the north, in a position to prevent our forces linking. The patrolling Sunderland discovered five enemy cruisers and five destroyers 33 miles south-west of Cape Spartivento /and

and a second enemy group of two battleships and seven destroyers in the vicinity. Both groups were steering southwest. The combined British forces turned to meet the enemy and Force H engaged at extreme range. This had the effect of causing the enemy to retire at high speed, and increasing range made the pursuit fruitless. Force H was unable to observe the result of its fire, but the Sunderland saw one cruiser hit and a disabled destroyer being assisted by cruisers and destroyers. Later, an Italian communique admitted that the 8-in. cruiser Fiume had been hit and a destroyer seriously damaged. After this skirmish, a few Italian bombers tried to attack our ships, but failed and lost two aircraft to the Fleet's fighters. When the Sunderland turned for Malta, it was shadowed for 45 minutes by an Italian flying boat.

The convoy passed safely through the Narrows and the series of complicated naval movements ended by the Fleet's reaching Alexandria on 30 November without casualty.

December for the Navy was a period of incessant activity, with the Italian warships quiescent. There were convoys to Malta from the Middle East, and the multiplicity of naval movements was increased by a steady flow of material to Greece and Crete.

Another action by the Navy was a daring sweep into the Adriatic by light forces, and the bombardment of Valona, focus of Italian supplies for the Greek front, by the battleships Warspite and Valiant on 18 December. Over 100 15-in. shells were rained on the port, our forces withdrew unopposed, and the flagship, as another defiant gesture at Italian air power, called at Malta on the way back to Alexandria.

The climax in this period of naval assertiveness was the Battle Fleet's bombardment of Bardia on 3 January, which softened the defences and helped to bring about the fall of the garrison two days later. A week after that, the Luftwaffe dive-bombers swarmed from their Sicilian bases and the Navy's fortunes entered a decline.

Plans to Build Up Malta Forces

When Wavell's Army began to push along the Libyan coast in the second half of December, bringing us airfields nearer the enemy supply route, the potentialities of Malta as an offensive base commended themselves even more to Middle East commanders. By the end of the year the R.A.F. on the island had proved its ability to operate in face of what the Italian Air Force could do. It had carried out invaluable reconnaissances of Italian ports and aerodromes, long reconnaissances for shipping in the Ionian Sea and between Italy and North Africa; Malta had been partially exploited as an offensive base and provided a vital link in air reinforcement of the Middle East from England. By the end of the year the following formations were operating from the island:-

No.431 (G.R.) Flight,	(Glen Martins)
No.228 Squadron,	(Sunderlands)
No.261 Squadron,	(Hurricanes)
No.148 Squadron,	(Wellingtons)
No.830 Squadron, F.A.A.	(Swordfish)

These units, however, were seldom up to establishment.

M.E.  
O.R.B.  
App.7  
Dec.1940

In view of what had been achieved, the time seemed opportune in December for policy about Malta to be reconsidered, on the basis that the island was usable by aircraft, that reconnaissance from there was invaluable to the Navy and that many valuable targets were within reach and had been successfully attacked. There was still no sign of a formation such as a torpedo bomber squadron capable of dealing with shipping in transit, and the lack of such a force gave the Axis opportunity to build up their forces in Libya without having to consider any peril from the skies en route. The consequence was that Mediterranean and Middle East Commanders began a series of representations to Air Ministry to remedy the situation. Malta's need was more fighters and reconnaissance aircraft, but the difficulties of getting them led Air Commodore Maynard to complain:-

/^Every...

DO/AML/13  
20A

"Every time I need a little help by way of an increase in establishment here or there, I have to battle for weeks before I can get it. It seems that the Air Staff is very much ahead of the Establishments and Personnel side of it, and the latter find it difficult to understand why demands on them are being made".

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/13  
22A

Sir Arthur Longmore on 11 December recommended that policy for Malta - "while the island remains usable and in view of its limited air capacity" - should be as follows, in order of priority:-

- (a) Fighter defence, for which No.261 Squadron completed to full establishment with reserves, plus reserves of pilots, should be sufficient for the present.
- (b) Fast G.R/L reconnaissance squadron with Glen Martins, for Italian port reconnaissance. (At present, only 7 + 5 Glen Martins approved).
- (c) T.B/G.R. Squadron for coastal reconnaissance and striking force, either bombs or torpedoes. (Beaufort type).
- (d) Night bomber squadron for strategic bombing of objectives as ordered by A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East.

When (b) and (c) had been provided, a decision should be made whether the flying boat squadron was still required at Malta as a result of experience of the ability of the G.R/L and T.B/G.R. squadrons to fulfil Central Mediterranean reconnaissance requirements.<sup>1</sup> Sir Arthur Longmore also recommended that the term "A.O.C. Mediterranean" should be changed to "A.O.C. Malta", as Air Commodore Maynard's responsibilities were entirely confined to the island.

H.Q. M.E.  
S.49916  
2A

A meeting of Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, on 26 December dealt with policy regarding heavy bombing and reconnaissance and agreed that, subject to specific operations

/in

1. Sir Arthur Longmore took exception to Air Commodore Maynard's addressing a signal on policy matters direct to Air Ministry. In a personal letter on 11 December Sir Arthur reminded the A.O.C. Mediterranean of the Air Council instructions in June

127.

in Libya, priority should be given to the naval requirements for reconnaissance in the Central Basin and bombing of ports in metropolitan Italy from Malta. This was followed by urgent representations to the Chiefs of Staff from the M.E. Commanders-in-Chief for further reconnaissance aircraft and the introduction of long-range torpedo bombers. The Cs-in-C. signal expressed concern at our weakness in air resources to control communications in the Central Basin and described the matter as of vital interest to all three Services, particularly when it was becoming essential to prevent enemy reinforcements reaching Libya and to pass our own reinforcements through the Mediterranean. "Air attack by R.A.F. and F.A.A. on merchant shipping and warships in enemy ports in Italy and Libya is producing good results but should be augmented by sinking ships on passage and at assembly ports. Reliable reconnaissance reports of movements of enemy warships would provide greater security for passage of our warships and convoys through Mediterranean and at same time provide the opportunity for attacking them by sea and air".

Apart from the fact that our weaknesses might lose us favourable chances of naval or air action, there was the danger that our naval operations might have to be curtailed to conform to the available air reconnaissance.

Our resources for reinforcement from Britain were already taxed to the utmost; and the Chiefs of Staff, pointing this out to the Middle East Commanders, complained that the vital expansion of Bomber Command was impossible

/while

Ibid: 9A  
C.O.S.(41)  
 2

H.Q. M.E.  
 DO/AML/13  
 21A

permitting the A.O.C. Malta to exercise local administrative control in direct communication with Air Ministry - "but the responsibility for general administrative control of your Command as well as of the others so far as operational requirements dictated was vested in me. Your practice of sending such signals to Air Ministry, repeating them to my Headquarters, only leads to confusion and unnecessary triangular exchange of views in long-winded signals. Signals referring to policy should be sent to me".

Ibid: 10A  
COS(41)2

while our resources, especially in crews, were diverted to other purposes. They approved, however, in principle, the establishment of a composite squadron of 7 Glen Martins and 7 Beauforts, plus 5 I.R. of each type, as it was considered that maintenance and accommodation facilities in the island would not permit of one complete squadron of each type being operated. Although no Beauforts could be allotted at this time, arrangements were put in train to send maintenance personnel and torpedoes ahead, to avoid delay in operations when the reinforcements arrived.

The result of these plans was that No.431 (G.R.)

No.69 Sqdn  
O.R.B.

Flight was disbanded on 10 January and re-formed as No.69 Squadron, with S/L E.A. Whiteley as its commanding officer. It remained a squadron in name only, for its strength was five Glen Martins, although the authorised establishment for No.431 Flight was 7 I.E. and 5 I.R. For the next few months, through casualties and bombing, this squadron never had more than six aircraft available and at one period was out of action altogether.

#### Sunderlands' Work from Malta

No.228  
Squadron  
O.R.B.

During December a beginning was made with a plan to intercept enemy convoys between Italy and Benghazi by using one Malta Sunderland equipped with A.S.V. for close co-ordination with the torpedo carrying Swordfish at Malta. The Sunderlands were also armed with 250 lb bombs for attacks on shipping, but due to the complexity of procedure and the circumstances in which ships could be attacked under International Law, no such attacks were made by the flying boats. However, the Sunderlands carried out some valuable locating and shadowing work for the Navy. On 27 January a Sunderland found three enemy merchant vessels north of Kerkenna, and its report led to the despatch of seven Swordfish from Malta. These sank one ship and damaged another. This operation evoked a congratulatory report from the Admiralty, reading:-

/s/Combined

"Combined R.A.F. and naval operations which resulted in successful attack on convoy at distance of 165 miles from Malta was well planned and executed. This provides an excellent illustration of the correct employment of air search and striking forces".

After this, several more such sightings were made by Sunderlands, but were out of Swordfish range.

The new search patrols devised for the Sunderlands were long - one was over 1,000 miles without a landfall - demanded a high degree of navigation, and were often carried out under severe weather conditions. Bad weather, in fact, interfered with operations in January, and heavy swells in Kalafrana Bay resulted in two flying boats being transferred to St. Paul's Bay. Operations were also affected by the presence of German fighters over Malta from January onwards and occasionally the Sunderlands had to be given fighter escorts in and out of the island.

In addition to sea patrols, the Sunderlands fulfilled a variety of useful functions. These included rescue of crews from aircraft forced down in the sea while on their way to Malta or the Middle East as reinforcements, and the carrying of important personages between Malta and the Middle East and Gibraltar. On the night of 12 January a Sunderland landed agents in Tunisia. The agents were disembarked into dinghies, with bicycles, half a mile off shore.

#### Enter the Luftwaffe - The "Illustrious Blitz"

The background of optimistic calculations about the offensive future of Malta was blotted out in January and did not emerge again for some months. The Malta hub of our Central Basin activity in the first five months of 1941 was the centre of a perplexing whirl. While the R.A.F. was battling to preserve the island against a German onslaught far more devastating than anything the Italians had launched, it was also striving to maintain the reconnaissance effort so needful to the Navy and to operate Wellingtons. Despite the intensity of the bombing and our restricted resources,

/these

these objectives were achieved, with only one short gap in operation of the bombers.

Up to mid-January, Malta withstood the Italian air attacks without much loss of efficiency. The Hurricanes devised tactics to exact a steady toll of raiders. The Italian bombers, content to operate at about 20,000 ft., inflicted little damage. Low-flying fighters, which machine-gunned Wellingtons at Luqa and Sunderlands at their moorings, were more disturbing.

Early in January, 1941, air reconnaissance disclosed the presence of large numbers of German aircraft on Sicilian aerodromes. There was not long to wait before these made their presence felt. Their first appearance over Malta was on 9 January, when nine JU.87's attacked shipping in Marsaklokk Bay, but the nature of this attack led to the belief that the pilots were Italian.

The following day, a British convoy passing south of Sicily from Gibraltar, bound for Malta and Greece, was attacked by JU.87's and JU.88's with a fanatical determination which left no doubt that the Luftwaffe had arrived. The enemy's main target was the *Illustrious*, which was heavily hit, set on fire and had her flight-deck wrecked. She beat off more attacks, and reached Malta six hours later with fires still burning. The cruisers *Southampton* and *Gloucester*, which had been escorting the convoy, were also dive-bombed. The *Southampton* was set on fire, and after several hours' unavailing effort to extinguish the blaze, had to be abandoned and sunk. The convoys reached their destinations and the Fleet returned to Alexandria, but the price was high.

It was now the turn of Malta, sheltering the crippled *Illustrious* and an unloading convoy, to endure the fury of the dive-bombers. The Luftwaffe had assembled about 200 aircraft in Sicily, under Flieger Korps X. There were some 50 Stukas of

/St. K.G.I.

Admiralty  
Account of  
War in the  
Mediterranean

H.Q.M.E.  
Intell.  
Summaries



Admiralty  
Account of  
War in  
Mediterr-  
anean

St. K.G.I. and St. K.G.II. at Catania, 39 HE.III's of K.G. 26 at Comiso<sup>1</sup>, over 100 JU.88's and HE.III's of L.G. No.1 at Comiso, and a squadron of long-range reconnaissance aircraft.

The dockyard was heavily raided on the 16th, 18th and 19th, and the *Illustrious* was twice damaged again. The merchant ship *Essex*, laden with 4,000 tons of ammunition, had a bomb burst in her engine room, but the explosion was curtailed by the bulkheads and her cargo was safely unloaded. During all the raids the *Illustrious*' guns were in action and repair proceeded feverishly on her plates. On the night of 23 January the patched-up carrier slipped out of harbour and reached Alexandria safely under her own steam. Her escorting cruiser squadron was heavily but unsuccessfully bombed on the passage.

AHQ MED  
S.247/36/  
1/Air  
AHB  
IIJ1/15

To meet these intensive attacks, Malta could put up only about six Hurricanes, three Fulmars and a Gladiator a day, which tackled raiders totalling 70 on the 16th, 80 on the 18th and 80 on the 19th. Yet on the 19th the tiny defensive force brought down 11 of the enemy. In the three main raids of the "*Illustrious* blitz" period, the fighters and guns accounted for 39 enemy aircraft for certain, five more unconfirmed and 12 damaged. These consisted mainly of JU.87's and JU.88's. We lost only three fighters in the air and six aircraft on the ground. After the departure of the *Illustrious* the Germans made no further attacks in strength until 4 February.

The Wellingtons as well as the fighters played a part in sapping the enemy's effort. Before the "*Illustrious* blitz", in fact, the bombers attacked Catania aerodrome on the night of 12 January dropping eight tons of bombs which started fires. Reconnaissance of Catania on the 15th showed

/100

Ibid:

1. K.G.26 specialised in attacks on shipping and docks and most of the other units also had experience against these forms of targets and in night raids against Britain.

100 aircraft there, of which between 30 and 40 were burnt out or severely damaged. The Wellingtons returned to the same target on the 15th, dropping 12 tons of bombs. About this time the enemy had over 200 aircraft based in Sicily.

Although Malta's aircraft could not prevent heavy damage to the Harbour and dockyard, they scored decisively over the dive-bombers. The Luftwaffe's first attacks on Malta seemed to follow closely the same pattern as the frustrated attacks on England in August and September 1940. First came confident dive-bombing; second, high level bombing with fighter escort; third, night raids; and finally night raids and fighter attacks in daylight. The JU.87 faded out of the picture in its role as a dive-bomber against land targets and the enemy had to put more reliance on the JU.88.

Between 11 October 1940 and 10 February 1941 when the average of fighters available daily was 11, our Malta aircraft claimed 41 of the enemy, with 10 more unconfirmed and 19 damaged. They made 62 interceptions in the course of 138 alerts, flying 492 hours on patrol. We lost three Hurricanes and two Fulmars in combat. A/A guns claimed 21 enemy aircraft destroyed during the same period.

The Germans were not long in replacing their losses in Sicily, but reinforcement of Malta's fighter force presented difficulties. On 21 January the Chiefs of Staff informed the A.O.C., M.E., that his first duty was to maintain a sufficient force to sustain Malta's defence. But though we held Libyan air bases in the New Year, the weather and distance - even with the use of long-range tanks - made reinforcement a difficult proposition. It was much more practicable to fly in Hurricanes from carriers sent from Gibraltar, and this was the system adopted later. Malta was helped out by six Hurricanes from the Middle East on 30 January.

/Commanders'

H.Q.MED.  
S247/36/Air

DO/AML/2 79A

Ibid. 84A.

Commanders' Concern at Turn of Events.

Our operations against the Italians had shown that offensive spirit and determination could overcome the handicap of a strategical and quantitative disadvantage, but when we were matched by a foe of equal determination, the Germans, it was a different story. The new position led to the Middle East Commanders signalling the Chiefs of Staff on 27 January: "Risks of our operations with irreducible minimum of force justifiable against unenterprising enemy, but this situation no longer acceptable when dealing with German forces. As regards Navy, it will not be possible with the light craft and escort vessels available to take on, with any guarantee against interruption, a sea line of communication extending a distance comparable to that between John O'Groats and Land's End whilst engaged at the same time in covering the ever-increasing Aegean traffic and Malta convoys, quite apart from active operations. As it is, all traffic between Cyprus, Palestine and Egypt has to run unescorted for lack of escorting vessels. The immediate naval requirements are a flotilla of destroyers and two small cruisers with good A/A. Second urgent requirement is small merchant ships of 2-3,000 tons to avoid putting all our eggs in one basket, in view of small escorts and shortage of harbours ..... With development of war in Mediterranean we must have resources and reserves, and this applies doubly now that passage through is so uncertain."

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/2 III  
84

C.O.S.(41)  
16th Meeting

Already the Chiefs of Staff Committee had asked the Admiralty to examine the question of escorts and shipping through the Mediterranean as a matter of urgency and the Chief of the Naval Staff feared that the damage to H.M. ships might make it necessary to change convoy arrangements.

H.Q. M.E.  
S.49916 17A

The critical period for convoys was when they were within range of the dive-bombers, which was anywhere within 200 miles of Sicily. The JU.88 was more dangerous than

/the

the JU.87, for whereas Fulmars operating from our carriers could catch the JU.87s they had not a sufficient margin of speed over the JU.88 to be really effective. It was therefore a risk to employ carriers to protect shipping in the zone of dive-bomber attack. Even fast convoys could cover only 120 miles in the zone of dive-bomber attack during the hours of darkness.

The achievements of the Luftwaffe, which quickly dominated the Sicilian narrows and also began to operate in Libya and to mine Malta harbour and the Suez Canal by night, so impressed Admiral Cunningham that in a signal to the Admiralty on 28 January he emphasised that its defeat in the Mediterranean was the first consideration.

But while the eyes of the Middle East commanders were on the situation caused by the arrival of German air and land forces,<sup>1</sup> the Chiefs of Staff were studying a wider strategy, which embraced the possibility of capturing the Dodecanese and preparing for the contingency of Turkey entering the war on our side. Yet the R.A.F. was already committed up to the hilt, supporting the Army in the Desert, Kenya and Sudan, escorting Red Sea convoys, defending

Alexandria and Malta, facing the necessity of defending Benghazi and a long line of sea communication and taking on inevitable new commitments in Greece. Sir Arthur Longmore had doubts whether our lines of communication were secure enough to maintain all that would be involved by fresh fields of operation. On 27 January he asked the C.A.S.: "Have your staff attempted to work out what number of squadrons of varying types can be maintained in the Middle East on existing air and /sea

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/2 88A.

Ibid: 82A.

Ibid: 85A

C.O.S. 28th  
Meeting  
1941.

1. Although it was acknowledged that the arrival of the G.A.F. in Sicily adversely affected our chance of capturing the island, a C.O.S. telegram to C's-in-C., Middle East on 24 January said that the importance of Sicily to our Mediterranean strategy was such that we should have plans ready for its capture in case circumstances such as dissension between the Italians and Germans paved the way for our entry.

sea lines of communication? Is not experience beginning to show that there is a limit which will be difficult to exceed unless the Mediterranean becomes more healthy for air route and shipping than at present?"

Ibid: 87A  
and 88A.

90A

99A

100A

Two days later, while our Libyan and Sudan offensives were progressing satisfactorily, Sir Arthur Longmore was "astounded" by a C.A.S. signal indicating that Turkey might agree to our infiltrating 10 to 15 squadrons, because the arrival of aircraft in the Middle East was hardly keeping pace with casualties in Libya, Sudan, Greece and Malta. When he pointed out that shipping difficulties and the uncertainty of the Malta air reinforcement route must for the time being impose some limit on the total air force which could be built up and maintained in the Middle East, the C.A.S. replied: "This is not a question of impressing the Turks. It is a question of trying to deter Germany, by fear of bombing of Rumania, from absorbing Bulgaria and Greece and Turkey without firing a shot and then dominating the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean as she now dominates the Narrows. If we can prevent or delay this, the squadrons in Turkey will have pulled far more weight than in helping to beat Italians in Africa". The Turkish project fell through, but the eyes of planning staffs remained fixed on a movement towards Europe. On 11 February the Defence Committee decided to undertake no serious movement beyond Benghazi, and that capture of the Dodecanese was of first importance, to be undertaken at the earliest moment. The Prime Minister instructed General Wavell: "You must concentrate all available forces in Delta in preparation for movement to Europe".

#### "Coastal Command" Controversy Revived.

The Navy's concern at the rough handling our ships had received at the hands of German dive-bombers and the fact that enemy supplies and reinforcements were reaching Libya untouched,

untouched, led in February to the C.-in-C., Mediterranean reiterating his call for a re-organisation of forces to secure stronger air protection, an air striking force, and the establishment of a separate air organisation analogous to Coastal Command. His proposals were resisted by the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, not on the score of the desirability of increased air support - for there could be no controversy over that - but on the undesirability of complicating the air organisation in a way which would lead to wastefulness and uneconomical working of forces weak enough already. The arguments against a Coastal Command from an administrative point of view were strong. Compared with those at home, the conditions in the Middle East were difficult. Supply of aircraft and spares over a long and vulnerable route was erratic. Preparation of aerodromes at widely separated points with indifferent communications bristled with complications. Maintenance problems affected our capacity to operate more than a certain number of aircraft in a given area.

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/6  
31A.

It was true that the R.A.F. could not meet the Navy's requirements in full, but this was mainly due to the lack of forces. While this situation existed, the allocation of aircraft for specific tasks was a question of priority between many conflicting calls from various fronts, which included the distraction of Greece and the possibility of having to make an allocation to Turkey.

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/2 III  
110A.

Nevertheless, the Admiral went ahead with his proposal for a Coastal Command, which had been a bone of contention in the Middle East for a long period.

DO/AML/6  
31A.

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/2 III  
118A.

In a signal to the Admiralty on 19 February he stated:-

"An aircraft carrier can no longer expect to enjoy the immunity experienced during the last few months with only the Italian Air Force to compete with. Apart from the increased risk of damage, it will now be necessary to embark a higher proportion of fighters at the expense of T.S.R.'s and the

/striking

striking effort of the carrier will be proportionately reduced. Malta and Aegean convoys and supply ships to Libyan ports are threatened, and some means of affording them fighter protection is an urgent requirement, for the aircraft carrier cannot be everywhere.

"<sup>1</sup>It is therefore essential for the prosecution of the war in the Mediterranean to supplement the long-range reconnaissance aircraft which work from Malta and Greece and the carrier-borne squadrons with aircraft operated from strategic positions on shore for offence, for local reconnaissance and for A/S and fighter patrols in defence of convoys. The strategic positions where aircraft for these purposes are required are: Malta, Crete, Cyrenaica, the west coast of Epirus; and the trend of the war will evidently soon necessitate establishing aircraft for work over the sea further north in the Aegean and perhaps in Turkish territory .....

"The requirements in the Mediterranean are:-

(a) An organisation similar to the Coastal Command in Home Waters, and (b) the provision of aircraft equipped and trained for work over the sea. Long range torpedo-reconnaissance aircraft such as Beauforts and long-range fighters are particularly required. It is not known how the operations of Coastal Command are organised as between the Admiralty and Air Ministry, but as regards the Mediterranean it is evident, if only to avoid complication and duplication in administration, that any similar

/organisation

H.Q. M.E. Corr.  
with V.C.A.S.  
4a.

1. Air Marshal Tedder had not been in the Middle East three months as Deputy A.O.C.-in-C. before he was led to comment acidly on the Navy's tendency to keep pressing for air support of various kinds. "Some people out here, particularly in the Navy", he wrote in a D/O letter to the V.C.A.S. on 23 March "have developed a practice of making signals which are evidently designed to be included in the official history of the war, e.g. C.-in-C., Mediterranean's signals regarding the inadequacy of air reconnaissance, of fighter protection, of the air defence of Alexandria and Suez Canal etc. It seems a trifle unnecessary, since they know the actual position perfectly well. There is no doubt we do badly need, apart from increased numbers, long range fighters and some torpedo-bombers (since Swordfish and Albacores have not got the range to deal with some of the important focal points)".

organisation should be under the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, operational control being a question of co-operation between us".

R.A.F. Resistance to Separate Command.

The Admiral's assessment of what was needed in the way of increased striking power was hardly challengeable, and the R.A.F. was already aware of it, but the establishment of a sub-ordinate command with centralised control did not find favour at Air Ministry. The C.O.S. took the view that such a system would either break down completely or at best be wasteful and inefficient. He thought the situation could be met by the appointment to the Middle East Air Staff of a naval liaison officer or the creation of a naval co-operation section of staff.

Sir Arthur Longmore was emphatic in his resistance to the idea of a separate Command, and he did not consider that provision of better support for naval operations was to any serious extent a matter of re-organisation. "Liaison and co-operation with Cunningham are as good as can be expected as

long as C.-in-C., Mediterranean has no shore base H.Q. and so liable to go to sea at short notice and out of touch with us<sup>1</sup>.

Liaison both at Alexandria with 201 Group and at H.Q. with Naval liaison staff is excellent and there have been no difficulties whatever regarding operational control. Quite agree that allocation of our limited forces to a subordinate Coastal Command would be criminally wasteful, highly inefficient, and might well in fact lead to Navy getting less support when really needed than they do now. In fact, the only way to improve air support for naval operations is to supplement air strength this Command, including latest torpedo bomber and long distance fighter. This I know was Cunningham's intention".

/At

C.O.S.  
163rd Mtg.

1. Later, in May, Sir Arthur Longmore told the Chiefs of Staff that he and General Wavell experienced some difficulty in co-ordinating the views of the three Services during the absences of Admiral Cunningham at sea. Although the Admiral left behind a senior liaison officer, the latter could not give decisions.

Ibid 119A

Ibid 122A  
Signal to  
C.O.S.  
Feb. 24 1941.



H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/6 31A

At the same time, the Admiral's proposals led to a detailed exchange of personal views between him and the A.O.C.-in-C., about how naval air requirements could best be met. On 17 February Sir Arthur Longmore informed the Admiral: "Your draft signal infers naval control of shore-based aircraft of your proposed Coastal Command at Malta, Crete, Cyrenaica and the west coast of Greece; but also presumably it would extend to the Red Sea coasts, Sudan, Aden and the East African coast which is not within your command. Thus there would be a Coastal Command within my Middle East Command operationally controlled in the Mediterranean by yourself as C.-in-C. Mediterranean, and further east by C.-in-C. East Indies. In fact, divided control throughout, and competition between you and me and the C.-in-C., East Indies for the operational allotment of whatever aircraft reach Middle East from U.K. or U.S.A. intact.

"I can imagine no conditions better calculated to provide inefficiency and friction between the two Services, and so long as I remain A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East I shall oppose any such proposal, as I do not regard it as a cure for our present difficulty, which arises almost entirely from insufficiency of aircraft to meet ever-growing commitments, amongst which, I agree with you, the arrival of the German Air Force in the Mediterranean looms very large.

"The present arrangement within its small capacity is flexible; it has met to a large extent the Army requirements and enabled them to carry out most successful offensives; it has met some, at least, of your requirements. I am not so sure that even at the present moment and at the expense of some valuable personnel and Wellingtons, it has not stopped the German mine-laying in the Suez Canal this moon period, but I agree that it may be premature to claim that. With an adequate supply of aircraft your requirements can be met under the existing organisation".

/These

Ibid: 33A

These reasons did not deter the Admiral, who in reply, however, said that the question of who exercised operational control of the proposed Coastal Command was quite a secondary matter and that he was content for the R.A.F. to have it. He pointed out that attack on naval targets was being done solely by F.A.A. Swordfish, which except in very favourable circumstances were quite unsuited for the job. "We are doing our best, by means of submarine and torpedo bomber attacks on convoys, to stop supplies going into Tripoli, but the port is being left untouched. To me it appears a wonderful chance - the only port through which the enemy can be supplied. The R.A.F. operations against Benghazi have practically precluded its use as a supply port. The breakwater is breached and the inner harbour is full of sunken ships. Tripoli requires the same treatment.

"Presently we shall require fighter protection for convoys. The Italians, who as a nation are not so sea-minded as we are, work it much better than we do. If the British Battle Fleet appears 100 miles off the Italian coast they are immediately attacked by hundreds of Italian bombers. Their convoys are escorted by fighters and their reconnaissance is infinitely more efficacious than ours. If the Italian battle fleet appeared 100 miles off Alexandria, would anything attack it except a few old Swordfish? I know that the trouble is shortage of aircraft, and that is why I want to draw the Admiralty's attention to the problem, which is a very pressing one to us".

Sir Arthur Longmore's reaction to this was to show in more detail the limitations under which the R.A.F. was working.

Ibid: 34A

The reason Tripoli had not received attention recently, he explained, was that there was a limit to the aircraft which could be operated from Malta, and a C.O.S. decision to send some Whitleys with parachute troops there for a special operation<sup>1</sup>

/meant

A.M.  
CS 7951

1. This was Operation "Colossus", carried out on the night of 10 Feb. About 35 parachutists were dropped to carry out demolition of the Apulian aqueduct, on which the big south Italian towns were dependent for water, near Caposele, but they did not achieve their objective.

meant that an equivalent number of Wellingtons had to be withdrawn. Again, Benina was not yet organised to operate more than a fighter squadron and four Wellingtons. "The long and vulnerable stretch of coastline which your convoys must use to reach Benghazi would necessitate a considerable number of fighters, flying hours and therefore petrol to maintain adequate protection during daylight hours.

"The situation should vastly improve when Italian and German aircraft are denied the use of Rhodes for operations ..... An Italian fleet within 100 miles of Alexandria would be attacked by all bomber squadrons within reach, but you would not expect me to tie up Squadrons waiting specifically for this unlikely contingency. You must remember that the combined Italian and German air force in the Mediterranean area is vastly superior in number to our own, and they are well able to afford the allotment of a considerable force for operations against shipping".

With this letter the matter was left for decision between the Air Ministry and Admiralty, but no changes were made, and operations continued under the same direction as before. However, as will be seen in the next section, it was not many months before the Admiral made another effort. "Sink at Sight" Powers Extended.

Under the existing instructions for attacking shipping, it was difficult, if not impossible, to discourage enemy traffic through air action, since captains of aircraft had limited powers. In the New Year, however, as we were not materially affecting the flow of enemy reinforcement to North Africa, revision of the instructions was dealt with in London as a matter of urgency. Up to this time, single merchant vessels or small groups unescorted could not be attacked except within the 30 miles limit

/prescribed

H.Q. Med.  
S/161/Air  
18A.

prescribed in August 1940.<sup>1</sup> Sunderlands from Malta, for instance, frequently sighted such enemy ships outside these limits, but had to leave them alone. Then, too, formations such as No.201 Group could not undertake operations with the primary object of attacking shipping unless they first secured authority from H.Q. R.A.F. Middle East.

H.Q.No.201  
Group  
S.10180 19A

The problem also involved steps to prevent the enemy using Tunisian territorial waters, which he was doing persistently to save his ships from attack.

H.Q. Med.  
S/161/Air  
28.

The first step to remedy the position was an Admiralty instruction on 6 February that south of latitude 35 degrees 46 mins. every enemy merchant ship could be assumed to be a military transport or auxiliary and sunk at sight.

The most important change in policy affecting shipping attacks was communicated by the Admiralty to Mediterranean commanders on 21 February and its effect was to make a large proportion of the Central Mediterranean a "Sink at Sight" area for any ships. Britain declared as dangerous to shipping the area enclosed by joining the following positions:-

From Cape Santa Maria de Leuca (in the heel of Italy) to Benghazi; thence westward along the N.African shore to the Tunisia-Tripoli frontier; thence along the limits of French territorial waters to a point three miles north of Cape Bon; thence direct to a position 30 miles from Cape Spartivento, Sardinia; thence at a distance of 30 miles from the west coast of Sardinia to parallel 41 degs. 18 min. N; thence eastward along this parallel to Paola Fuora point; thence southward and eastward along the coast of Italy to Cape Santa Maria de Leuca.

Within this area, any ship could be attacked at sight, but French coastal traffic, including that to the Tunisian islands, was not to be molested.

/In

H.Q. Med.  
S/161/Air  
16A.

1. This "sink at sight" order provided for attacks on any ships within 30 miles of the Libyan coast and any Italian ship within 30 miles of any Italian territory in the Mediterranean.

In the Adriatic, all ships navigating within 30 miles of Italian and Italian occupied territory could be attacked without warning. To avoid infringing Yugoslav territorial waters, the northern limit of 30 miles off the Albanian coast was fixed at 42 degs. north. Provision was made for certain Yugoslav ships to enter and leave the Adriatic on approved voyages.

Elsewhere in the Mediterranean, German and Italian vessels could be attacked without warning anywhere within 30 miles of Italian territory and also south of 35 degs. 46 mins. in Tunisian territorial waters. The Admiralty also ruled that to discourage trade between Spain and Italy there was no objection to occasional attacks without warning on enemy merchant vessels outside 30 miles of Italian territory.

Ibid: 34A.

The position with regard to Tunisian waters was made clear in a British Note to the French Government at the beginning of March, stating that our reconnaissance had shown German and Italian transports persistently used Tunisian territorial waters as a sanctuary from attack. Britain therefore authorised its naval and air forces to take action against enemy ships in all waters south of lat. 35 degs. 46 min. and warned French ships not to be at sea in this area between sunset and sunrise. It was not our intention to interfere with French coastal traffic.

44A

Towards the end of April, when our forces were evacuating Greece, the Mediterranean "sink at sight" area was extended. Germany and Italy had already declared the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean and greater part of the Adriatic as dangerous to shipping. Our counter-declaration defined the following area in which any vessel navigating without our permission was liable to attack:- The limits of the area declared dangerous to shipping in February extended eastward along the coasts of Libya and Egypt from Benghazi to Ras el Kanais; thence in a  
/direction

direction 24 degrees to a point three miles from Cape Khelidonia, in Turkey; thence along the limits of Turkish territorial waters to Greek territory; along the coasts of Greece and Albania, Jugoslavia and Italy to Cape Santa Maria de Leuca. It was also laid down that enemy vessels could be attacked within Turkish territorial waters except within the Dardanelles Straits.

#### Malta's Defence.<sup>1</sup>

The "Illustrious blitz" marked the start of a German plan to neutralise Malta as an air base and to make its harbour and surrounding seas untenable to our Naval forces. This plan did not succeed, though in four months of persistent attack the enemy came very near to achieving it. In that period, a handful of Hurricanes exacted a steady toll of raiders, but were heavily outnumbered that they could not prevent heavy damage being done to the dockyard and Halfar and Luqa aerodromes, by dive-bombing.

Malta's anti-aircraft defence at the start of the year consisted of 70 heavy and 34 light guns, which by the middle of March had been brought up to over 90 heavy and 52 light guns. On the latter date the air bases had the following defences:-

Halfar	4 Bofors	20 light automatics
Luqa	6 Bofors	31 light automatics
Takali	5 Bofors	27 light automatics
Marsa Scivocco (seaplane base)	10 Bofors	29 light automatics

Although anti-aircraft fire had many successes against the resolute dive-bombing, adequate fighter defence was the only satisfactory solution. This view was expressed by the Governor in March, when the War Office feared that the persistence of the air attacks might be the forerunner of invasion.

/In

1. In this narrative, the defence of Malta is touched upon only sufficiently to indicate broadly the way it impinges on the subject of the air-sea war. The defence of Malta will be the subject of a separate narrative.

SECRET

145.

In February, when the Luftwaffe intensified its efforts to blot out the island, Malta's significant part in the Mediterranean struggle was recognised by the upgrading of the status of the A.O.C. from Air Commodore to Air Vice-Marshal. This month and March found the R.A.F. operating under the greatest strain to which it had so far been subjected. The Luftwaffe introduced large scale raids by night to mine the harbour, so the Hurricanes had an additional commitment. On 17 February the island was raided for the 11th successive night. Reinforcement of the Luftwaffe in Sicily towards the end of the month resulted in a period during which there were formidable sweeps by Me.109s nearly every day and intermittent dive-bombing of the harbour and airfields. The Luftwaffe now had about 500 aircraft in the Mediterranean theatre, of which 170 were bombers, 90 dive-bombers, 20 reconnaissance, 60 fighters and 180 transport. The bulk of these were based at Catania, Comiso, Palermo and Taranto, about 30 Ju. 87's and 30 fighters being in Libya. Early in March, there were at least three German fighter squadrons in Sicily.

H.Q. M.E.  
Intelligence  
Summaries.

H.Q. Med.  
S247/36/1/Air

Dive-bombing on 26 February of Luqa aerodrome by over 40 aircraft destroyed six Wellingtons on the ground and severely damaged seven more. Luqa was put out of action for nearly 48 hours. An even heavier blow was struck at Halfar early in March by nearly 100 aircraft. This time the fighters claimed seven of the enemy and the guns nine. Weight of numbers was gradually overpowering the Hurricanes;

By the first week in March, the German raids had reached such proportions that the overriding need was more Hurricanes. The presence of the Wellingtons was an embarrassment to the island's defence, and compromised the steady flow of reinforcements through Malta to the Middle East. They were also an attractive target to the

H.Q. M.E.  
S.49916 15A.

Luftwaffe; in fact the A.O.C.-in-C., M.E., suggested that /their

their presence probably accounted for the increased scale of German attack. In any case, there was a danger that Malta would soon be short of petrol, since convoys were rare.

Although Sicily and Southern Italy offered attractive targets for the bombers, with the advantage of short range, Malta at this stage could not afford the luxury of operating them. The A.O.C., Malta, suggesting removal of the Wellingtons, signalled H.Q. M.E. on 7 March that he could not continue to operate them or the Sunderlands until the fighter effort was appreciably reinforced. He added: "I am most reluctant to adopt these defensive measures, which I trust will be only temporary, but I am forced to do so in view of the events of the past few days. Typical situation arose today. Whilst our Hurricanes engaged Me's west of the island, other Me's machine-gunned a Sunderland at moorings in St. Paul's Bay and attacked Glen Martin returning from reconnaissance. Former rendered unserviceable for approximately two months and latter shot down ..... Must once more stress necessity for fighter reinforcements, without which I cannot hold myself responsible for effective air defence of this island".

The consequence was the removal of No.148 Squadron and No.228 Squadron to Egypt between 9 March and the end of the month, on the understanding that Wellingtons would later use Malta as an advanced refuelling base. Their removal was not too high a price for adequate fighter defence.

It was a relief to the sorely-pressed fighter defence when 12 Hurricanes arrived on 3 April, flown off the Ark Royal, and a further 23 arrived by the same means on 27 April. Nevertheless, our fighters were heavily outnumbered, and the hazards were increased by the enemy's employment of large formations of Me.109's - as many as 30 at a time. Against such odds we lost eight Hurricanes in combat between 5 and 18 May, against the enemy's loss of four aircraft. On 29 April the island experienced a heavy raid, with 70 bombers concentrating on the dockyard and Takali aerodrome. The dockyard suffered severely.

/More

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. March  
App.5

Ibid: 17.

H.Q. Med.  
S.247/36/1/  
Air  
H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.



H.Q. Malta  
O.R.B.  
H.Q. M.E.  
S.21299

More Hurricanes arrived in May, enabling an additional squadron to be formed on the 12th. This was numbered 185. The arrival of No.249 Squadron (Hurricanes) on the 21st enabled all the pilots of No.261 Squadron, who had borne the brunt of the fighting, to be sent to Egypt for less strenuous duties, in the defence of Alexandria. Malta now had two full fighter squadrons - No.185 and No.249 - and by this time the German attacks were diminishing in frequency and intensity. They died away at the end of the month, as the Luftwaffe was pulled out of Sicily for the Russian front, leaving Malta breathless but fighting back vigorously. In the middle of May there were about 220 German aircraft in Sicily. A month later, all the bombers had been withdrawn, leaving about 30 single-engine fighters as the Luftwaffe's only representatives. The Italian Air Force strength in Sicily at this time was about 45 S.79's (bombers), 12 B.R. 20's (bombers) and 45 fighters.

On 25 May, Air Vice Marshal H.L. Lloyd took over the R.A.F. Mediterranean Command from Air Vice Marshal Maynard, who returned to the U.K.

H.Q. Med.  
S.247/36/1/Air

Between 11 February and 10 June, Malta had 388 alerts which involved 99 night bombing raids, 38 daylight raids, 11 machine-gunning attacks, 72 enemy fighter patrols and 76 reconnaissances. Our fighters, flying 1,817 hours, claimed 39 enemy aircraft for certain, 25 unconfirmed, and damaged 11. The A/A guns claimed 28 confirmed, 9 unconfirmed and damaged 16. We lost 32 fights and 17 pilots in combat. Losses through bombing and machine gunning were much more severe:- 8 Wellingtons destroyed, 7 damaged; 3 Hurricanes destroyed, 16 damaged; 3 Sunderlands destroyed, 3 damaged; 1 Gladiator destroyed, 2 damaged; 1 Seal destroyed; 6 Fulmars damaged; 2 Swordfish destroyed, 12 damaged; 1 Maryland destroyed, 5 damaged; 1 Magister destroyed; 2 Beaufighters destroyed, 3 damaged; 1 Blenheim destroyed. Practically all the buildings and hangars at Halfar

Halfar were damaged.

One result of Malta's successful defence was the maintenance of the air reinforcement route from the U.K. to the Middle East. In May, the Middle East received 84 aircraft by this means.

The measures for protection of Malta's aircraft - camouflage, dispersal and the construction of stone pens to minimise blast - proved very effective and saved many aircraft from destruction. Their success led the Air Ministry to reject a scheme urged by the Admiralty for tunnelling underground hangars to house folded F.A.A. aircraft. This question, first raised in September 1940, was revived in May 1941, but was not pursued because the effort was not justified, particularly for obsolescent aircraft. The cost of tunnelling to house 12 Swordfish was estimated at £80,000; in the conditions of labour shortage the project would occupy over a year and prejudice the building of further stone pens.

#### Vicissitudes of Air Reconnaissance.

Malta's successful resistance meant that the R.A.F. was able to maintain, with little interruption, reconnaissance and bomber operations from the island, and in May to instal the nucleus of a ship striking force. In the allocation of limited resources and servicing, fighter defence had to take first place, reconnaissance second and offensive effort last.

In addition to the losses through enemy bombing and the strain on maintenance, the difficulties were accentuated by lack of personnel, spares and equipment. In the circumstances, the Sunderlands could not be properly employed. They proved very vulnerable at their moorings when the Germans introduced low-flying fighter attacks, and it was imprudent to risk them off Sicily or S. Italy against hordes of fighters. Their reconnaissances became very limited in February, as the Marylands were more suitable over defended areas, and in March

/H.Q.

A.M. S.71800

A.M. S.5804

No.228  
Squadron  
O.R.B.

H.Q. Mediterranean considered several schemes for putting the Sunderlands to better use. The question was resolved by H.Q. Middle East, which ordered their transfer to the Middle East. The removal was carried out between 19 March and the end of the month, but a few personnel were left behind to handle Sunderlands calling at Malta on communications flights, or on special duties.

No. 69 Squadron  
O.R.Bs.

This left the Marylands of No. 69 Squadron, based at Luqa, to do all the sea and port reconnaissance. The bulk of their effort in the first three months of the year was applied to visual and photographic reconnaissance of shipping and the ports and aerodromes in Sicily and S. Italy, where they frequently met intense A/A fire and strong fighter opposition. Sometimes, lone Marylands were chased all the way back to Malta by Macchis, but, undeterred, they went boldly over the most strongly defended places to get the much-needed information. It was these "eyes" which discovered the arrival of the Luftwaffe on Sicilian airfields in December, provided the target information for the Wellingtons and the torpedo-carrying Swordfish of No. 830 F.A.A. Squadron, and gave the Navy prompt warning of Italian naval and shipping dispositions.

The Marylands faced many dangers and difficulties. Sometimes a sortie would be spoiled by failure of a camera due to the intense cold - December, 1940, was the coldest month in Malta for 17 years - at the heights from which photographs were taken (15,000 to 20,000 feet). The hazards were increased when the Luftwaffe attacks developed, for part of the enemy tactics was to put a ring of fighters round the island to hem in reconnaissance aircraft. Evading the enemy cordon became part of the Marylands' daily routine.

On 7 March a Maryland exchanged shots with a fighter while on reconnaissance of Taormina, and eluded  
/the

the enemy. On the way back, the Maryland damaged a Cant Z506, but on reaching Malta was intercepted by Me.109's, which set it on fire and shot down a Hurricane which tried to give protection. One of the Maryland's crew escaped by parachute.

Later the same day, a Maryland piloted by F/O Warburton<sup>1</sup> was chased from Taranto across the Adriatic by four Macchi 200's. The pursuers were shaken off, but on heading for home the Maryland was intercepted off Cape St. Maria de Leuca by two Macchi 200's. A chase continued for 100 miles during which shots were exchanged. When the Maryland finally escaped, it was short of petrol, but made a safe landing at Menidi, Greece, and returned the next day. These examples were typical of the hazards faced daily by the reconnaissance crews. Then, too, the squadron never had more than five aircraft at one time, and usually only three serviceable. Serviceability suffered through the bombing of Luqa, and at one time there were no aircraft available. On 22 February the A.O.C., Mediterranean signalled H.Q., M.E. that he was "blind" as to the best objectives for the Wellingtons, as no Marylands were serviceable. On 5 March, when H.Q. M.E. wanted Malta to do shipping reconnaissances on the Tripoli route, H.Q. Mediterranean pointed out that there were only two Marylands serviceable a day, and sometimes only one.

In January, Malta acquired, by the fortune of bad weather, a P.R.U. Spitfire which force-landed on the island after a reconnaissance of Genoa from England, as it was short of fuel. Air Ministry gave permission for its retention in the Mediterranean for special photography, including the requirements of the Naval C.-in-C. This aircraft provided

/some

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1. F/O Warburton was among the original pilots of No.431 Flight in Malta. He began operating there in September 1940, was awarded the D.F.C. in January 1941 and subsequently achieved distinction as one of the outstanding reconnaissance pilots of the war.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. App.43.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B.  
Appendix  
Jan. & Feb.

some valuable photographs of ports, but was lost over Italy on 2 February.

H.Q. Med.  
S.247/36/1/Air.

Between 11 October 1940 and 10 February 1941, Malta's reconnaissance aircraft, embracing the Sunderlands, Marylands, Swordfish of No.830 Squadron F.A.A., a Spitfire, a French Latecoere, a Skua and a Blenheim, flew a total of 1,449 hours. This included 170 extended sea reconnaissances, 77 photographic reconnaissances, 21 visual reconnaissances and 8 special searches. Losses in the air through enemy action were 1 Maryland, 1 Spitfire and 1 Sunderland. Between 10 February and 7 June, the Marylands put in 1,099 hours.

#### Naval Blows at Supply Route.

H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.  
The Air Battle  
of Malta.

In the first six months of 1941, the major successes against the enemy supply route were enjoyed by our submarines, which continued to operate from Malta despite the bombings. The Fleet Air Arm's Swordfish of No.830 Squadron occasionally attacked ships<sup>1</sup>. On 27 January they sank a merchant vessel of 5,000 tons and severely damaged an 8,000 tonner by bombing. On the night of 13 February they sank a ship in a convoy off Tunisia with torpedoes and had a similar success off Kuriat Island two nights later. But with their small range and slow speed they were unequal to the situation and could operate only on moonlight nights. The necessity for more severe anti-shipping measures brought some of our light naval forces - the 14th Destroyer Flotilla - back to Malta in the spring, but destroyer operations were not carried out with impunity. The Navy's determination to use Malta was matched by heavy air attack by night and day. There were large-scale raids to lay mines in the Marsa Muscetto and

/Grand

H.Q. MED.  
S.247/36/1/Air

1. Between October 1940 and February 1941, No.830 Squadron put up 41 sorties in five attacks - three of them against Tripoli. Between February and June 1941, they carried out 76 sorties against shipping, claiming three merchant vessels of between 5,000 and 7,000 tons sunk and a destroyer damaged, 48 sorties against Tripoli and 9 against Lampedusa, mainly on harbour mining.

Grand Harbour; many of the mines, going astray, blasted the dockyard district. The presence of naval units was a constant temptation to the Luftwaffe.

War Cabinet  
Weekly  
Resume.

On 21 March the destroyer Defender was damaged by near misses from a Ju.88 and had to be escorted into Malta by fighters. Air attacks followed the berthing of a convoy from Alexandria on 23 March. In these, H.M.S. Bonaventure and the destroyer Griffin were slight damaged by near misses, while two ships of the convoy, the City of Lincoln and the Perthshire suffered direct hits, some of the latter's cargo being burnt. The destroyer Encounter was severely damaged in a night raid on the harbour on 29 April and was hit again the following night, and a minesweeper was also damaged. On 2 May, the destroyer Jersey, of the 5th Flotilla, which had just arrived at Malta to join in supply cutting, was sunk by a mine at the entrance to the Grand Harbour. About the same time, the cruiser Gloucester was damaged by bombs on passage from Malta to Gibraltar.

Nevertheless, the risks taken in operating naval units from this base seemed to be justified. Between 21 and 24 March the Mediterranean Fleet was able to cover convoy movements in the Central Basin, and enemy surface forces kept discreetly cut of the area. On the night of 15 April an Axis convoy previously located and shadowed by Marylands from Malta was intercepted off the east coast of Tunisia by the 14th Destroyer Flotilla. The enemy force of five merchant ships and three destroyers was annihilated. In the action, H.M.S. Mohawk was torpedoed and sunk, but 167 of her crew were saved. In the six and a half months of hostilities between the entry of Italy into the war and January, 1941, the Navy sank or captured 36 merchant ships, totalling 123,144 tons, in the Mediterranean. Between January and March 1941, the Navy disposed of 23 vessels, aggregating 97,985 tons - 60,000 tons of which was to the credit of our submarines. Air

Admiralty  
Account:  
Navies of  
British  
Commonwealth  
at War.

/reconnaissance

**SECRET**

reconnaissance of Tripoli from Malta showed how the German push in Cyrenaica was being fed through this port. For instance, on 10 March there were 17 ships in the harbour. A week later there were 11 ships of between 4,000 and 8,000 tons there, two outside the harbour, and eight anchored off Burnt-el-Sun. On 26 March, 10 merchant ships and six destroyers were in the harbour. It was evident that, despite the Navy's efforts and the bombing of that harbour, the enemy was not discouraged in his purpose of getting supplies across to Tripoli.

C.O.S. Plans for Increasing Sinkings.

It was the enemy's success in getting his reinforcements across to Tripoli, coupled with our retreat from Libya in March and April, which had the effect of focussing more intensively the minds of our planning staffs on the battle for sea communications and supplies. The Prime Minister wanted the largest possible force of submarines based on Malta, to disrupt Axis communications and particularly to prevent enemy surface craft getting into Benghazi. The Air Staff were asked to consider the use of bombers, from Malta if necessary, against lines of communication.

The tactic of sinking ships in transit had more to commend it than any other form of supply cutting. It was economical in the effort involved, and achieved finality. Once a cargo was landed, the air effort needed to destroy it or prevent its reaching the destination was vastly disproportionate to that of a few aircraft carrying bombs or torpedoes. The Vice Chief of the Naval Staff, for instance, believed that a successful attack on a ship in transit by an aircraft was worth more than the effort of 50 aircraft against the same cargo when safely discharged on land.

In April the Admiralty put forward a suggestion for three long-range aircraft fitted with A.S.V. to work at night in conjunction with our destroyers from Malta, but this was

/not

C.O.S. 122nd  
Meeting  
4 April.

C.O.S. 171st  
Mtg. 9 May.

A.M.  
S.9110

not approved by Air Ministry, as at this time Malta was enterable for Sunderlands, and Wellingtons could be adapted only at the expense of the bombing effort.

C.O.S. 129th  
Meeting  
9 April.

The Chief of the Air Staff favoured harassing enemy lines of communication on the sea passage, at Tripoli, and in the Desert along the coast. He thought we might make the maintenance of the German effort intolerable by air attacks on Palermo (one of the chief loading ports), by air and sea attack on their shipping along the N. African coast and intensive mine-laying of Tripoli harbour by Swordfish.

C.O.S. 132nd  
Meeting  
12 April.

What had to be faced was the certainty that the Mediterranean Fleet alone could not cut or seriously interfere with the enemy line of communication between Italy and Libya. This was admitted by Vice Admiral T. Phillips, V.C.N.S., who told the Chiefs of Staff that the Navy could harry that line and cause casualties, but could not expect to cut it unless the whole Fleet could be based on Malta. Sir Charles Portal doubted if the Navy or R.A.F. had made the maximum possible attempt to interfere with the Italy-Libya route, but he still feared that the sending of reinforcements to the island for this purpose would evoke heavy bombing from the Luftwaffe.

A.M. 88768  
15A

The long expected reinforcement of Malta with a torpedo striking force did not materialise during the period under review - nor, for that matter, during the year. A decision to instal a flight of 7 I.E. and 3 I.R. Beauforts as part of No. 69 (G.R.) Squadron was made by the E.R.P. Committee on 1 January 1941, and preparations for their dispatch were almost complete in April. The Naval C.-in-C. was anxious to see such a force established, observing in a signal to the Admiralty on 11 March: "The Mediterranean, as both sides have found to their cost, is the ideal hunting ground for such aircraft". But there were obstacles to the operation of such a squadron from Malta. One was the lack of spares, equipment and personnel; in fact, the Director of Overseas Operations

/considered



A.M. S.5804  
M.79.

considered that unless we captured Cyrenaica the replacement of the Swordfish at Malta by Beauforts was administratively impracticable. In any case there were only 24 torpedoes in Malta at that time. The decision to provide Beauforts, however, was partly implemented on 23 March, when some maintenance personnel were sent from England specially for Beaufort handling, but on 15 April, Air Ministry cancelled the plan to send Beauforts.

A.M. S.8786  
67B.

Instead, the outcome of the C.O.S. discussions was an arrangement to send immediately to Malta some Blenheims, as an experiment, to operate against shipping, and a force of Beaufighters on a temporary basis to afford extra protection to an important through convoy early in May. Steps were also taken to speed up bomber reinforcements.

C.O.S. 144th  
Mtg. 23 April.

#### Beaufighters on Convoy Work.

H.Q. ME.  
O.R.B. App.  
57. April.

The Beaufighters - an echelon of 13 coastal type, fitted with I.F.F. - were from No.252 Squadron and flew to the island via Gibraltar, reaching Malta on 2 May. They were intended to stay only to provide a long-range screen for an important convoy movement between 6 May and 12th, while Malta's Hurricanes covered the convoys within a 40 mile radius. One convoy, of five merchant vessels carrying tanks and mechanised equipment for the Middle East, was from Gibraltar to Alexandria, escorted by the Queen Elizabeth, two cruisers and eight destroyers. On 6 May the Mediterranean Fleet sailed from Alexandria to meet it and cover the passage through the Central Basin, and at the same time it escorted convoys to Malta and Suda Bay.

Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval  
Operations.

On the way, the cruiser Ajax and destroyers Havock, Hotspur and Imperial were detached to bombard Benghazi and after this they encountered two enemy supply ships of 3,000 and 6,000 tons. The destroyers quickly disposed of these.

The main convoy through the Mediterranean and the escorting warships were given air cover when in range of

Malta and were fortunate in making part of the passage in fog - an unusual phenomenon in the Mediterranean at that time of the year. One ship of the convoy, the Empire Song, (9,228 tons) was lost through mining in the Sicilian Channel, and the S.S. New Zealand Star also struck a mine, but proceeded. Two convoys from Alexandria reached Malta without mishap on the 9th, although the harbour had been heavily mined and had to be cleared by emergency measures. Repeated enemy raids were made on the through convoy, but were beaten off by the Fleet's own aircraft and guns. The only casualty was the destroyer Fortune, which was hit by a bomb but was able to proceed. Nine enemy aircraft were shot down for the loss of seven F.A.A. aircraft, of which only two were due to enemy action. The remaining four ships of the convoy and the escort reached Alexandria on 12 May.

It had been Air Ministry's intention on the nights during the critical period of the convoy's passage to direct the heaviest possible attacks against Sicilian aerodromes housing dive-bombers. This plan put the R.A.F. in Malta in a quandary through lack of accommodation for Wellingtons, maintenance and handling difficulties. Then, too, it was hardly within the capacity of all the "heavies" we could mass to neutralise the enemy's dive-bomber potential, for he had aircraft on six aerodromes, from any of which attacks could be mounted, and the precise dispositions were unknown to us through lack of regular reconnaissance. In addition, Wellington night operations from Malta were bound to suffer through the German attacks, which were almost a nightly affair. These arguments were put to H.Q., M.E., by H.Q., Malta in a signal which stated: "Consider possible Wellington effort from here quite insufficient to produce any appreciable diminution of potential enemy attack on convoy, while the effort here would be out of all proportion to possible results and would seriously militate against success of other /activities.

War Cabinet  
Weekly  
Resumé.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B.  
April.  
App.57.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B.  
May. App.17.

activities. Consider far better results likely to be obtained by Beaufighter dusk attack on aerodromes". Air Marshal Tedder agreed with this, especially as all available bomber forces in the Western Desert would be needed to cover enemy aerodromes in Cyrenaica during the later stage of the convoy. The C.A.S., however, stuck to the need for bombing, considering that dusk attacks by Beaufighters under the noses of Me.109's and 110's would be costly, Air Marshal Tedder also adhered to his view, considering: "At a time when concentration is of such importance, my instinct is against detaching what must necessarily be a small force for an operation which affords such poor prospects of really effective results".

H.Q. M.E. Opl.  
Summaries.

The upshot was that no bomber operations were mounted, and Beaufighters were used on 10 May to strafe the aerodromes at Comiso and Catania. At Comiso, six Beaufighters destroyed several aircraft, including two Ju.52's, by machine gunning, which caused fires. Three Beaufighters caused damage to groups of He.111's and Ju.88's at Catania by machine gunning from a height of 50 feet. Both attacks achieved complete surprise, and there was no flak until the Beaufighters were near the end of their attacks.

H.Q. Med.  
S.152/7/Air.  
E.22 and E.23.

So impressed was A.H.Q., Malta with the Beaufighter performance that the following day representations were made to H.Q. M.E. with a view to their employment in a wider offensive and defensive role in the Central Basin. First, the O.C. of the Beaufighter Squadron was anxious to try their value in the moon period as night fighters or to intrude at night over Sicilian aerodromes. The A.O.C., Malta considered that the Beaufighters could be usefully employed to protect destroyers, to cover the Blenheims operating against convoys, to attack aerodromes and air traffic between Sicily and Tripoli and to assist in the night defence of

Ibid: E.26.

Malta. Air Marshal Tedder supported this proposal to

/retain

retain the Beaufighters at Malta in view of their range and hitting power and considered that night fighter type Beaufighters would pay a good dividend over Sicilian aerodromes.

Ibid: E.27. Air Ministry agreed to their temporary retention at Malta, and a plan was drawn up for their operation at night over Sicily and to intercept enemy aircraft attacking Malta at night, by patrolling over the sea between the island and Sicily.

Before this could materialise, however, the impending attack on Crete caused H.Q. M.E. to switch the Beaufighters in an effort to stave off the menace. On 14 May H.Q. M.E.

Ibid: 29. signalled for the Beaufighters to operate from Heraklion, returning to Malta as their base.

Ibid: 43. Enemy action against Luqa delayed the Beaufighters' departure, but nine were able to carry out an operation

Ibid: 49. against airfields in Greece on 16 May which earned the congratulations of the Vice Admiral Mediterranean. The Beaufighters, less one lost, returned to Malta on the 17th, but after this there was difficulty in maintaining them through servicing troubles, lack of spares and congestion at Luqa.

The consequence was that four Beaufighters were dispatched to Gibraltar en route to the U.K. on 20 May and the serviceable remainder, on the orders of H.Q., M.E., left for Egypt by the end of the month. At the same time, other

H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B. May.

Beaufighter reinforcements for the Middle East began to pass through Malta. Their role, defined by Air Ministry, was protection for the Fleet in the Eastern Basin, not attacks against lines of communication.

Ibid: 71.

#### Reconnaissance Improved.

A vital condition for successful attack on Axis shipping was good and regular reconnaissance, but, due to the inadequate numbers of aircraft, there were many gaps in our air reconnaissance over the sea. There were seldom more than three Marylands available on Malta, due to serviceability difficulties. As the operations of our light naval forces largely depended

/on

C.O.S. 163rd  
Mtg. 5 May.

on air reconnaissance, the Navy naturally wanted the air effort strengthened. The German fighters in Sicily had driven the Sunderlands away from Malta, but the flying boats' position in the Eastern Basin was not much more comfortable with the Luftwaffe established in Greece. Sir Arthur Longmore urged that one of the Sunderland squadrons should be replaced by a G.R. landplane squadron of Marylands or Baltimores and stressed the need for a P.R.U. fighter type aircraft at Malta for long-range work.

H.Q. M.E.,  
O.R.B.  
App. 42 April

Towards the end of April, steps were taken to establish more accurately the shipping traffic between Italy and N. Africa. H.Q. M.E. ordered that Malta aircraft should carry out reconnaissances of Palermo, Trapani, Tripoli, Zuara and Misurata twice a week and Naples once a week.

H.Q. M.E.  
Operation  
Order No.9.  
3 May 1941.

Then, at the beginning of May, a more co-ordinated reconnaissance system, to cover the Ionian Sea, was drawn up. Enemy warships and convoys were known to be in this Sea, and it was the intention to help our naval units locate them. A more effective reconnaissance system was also needed at this time, as the first Blenheims to be used on shipping strikes had just arrived in Malta from England. The additional reconnaissance was provided by Marylands of No.39 Squadron operating from Mersah Matruh. Their task was to patrol from Mersah Matruh to the island of Zante, thence to Malta, while another aircraft operated over the same route in the reverse direction. Long range tanks were necessary for this patrol.

No.69 Squadron  
O.R.B.

The position of Malta's Marylands was improved the first week in May by the arrival of three new aircraft, and No.69 Squadron began to adapt Hurricanes for reconnaissance. The first of these, a Mk.I, was added to the squadron on the 12th. In this month, the squadron was able to carry out an average of three long-distance reconnaissance patrols a day. In consequence, nearly all the successful operations from the

/island

island against shipping and many of the bombing attacks on Tripoli resulted from their sightings.

Start of R.A.F. Shipping Strikes.

The conclusion of the Ministry of Economic Warfare and Admiralty early in May was that the Axis was getting very short of shipping to meet essential needs in the Mediterranean. In this theatre, it was calculated, the enemy had nearer 500,000 tons available than 1,000,000 tons, excluding tankers and ships over 10,000 tons (useless for carrying merchandise). Of the available total, they must use 250,000 tons for supplying Albania and Tripoli, 100,000 for commercial purposes in the Adriatic, 100,000 under repair, leaving about 100,000 for supplying Greece or the sea-borne supply of an expedition anywhere else.

It was considered that we were sinking more of the enemy's shipping than he was of ours. Apart from the local advantage of interrupting communications, the sinkings had important strategic implications. Interference with coast-wise distribution of bulk supplies threw an extra load on internal communications. The Chiefs of Staff, in fact, were so impressed that they signalled the Cs.-in-C., Middle East that "if sinkings of enemy merchant ships at the rate of recent months are continued, a position of considerable embarrassment to the Axis Powers may shortly arise".

The fact remained that enemy convoys were often known to be in transit when our surface forces were not positioned to intercept, and we had no air striking force for daylight operation. Malta's Marylands spotted about ten small convoys in April and these mainly went unmolested. This unsatisfactory state was altered in May, when the Blenheims sent under the C.O.S. plan operated. They were from No.2 Group (in the U.K.), whose aircraft were having considerable success against shipping off Holland and Norway. The crews were experienced in mast-height attacks with delay fuse bombs, against stronger opposition

C.O.S.(41)  
285 3 May.

C.O.S.(41)  
102nd Meeting

C.O.S. 171st  
Mtg. 9 May.

No.69 Squadron  
O.R.B.

H.Q. M.E.  
S.49916

opposition than was expected in the Mediterranean.

H.Q. Med.  
S247/36/1/Air.

The first six Blenheims arrived at Malta on 27 April. These, from No. 21 Squadron, began Malta's campaign against shipping in transit, facilitated by the wider powers of "sink at sight" conferred in February and April. At the same time, the preponderance of reconnaissance from the island was directed to the supply routes between Sicily and North Africa. Convoys were frequently sighted and shadowed by the Marylands.

M.E. Operational  
Summaries.

The six Blenheims carried out their first mission on 1 May, against a merchant ship of 3,000 tons escorted by a destroyer near the Kerkenna Islands. They dropped 5,000 lbs. of bombs and three hits were registered on the destroyer, one on the merchant ship, and near misses on both. The two ships were later confirmed as having been sunk. While on this mission, the Blenheims attacked three Cant.Z501's and probably destroyed one of them. All the Blenheims returned safely, two having been hit by A/A fire. The next day, four Blenheims bombed a convoy of two destroyers, a patrol vessel, four merchant ships of 4,000 - 8,000 tons, and two of 2,000 tons spotted by a Maryland 140 miles south-west of Malta. Hits were scored on one destroyer, one ship of 8,000 tons, one of 4,000 and one of 2,000 tons.

Swordfish of the F.A.A. joined in the blows at shipping by laying magnetic mines at night in Tripoli harbour, which was also bombed by the Wellingtons from Malta.

Five Blenheims, escorted by three Beaufighters, successfully attacked another convoy of eight small merchant ships and two escort vessels on a southerly course 65 miles S.E. of Pantelleria on 7 May. Two ships were left listing badly, one of them on fire, and a third ship was probably hit. On the night of 12 May four Swordfish of the F.A.A. blew up a merchant ship of 8,000 tons by bombing 100 miles south of Lampedusa, and scored direct hits on the escorting destroyer.

No.21 Squadron Blenheims returned to England on 11 May and were replaced on the 16th by a detachment from No.139 Squadron (Blenheims). These started on 22 May by scoring eight direct hits on a tanker, previously located by a Maryland, near Pantelleria. The attack was followed by four explosions from the ship, which came to a stop. Once again, this attack was the result of a Maryland sighting.

Two days later, two Blenheims bombed a merchant vessel of about 500 tons escorted by a destroyer, located by a Maryland near the Kerkenna Islands. The merchant ship was hit twice. On 25 May the tanker hit on the 22nd was again successfully bombed. On 21 May a further detachment of Blenheims of No.82 Squadron, arrived in Malta and on 26 May attacked a southbound convoy discovered by a Maryland 140 miles south of Malta. The Blenheims scored seven direct hits on two ships of between 8,000 and 10,000 tons, one of which was last seen down by the stern. Two Blenheims were lost on this operation. An Italian ammunition ship of 4,000 tons was destroyed by two aircraft of No.139 Squadron in Sfax harbour on the 28th. This ship blew up with a violent explosion, after eight direct hits. Our aircraft were fired on by an Italian destroyer and merchant vessels in Sfax Road.

On 30 May three Blenheims of No.82 Squadron bombed two merchant ships at anchor four miles east of Sfax, scoring near misses. Blenheims which returned to the scene the following day found that one ship had left, but they bombed and machine-gunned the remaining vessel, which was left pouring out clouds of black smoke.

<sup>1</sup>Analysis of results by the Assessment Committee on anti-merchant shipping operations credited No.2 Group Blenheims with the following figures during their operations from Malta during May:-

/Cat.I



163.

Cat.I	(sunk or constructive loss):	2 ships totalling 6,313 tons
Cat.II	(seriously damaged):	5 ships totalling 22,500 tons
Cat.III	(damaged):	5 ships totalling 25,000 tons

Thirty four sorties were made to achieve these results in attacks against 15 vessels. The casualties were two Blenheims lost and two damaged.

Admiralty Account:  
Navies of British  
Commonwealth at  
War.

During the months March, April and May, the Navy increased its total of shipping sunk in the Mediterranean to 112,678 tons, most of which fell to the submarines. But

No.69 Squadron  
O.R.B.

despite the combined efforts of the Navy and R.A.F. at this time, the enemy continued to get his supplies into Libya. Large numbers of vessels were using Tripoli - on 10 May about 20 merchant vessels lay there - and others were unloading at Benghazi.

Protection of Coastal Shipping

In this period, our resources for air-sea operations in the Eastern Basin had to be manipulated to meet major threats from two directions - Libya on one hand and Greece and the Dodecanese on the other. Wavell's advance on 9 December, which did not halt until two months later at El Agheila, and our retreat in March and April involved the Navy in a supply problem of some magnitude and the holding of an extended sea line of communication along the coast in face of coastal air interference. The development of operations in Greece gave the Navy another vital line to safeguard, which was harassed from its inception by aircraft from the Dodecanese. The Italians persisted with torpedo attacks in November and December, the main success being in Suda Bay on 3 December, when H.M.S. Glasgow, at anchor, was damaged by torpedoes from two S.79's.<sup>1</sup> The ship was able to return to Alexandria under her own power.

While the enemy was being mauled in the Desert in January, Sunderlands of No. 201 Group took part in searches for his fleeing shipping, but little was found. For their supply, our advancing forces were greatly dependent on the Navy's Inshore Squadron - a miscellaneous assortment of naval and mercantile craft capable of doing all sorts of jobs, from coastal bombardment to the carrying of water. This Squadron had to overcome the difficulties of blockages and smashed quay facilities in the newly-acquired harbours such as Tobruk and Derna. It had to face ceaseless harrying by bombers and minelaying aircraft, for by this time the Luftwaffe had arrived in Libya. The R.A.F., maintaining pressure on the retreating enemy, had little to spare for patrols over our coastal shipping, and in view of the lengthening line, could protect only the ports. The Navy's early losses included the minesweeper Huntley, bombed and torpedoed while on her

/way

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<sup>1</sup> The Italians had established a squadron at El Adem, equipped with S.79's and S.82's, fitted for torpedo carrying.

way to Derna, and the destroyer Dainty, dive-bombed off Tobruk.

The exposed position of our ships, despite our grip on the land, was emphasised by the loss of the monitor Terror.

This gallant old ship was lying at Benghazi on 22 February when she was damaged by near misses from bombs.<sup>1</sup> She struggled back eastwards, her commander sending a signal:

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B. and  
H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. App.  
Feby.

"With no dawn fighter protection as at present, consider it only a matter of time before ship receives a direct hit".

The Navy asked for air protection, but before this could be provided by No. 202 Group the Terror's back was broken in a dive-bombing attack. She was abandoned and sank on the 24th.

After the capture of Benghazi, the work of the Inshore Squadron was intensified. It was very difficult to get supplies in there. The harbour was full of wrecks, the breakwater was breached, and the enemy interfered constantly from the air by bombing and mining. At the end of February, in fact, we were forced to abandon efforts to supply the Army by sea through Benghazi. Our brief hold on this port in February and March was of little value because the Germans concentrated air attack on such a scale as to discourage its full exploitation by the Navy.<sup>2</sup> Neither was Tobruk immune. We had to exercise great care in sailings to and from that port, with fighter protection at dusk and dawn. The R.A.F. was unable to fulfil the Navy's request for fighter protection

War Cabinet  
Weekly  
Resume No. 78

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B.  
App. 2 Feby.

/between

1 The Terror was a veteran of the Belgian coast in the 1914-18 War. In 1939 and 1940 she defended Malta and Suda Bay against air attack and led gunboats in coastal bombardments of Cyrenaica.

2 The R.A.F. view is that the Navy "beat the pistol" by using the port too soon - before radar cover, fighter and A/A defence had been established. Enemy daylight attacks thus prevented the Navy's use of the port. The Navy returned later, when fighter defence had been established, forcing the enemy effort to night raiding on a small scale, which did comparatively little damage. Strategical action by the Wellingtons also helped to relieve Benghazi of enemy air action.

A.M.S. 26793  
(A.M. Comment  
on Despatch by  
Gen. Wavell for  
period 7 Feb. 1941  
to 15 July 1941)

between the meridians of 28 and 25 degrees longitude, confining itself to covering Tobruk with a detachment of No.73 Squadron, and giving some cover west of 25 degrees from the Desert squadrons.

Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval War  
in Eastern  
Mediterranean

It was not surprising that when Admiral Cunningham was made a K.C.B. on 4 March he said, with his mind on the Inshore Squadron along that dive-bombed coast: "I would rather that they had given me three squadrons of Hurricanes".

Air Cdre  
Collishaw's  
Report

Our reinforcement of Greece reduced the R.A.F. in the Desert to a minor force; consequently when we retreated to the Sollum - Halfaya area in April, leaving Tobruk beleagured, protection of that port offered a difficult proposition. By 7 April our Desert squadrons had withdrawn east of the Egypt - Cyrenaica frontier, leaving No.73 Squadron Hurricanes to operate within the perimeter of Tobruk. When the enemy was unable to push into Egypt through our hammering of his communications, he concentrated on Tobruk. He assembled masses of fighters on the Gazala aerodromes, and maintained heavy pressure from the air, sending as many as 50 bombers and 50 fighters at a time. This forced the R.A.F. to abandon aerodromes in the Tobruk defended area, except for refuelling. Now, forced to operate from Egypt, we could not maintain an adequate fighter force over Tobruk. On 17 April H.Q. M.E. instructed No.204 Group that "the primary role of the fighter force in the Western Desert is defence of Tobruk, especially shipping in and approaching or leaving harbour".

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. Feby.  
App.37

Our method of protecting Tobruk and shipping was to use the advanced Sidi Barrani landing grounds, the Hurricane squadrons being based in the Mersa Matruh - Bagush area. In this way we were able to offer resistance to the enemy's air onslaught. As the Sidi Barrani landing grounds were precariously held by a skeleton military force, air operations from them were conducted on the assumption that we might lose them at any time, so the detachments were kept in a high state of mobility. Since we could protect shipping effectively only as far as

Air Cdre  
Collishaw's  
Report

/Bardia,

Bardia, sailings were conducted for the remainder of the distance in darkness. The enemy tactic was to employ large numbers of dive bombers, escorted by Me.109's and 110's against our ships, the Me's engaging our fighters while the dive bombers did their work. Occasionally the bombing was from high level, and sometimes the German fighters shot up the ships from low altitudes. These variations in attack set our fighters a problem. Normally, we concentrated our formations, operating at about 15,000 ft, to prevent surprise by superior forces. Full use of R/T between our ships and fighters was not always possible because only a few of the ships were so equipped. For warning of the presence of the enemy at low heights, our patrols had to rely on the ships' A/A fire. Our fighters usually operated in formations of 12, employing "weavers" to prevent surprise. These tactics proved successful, and even when our formations encountered a numerically superior enemy they always gave a good account of themselves. No ships were lost while provided with fighter escort.

Nevertheless, our ships could not be covered all the time, and some losses were incurred. On 18 March an armed boarding vessel was mined and sunk off Tobruk. The hospital ship Vita was damaged by bombing off Tobruk on 14 April and early in May another hospital ship, the Karapan, was set on fire, but reached Alexandria safely. On 13 May the gunboat Ladybird was sunk in Tobruk harbour by dive bombers, and on 25 May the sloop Grimsby and the tanker she was escorting were sunk by air attack 40 miles north-east of Tobruk.

Our advance and retreat in Cyrenaica provided a practical illustration of the influence which occupation of territory exerts on the potential scale of air attack on shipping.

Apart from port bombings, we were not able at this stage to hit the enemy's seaborne supplies as he did ours. This phase emphasised the need of long-range fighters for shipping protection and for attacking enemy vessels with cannon guns. When on 15 April the C.A.S. suggested that Blenheims might be put into Crete to harass enemy shipping between Tripoli and Derna - because

/Crete

Crete was nearer the enemy sea routes than our Mersa Matruh bases. Sir Arthur Longmore could only point out that Heraklion and Maleme were unsuitable for the operation of Blenheims. In any case, the facilities in Crete were too much occupied with the evacuation from Greece, and a little later Crete was lost.

#### R.A.F. Help in Suez Canal Minesweeping

When established in Libya and the Dodecanese, the Luftwaffe threatened our supplies and communications by mining the Suez Canal and harbours in Egypt and - when the Army of the Nile advanced - in Cyrenaica. It was a very effective form of attack and for a time became a serious embarrassment to our reinforcement efforts. The raids were made at night, and the employment of acoustic and magnetic mines and delay action devices strained our counter-measures. When these raids began, in the middle of January, the aircraft were believed to be operating from Benghazi, but the long trip proved expensive to the enemy. For example, on 17 January five Heinkel III's used this route, but two force-landed in the part of Libya occupied by the British, and there was good reason to believe that two others were lost. The mine-laying aircraft operated from Rhodes when we captured Benghazi, and caused several closures of the Canal. On 4 February Rear Admiral A.V. Willis informed Air Marshal Tedder: "We are having a bad time with this magnetic mining - nothing like enough resources to deal with it, either sweeping craft or personnel". To help the Navy's mine experts move quickly from place to place, H.Q. M.E. put an aircraft at their disposal, and a Hurricane squadron (No. 274) was installed to provide Canal defence by day and night. In addition, there was No. 971 (Balloon Barrage Squadron) which by the middle of January had 30 balloons to protect the Fleet in Alexandria from low flying and dive bombing attack. This squadron came under control of No. 201 Group. The German night minelaying led to some of the balloons being removed from Alexandria to protect the Canal. Reinforcements of minesweepers were sent from South Africa.

(Observation

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. App. 1  
Feby.

H.Q. M.E.  
AOC/206  
3A, 4A

No. 201  
Group O.R.B.  
Jan. & Feby.

COS(41)105

Observation posts were established along the Canal, manned by British and Egyptian troops, on the scale of about three to the mile, to spot the fall of mines, and there were floating patrols in the Bitter Lakes. On 16 February the Prime Minister instructed that keeping open the Canal must be regarded as a prime task. At this time German minelaying aircraft were active over Malta, which experienced 11 such raids on successive nights. and over Benghazi.

H. Q. M.E.  
AOC/206  
6A,7A,8A

Early in March, the Navy suggested R.A.F. action against Rhodes, to restrain the minelaying aircraft, and wanted an R.D.F. installation half-way along the Canal to keep a plot of attacking aircraft. The idea was that such an installation would help to keep watchers on the qui vive and could be integrated with guns. It was impracticable, however, because the type of apparatus to deal with low flying aircraft was not available, and the limitations of R.D.F., coupled with the topographical characteristics of the Canal Zone, offered little prospect of devising a lay-out to provide useful plots of low-flying aircraft.

Early in February, when a southbound convoy went through the Canal, the steamers Aghios Georgios and Raneë (5,060 tons) were sunk by mines. Twenty-four ships had previously passed over the mine which sank the Raneë. The sunken ships blocked the main fairway, but a passage was cleared by dredging.

No.1 G.R.  
Unit O.R.B.

The call for mine clearance involved the R.A.F's No.1 G.R. Unit, with its D.W.I. Wellingtons, in a busy period of activity after months of waiting at one hour's readiness for some such contingency. Although these coil-equipped aircraft could not detect and explode acoustic mines, they were very effective against the magnetic variety. Their advantage lay in swift movement to the point involved, and in the number of runs that could be made over a given area, ensuring protection against mines with delayed settings. The unit had been inactive

/operationally

operationally in November and December, and on 24 January three of its aircraft went to Tobruk, but did no sweeping there through lack of communication with the Navy, which was in charge of clearing mines. On 31 January the aircraft were hurriedly recalled to Ismailia to deal with mines between Lake Timsah and the Bitter Lakes. Next day they were successful in exploding two mines which had escaped naval sweeping. Later the same day, a D.W.I. Wellington saved the Canal from a prolonged closure. The circumstances were that the 25,000 ton merchant ship Dominion Monarch was passing slowly through waters believed to have been mined, but where sweeping had produced no results. As an extra precaution, a "coil" Wellington flew ahead of her, 50 ft. above the surface. The precaution was justified, for the aircraft exploded a mine almost under the bows of the vessel, which proceeded undamaged. If this large ship had been sunk at that point, the inevitable result would have been blocking of the Canal for several months.

The worst period of Suez traffic hold-up was in February and March. Mining on three nights caused closure from 18 February until 9 March, and immediately on re-opening 43 northbound merchant vessels passed through. More mining on 11 March resulted in further closure until 19 March.

When the Canal was re-opened, the carrier *Illustrious* was moved away to undergo extensive repair, and her sister carrier, the *Formidable*, was admitted into the Mediterranean to restore the Fleet's air "umbrella".

Enemy mine-laying continued intermittently after this, but the watching and clearance organisation worked efficiently enough to prevent any further closure for more than a few days at a time. By 9 March the D.W.I. Wellingtons had accounted for seven mines in the Canal, and after a month's rest from operational work, during which the unit was transferred to Kabrit in April, exploded several more mines in May.



COS 194th  
Meeting  
May 29

The extent to which the mining affected the supply position was indicated in the concern felt by the War Office and Ministry of War Transport, which made representations to the Chiefs of Staff. At the end of May it was estimated that if the enemy succeeded in keeping up the interruption in traffic, little more than half the requirements of our forces and the needs of the Civilian population in Egypt could be imported. The Ministries were consulting on measures for further port development, but this could not give immediate relief. Meanwhile, a committee was established to consider methods for improving unloading and transport facilities for by-passing the Canal, and Admiralty experts were sent to the Middle East to advise on mine-sweeping methods. A suggestion for relaxing restrictions on the opening of the waterway after mining raids was rejected, because the risk of a sinking in a part where deviations would be difficult could not be afforded.

At this time we were not in a position to carry out mining from the air on a scale comparable to that of the enemy, through the lack of aircraft adapted for mine-carrying. F.A.A. aircraft from Malta had done some, but their capacity was limited; for instance, about 30 mines were planted, mostly at Tripoli, between February and June. Mining from the air, it was discovered, produced better results than those laid by submarine, the superior results being due to an aircraft's ability to place mines in areas not approachable by surface vessels or submarines.<sup>1</sup> Although the R.A.F. did not do any mining during the period under review, preparations went ahead in May for adaptation of Wellingtons - each aircraft to take two 1,000lb mines - and for instruction of crews by the Navy in this specialised task.

H.Q. M.E.  
S. 51309  
30A

/Patrols

H.Q. M.E.  
S. 51309  
M.48

<sup>1</sup> During the period June to October 1941, the Admiralty summary of results of mine-laying in the Mediterranean gave the average number of mines laid by air to produce a casualty as 16.5 and that laid by submarine to produce the same results as 92.

Patrols from Greece and Crete

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B.  
Nov. & Dec.

Operations based on Greece and Crete occupied the major part of No. 201 Group's effort from November 1940 until our withdrawal in April and May. No. 230 Squadron Sunderlands bore the brunt of operations from Greece and Crete and were in fact the Navy's main source for reconnaissance over an extensive area embracing the south-eastern Ionian Sea, the Gulf of Athens, Sea of Crete and the sea between Crete and Alexandria. In the conditions - lack of a land-based G.R. squadron, comparative immunity from enemy fighters, and the necessity for prolonged searches over large tracts of water - the flying boats were ideal. The first operations from Suda were mainly to the westward, to guard against the approach of enemy surface craft which might menace our north-bound convoys. Besides patrols, a multiplicity of tasks fell on the Sunderlands which gave them little respite. They provided the quickest and safest transit for important personages, such as Mr. Eden and Sir John Dill, C.I.G.S., on diplomatic and military missions between Malta, Alexandria, Athens and Istanbul. They acted as escort and navigational guides to the R.A.F. squadrons which flew periodically to Greece from Egypt to build up our air strength there; they searched for bomber crews forced down in the sea; made special searches for submarines; provided useful information about shipping; and spotted floating mines.

Ibid: Jan.

Experience in December showed that Suda was unsuitable as a flying boat base, mainly because of weather, obstructions, and inadequate W/T communication. Scaramanga, a naval base 10 miles west of Athens, was consequently prepared as an advanced base, offering better facilities, and on 14 January the No. 230 Squadron detachment was transferred there from Suda, which remained as an emergency landing base. At the end of January, Argostoli in Cephalonia, was established as an advanced alighting point for aircraft on Eastern Aegean patrols, stocks of petrol and oil being deposited there. The refuelling vessel

Pass of Balmaha was also moved to Scaramanga, whence operations began regularly on 22 January with four flying boats.

By this time the A.S.V. device was available in some of the Sunderlands, usually in replacements from England. It was used on the night of 19 January, in an unsuccessful effort to locate a submarine which torpedoed a British merchantman in the Gulf of Athens.

It was the Navy's practice to pass convoys between Alexandria and Malta via the Aegean, so the Sunderlands patrolled this route and also stretches of the eastern Ionian Sea, to give warning of the approach of enemy ships. The large area to be covered with a limited number of aircraft, often in bad weather, left loopholes for fast ships. Consequently the whole system of Sunderland patrols came under revision at a Conference between No. 201 Group and the Naval C.-in-C., on 18 January. The Navy's main concern was to keep enemy warships away from our convoys to Crete, Greece and Malta and at the same time effectively block enemy reinforcement of the Dodecanese. To provide adequate warning of the approach of enemy vessels, four patrol areas were established over the Ionian Sea, covered by Sunderlands at Malta and Scaramanga, as under:-

		<u>Degs.</u>	<u>Mins.</u>	<u>Degs.</u>	<u>Mins.</u>
Patrol P.	Pinpoints	35	35 N	15	46 E
		37	12	16	28
		37	28	17	22
		35	24	18	00
		35	04	16	05
Patrol Q.	"	35	10 N	17	10 E
		36	41	16	12
		37	46	17	34
		36	04	18	30
Patrol R.	"	36	06 N	18	30 E
		37	46	17	34
		38	42	18	44
		36	50	19	33
Patrol S.	"	37	00 N	19	00 E
		38	30	18	16
		39	18	19	22
		37	30	20	22

/Malta

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B. Feb.  
App. A.

The patrols R. and S., designed mainly to cover Fleet and convoy movements between Alexandria and Malta, were by no means ideal for protecting the approaches to the Aegean. Consequently, two further standard patrols were introduced, designated A.A.W. and X.X. The former was a creeping line ahead of a sector (200 miles in depth) extending north from the bearing 270 degrees on Agria Grabusa to within visibility distance of the west coast of Greece. It was designed to detect vessels within the search area steaming at 15-20 knots. Patrol X.X. was across the outer end of the A.A.W. sector, designed to intercept vessels approaching the A.A.W. area.

At this time, when naval calls for reconnaissance were pressing, the efficiency of No.228 Squadron at Malta, which integrated with No.230 Squadron on the Ionian patrols, was diminished by the Luftwaffe attacks on the island, and for a time the squadron's assistance was lost altogether through the process of removal of the unit from Malta. On 20 March operational control of No.228 Squadron, which was now back at Alexandria, reverted to No.201 Group. It was still necessary to risk Sunderlands occasionally at Malta, for special operations; e.g. when a convoy of four fast cargo vessels was run from Haifa to Malta between 19 and 23 March. The convoy arrived safely.

Despite the length and duration of the Sunderland searches, sightings of suspicious vessels were rare. On 18 March a Sunderland from Scaramanga assisted a destroyer in a submarine hunt, dropping two bombs and two depth charges, but no definite result was achieved. Four days later, a Sunderland returning from Scaramanga for overhaul was able to help the Brazilian steamer Taubate, which had been bombed and machine-gunned for an hour by a German aircraft about 100 miles north of Alexandria. The Sunderland protected the ship and assisted it to locate one of its rafts, which left with four men when the attack was made, and drifted three miles.

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B. App.A  
Feb.

Malta was normally responsible for patrols P. & Q.  
and No. 201 Group for patrols R. and S.

Ibid: App.C.

No. 201 Group was also responsible for a patrol covering the western approaches to the Aegean, known as Patrol W.A.A. This was the sector between a line bearing 270 degs. from Agria Grabusa (35 degs. 38 N, 23 degs. 35 E.) to the west coast of Greece - to a depth of 160 miles.

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B. Feb.

At the Naval C.-in-C.'s request, patrol W.A.A., covering the Kithera entrance to the Aegean, was carried out daily, but in the middle of February, No. 201 Group, wishing to conserve some of No. 230 Squadron resources for long-range reconnaissance in the event of protracted major operations, tried to effect an enemy. The aircraft on this patrol were involved in flying from Scaramanga for a comparatively short patrol which, it was felt by No. 201 Group, could be effectively done by land-based aircraft from Crete. Admiral Cunningham, however, would not make No. 815 (Swordfish) Squadron, F.A.A., stationed at Maleme, available for this task, on the ground that the six aircraft there were fully employed already, on the following work: assisting Kithera surface patrols; assisting surface operations towards the Dodecanese; anti-submarine patrols towards Gavdo Island. He also contended that the Swordfish had not the requisite range for the W.A.A. patrol. As the Admiral was insistent on the importance of this patrol to secure the Aegean and Greek lines of communication, a Sunderland had to be detached from Scaramanga to operate constantly from Suda, with reliefs every three days.

Ibid: App.Q.

Events in March imposed severe strain on No. 230 Squadron - first through covering extensive convoy movements to Greece, and towards the end of the month an unremitting period concerned with the naval battle of Cape Matapan. Convoys to Greece early in the month included the R.A.F. depot ship Dumana. The long sorties to protect these convoys involved so much flying that some of the patrols had to be relaxed, and this position led to the standard patrols being revised.

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B. March.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. April  
App. 6.

Early in March, as our convoys to Greece suffered serious losses through air attacks from the Dodecanese, the Navy asked for fighter protection in the vicinity of Crete in addition to the F.A.A.'s assortment of Fulmars and Gladiators at Maleme. B.A.F. Greece was asked to aid with a detachment of fighter Blenheims.

Cabinet  
Resume 82.

On 26 March H.M.S. York and the oiler Pericles were torpedoed in Suda Bay by one-man submarines and were subsequently beached. Torpedo aircraft from the Dodecanese were also active.

Italian Fleet Move Discovered by R.A.F.

R.A.F. M.E.  
Review No. 3.

Until March, despite the Royal Navy's daring sorties to the enemy's doorstep, there had been no major clash between the rival Fleets. To cope with such a contingency, however, we had to keep a Battle Squadron of three Queen Elizabeth class battleships and two cruiser squadrons, as well as the necessary screening destroyers. These forces were hardly sufficient to be instantly available to attack the enemy fleet as soon as it emerged from its lair, protect our convoys on several routes and chop the enemy's supply lines. Nevertheless, the presence of our light forces in the Central Basin, in defiance of German air power, was an embarrassment to enemy convoys. It was not surprising that towards the end of March the enemy embarked on a naval manoeuvre with a twofold object - (1) To distract the attention of our Fleet from the Naples-Tripoli supply route while further convoys made the passage. (2) To tempt our warships to pursue Italian naval units into a position where they could be attacked by swarms of dive bombers from Sicily and southern Italy. It proved to be a costly venture to the enemy.

Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval War in  
Mediterranean.

Towards the end of March, it was apparent to our Naval staff in the Mediterranean that something unusual was afoot. The enemy was displaying an increased interest in our warships' movements; his reconnaissance aircraft dogged Aegean convoys, were active south and west of Crete, and visited Alexandria almost daily. Such manifestations of intensified

/curiosity,

curiosity, and the imminence of a German attack on Greece, suggested the possibility of an important operation. In assessing what this was likely to be, the Naval C.-in-C. had to consider the likelihood of attack on our convoys, an enemy bid to run a convoy to the Dodecanese, or a landing in Greece or Cyrenaica. Our fleet could not be constantly at sea waiting for such eventualities. It was largely dependent on R.A.F. reconnaissance. In the Battle of Cape Matapan, that reconnaissance, provided by the aircraft of No. 201 Group, played a significant part about which all too little has been said in the published accounts.

The C.-in-C.'s suspicions about Italian naval

No. 201 Group movements led to a request on 26 March for No. 201 Group to  
O.R.B.  
No. 230 execute maximum scale reconnaissance on the following day of  
Squadron the Q., R., and S. patrol areas (defined above), to within  
O.R.B. visibility distance of the west coast of Greece. At this time  
No. 228 Squadron had just moved from Malta to the Middle East,  
so No. 230 Squadron detachment at Scaramanga had to cope with a  
commitment which involved 12 hours' patrols - dawn to dusk.  
At 0410 hours on 27 March, a Sunderland left Scaramanga on one  
of these long flights, to search area Q. Six hours later, it  
sighted three cruisers - two Zara class and one Colleoni - and  
a destroyer about 120 miles south-east of the toe of Italy,  
steering a south-easterly course at a speed of 15 knots. It  
was significant that on this day the enemy maintained standing  
fighter patrols of three to six Me.109's or Me.110's off Malta,  
presumably to prevent the Maylands taking off on reconnaissance,  
and in this he largely succeeded.

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B. March  
App. T.

On the Sunderland's sighting report, Admiral Cunningham took important decisions. He suspected that the enemy intended a surface raid into the Aegean against our convoys, accompanied by intensive air operations. He decided to put to sea with the 1st Battle Squadron, the carrier Formidable and destroyers, and to deploy a cruiser squadron under

/Vice

Vice Admiral Pridham-Wippell which was in the vicinity of Crete, with the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla. Precautionary alterations were made in the sailings of Aegean convoys. The Fleet Air Arm squadron (No. 815) at Maleme was ordered to stand by with fighters and torpedo-carrying Swordfish, preparations were made for extensive R.A.F. reconnaissance of the Ionian Sea, and R.A.F. bombers in Greece were put at readiness. Nothing more was seen on 27 March of the enemy cruisers located by the Sunderland.

R.A.F. Part in Battle of Matapan.

The Battle Fleet sailed at dusk on the 27 March; it consisted of the Warspite, Barham (wearing the flag of Rear Admiral H.B. Rawlings), the Valiant, and the Formidable, covered by the 14th Destroyer Flotilla - (Jervis, Janus, Nubian and Mohawk) - and the 10th Flotilla - (Stuart, Greyhound, Griffin, Hotspur and Havock). The Second-in-Command, Vice Admiral Pridham-Wippell, was ordered to rendezvous next morning south of Gavdhos Island with the cruisers Orion, Ajax, Perth and Gloucester and the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla - (Ilex, Hasty, Vendetta and Hereward).

Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval War in E.  
Mediterranean.

No. 201 Group  
and No. 230  
Squadron  
O.R.B's.

and

Admiralty  
Account of  
War in E.  
Mediterranean.

During the night of 27-28 March a Sunderland patrolling west of Crete had not seen anything of the enemy. Soon after dawn on the 28th, one of the Formidable's aircraft reported three cruisers and four destroyers 30 miles south of Gavdhos Island, steering south-south-east. This was in the neighbourhood of Admiral Pridham-Wippell's force, which at 06.12 hours identified the enemy force (which will be referred to as Force X) as three cruisers and an unknown number of destroyers in position 34 degs. 02 N. 24 degs. 17 E, steering 100 degs T. Force X, which was to the north of our cruisers, was suspected to consist of 8-in. gun ships, which could outrange and outpace our ships. Vice Admiral Pridham-Wippell turned south-east, feigning flight, to entice the enemy towards our Battle Fleet. This ruse succeeded, and for three-quarters of an hour Force X followed, firing at intervals but keeping out of range. Salvoes on both sides fell short. At 0721, however, in position

/33 degs.



33 degs. 50 N, 24 degs. 21 E, the enemy turned away northwest, having catapulted an aircraft which probably reported the composition of our cruiser force. Our cruisers turned in pursuit at 0736 hours, and a Sunderland already on patrol was ordered to locate and shadow the enemy.

At 0859 hours Admiral Pridham-Wippell reported a battleship 18 miles from him, in position 34 degs. 18 N, 23 degs. 47 E. Our Battle Squadron was then 73 miles to the east. The enemy battleship opened heavy and accurate fire on our cruisers from a range of 16 miles. Admiral Pridham-Wippell's force was in an unpleasant position, with a battleship on one quarter and Force X on the other. He turned his cruisers south, under cover of a smoke screen, and the battleship ceased firing.

Just before this, a striking force of torpedo-carrying Albacores had flown off the Formidable to deal with Force X,<sup>1</sup> but on reaching the scene the pilots discovered that what had been delivered into their hands was the battleship Vittorio Veneto, the Italian flagship, escorted by four destroyers. Diving through a heavy barrage, the Albacores scored a hit aft, which caused the battleship to stop firing at our cruisers and reduced her speed.

A complication arose when a Sunderland sighted five cruisers and three destroyers about 35 miles west of Gavdhos at 09.35 hours. The cruisers were two Abruzzi class and three Zaras. (Force Z). Some uncertainty about the position of the enemy arose after this report, because it was not immediately assumed that there were two separate Italian cruiser forces in the area. This led to an order

/by

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary -  
Matapan.

<sup>1</sup> It had always been the C.-in-C.'s intention, when contact was made with the enemy Fleet, to hold back the torpedo air striking force until the Battle Fleets had closed within about 50 miles, or until the enemy had definitely turned away. On this occasion, owing to the exposed position of our cruisers, it was necessary to launch the striking force unduly early. "Few things could have been more timely than their intervention", the C.-in-C. commented in his despatch, "but it had the effect I had always feared - that the damaged enemy turned for home with a lead which could not be closed to gun range in daylight."

by the G.-in-C. at 11.06 hours for maximum Sunderland reconnaissance to be concentrated south and west of Crete. The Sunderland continued to shadow Force Z, and at 11.45 hours reported it in position 35 degs. 03 N. 22 degs. 26 E. on a course 300 degs T, and at 13.03 hours 75 miles west-south-west of Kithera Channel.

H.Q. B.A.F.  
Greece  
S/100/Ops  
38A and  
Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary  
Matapan

At Menidi and Paramythia, Greece, the R.A.F. had standing by 12 Blenheims of No.84 Squadron, 12 of No.113 Squadron and six of No.211 Squadron. These Squadrons went into action in the afternoon, delivering a series of attacks on the Italian cruiser and destroyer Force Z as it was steaming west and north-west. Their orders were to create the maximum disorganisation and delay among the enemy forces. Three aircraft of No.84 Squadron attacked at 14.30 hours (local time) in a position given by the leading aircraft as 247 degs. Kithera Light 100 miles. The claims were two unconfirmed hits with two 250lb. bombs on one cruiser, and two direct hits on a second cruiser with two 500lb. S.A.P. bombs. In the latter case, black and yellow smoke was seen issuing from the ship for ten minutes, and the vessel stopped after turning to the centre of the formation.

At 14.37, six aircraft of No.113 Squadron bombed the warships, claiming near misses on the leading cruiser and a destroyer. About 15.30 hours a further six aircraft of No.113 Squadron carried out an attack, claiming many near misses, one particularly close to the stern of a destroyer. About 16.30 hours five Blenheims of No.84 Squadron claimed near misses. The final land-based attack was about 17.00 hours, 140 miles south of Zante, made by four aircraft of No.211 Squadron, which claimed a large number of near misses. In all these attacks the aircraft made dummy runs over the target in addition, forcing the enemy to take continuous avoiding action for over two hours. The Blenheims made 24 sorties, dropping 23,750lb. of bombs. The positions in which the attacks were made were given as:-

/Time

Time	Location	No. of Aircraft	Squadron
14.30	35.10 N 22.10 E	3	No. 84
14.37	35.16 N 22 E	6	No. 113
15.30	35.42 N 21.42 E	6	No. 113
16.30	35.46 N 21.18 E	5	No. 84
17.00	35.40 N 20.55 E	4	No. 211

This was the first instance in the Mediterranean war in which an R.A.F. striking force had co-operated with the Fleet in an action. Despite intense A/A fire from the ships, none of the aircraft was damaged.

Based at Maleme were torpedo-carrying Swordfish of the F.A.A., which about noon found Force X still retreating westward and delivered an attack. It was apparent that our naval forces could not overtake the Vittorio Veneto and Force X unless the flagship's speed could be further reduced. A second striking force flew off the Formidable at 12.30 hours and scored two torpedo hits on the battleship, whose speed was reduced to 13 knots.

At this juncture, Force Z was about 120 miles north-west of the British battleships, steering north-west at 30 knots. Force X and the damaged Vittorio Veneto were 60 miles nearer, but could not be overhauled by the British Battle Fleet before dark. Admiral Pridham-Wippell's cruiser force was therefore sent on at full speed to make contact. A Sunderland continued to report the position of the enemy, and it was evident that the two enemy forces were joining up. Just before 17.00 hours, Warspite's aircraft reported a single enemy force in position 35 degs. 01 N, 21 degs 10 E. The Vittorio Veneto was covered by three 6 in. gun cruisers to port and three 6 in. gun cruisers to starboard, the whole screened by 11 destroyers. Two other cruisers from Force Z were somewhere to the north-west.<sup>1</sup> At dusk, a further F.A.A. torpedo force went into the attack, facing a heavy barrage. They were unaware what they achieved, but as it turned out, they hit the Pola, which dropped out of line and stopped. After this attack, the enemy altered course to south-west, but our cruiser force was unaware of this and never regained contact.

/The

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<sup>1</sup> Presumably the Garibaldi and Abruzzi. As these did not join the main force, it seems possible that their fighting powers had been affected by the R.A.F. Blenheim attacks. Italian survivors said that bombs fell near the Garibaldi and Zara.

SECRET

183.

The Naval C.-in-C. decided to engage in a night action, as by daylight the retreating enemy would be under cover of his dive-bombers, being then only 300 miles from home.

At 20.40 hours the C.-in-C. sent in eight destroyers to the attack. The odds were all against them. What was not appreciated at the time was that after the torpedoes Pola had stopped, three cruisers and some destroyers had turned back to support her, and that the rest of the enemy force, after turning southwest for some distance, had turned again to the north-west. At 10.25 hours, blissfully unconscious of their danger, three Italian cruisers steamed within two miles of the Warspite. Roadsides from the Valiant, Barham and Warspite quickly disposed of the Fiume and Zara, and the fate of another cruiser hit was unknown. Enemy destroyers appeared out of the darkness and fired torpedoes, which missed our battleships, and hits were scored by the Warspite on the leading destroyers. Our battleships and the Formidable then withdrew to the north-east to avoid being torpedoed in the excitement of a destroyer melee. A confused action followed, in which the Stuart torpedoed another cruiser and mauled a destroyer which was later blown up by the Havock. The action was largely over by midnight. In the small hours, the Pola's crew abandoned her and she was finished off by torpedoes from our destroyers.

The losses to the enemy were three 10,000 ton cruisers and two 1,500 ton destroyers. The Vittorio Veneto had been damaged and the Blenheims' bombs may have caused damage. All our ships emerged unscathed, the only loss being one F.A.A. aircraft.

Beginning at 03.25 hours on the 29th, all available Sunderlands were put into the air to search for any crippled Italian ships and to scour the area to the west and north of the last known position of the enemy Battle Fleet, as it was hoped that the damaged Vittorio Veneto might still be within range. By 10.55 hours, No. 230 Squadron had six Sunderlands

/over

over the Central Basin, and No. 228 Squadron, which had just changed its base from Malta to the Middle East and was not fully available operationally, provided three.<sup>1</sup>

At 06.30 hours a Sunderland landed amid a huge oil patch at position 35 degs. 22 N, 20 degs. 50 E, where there were about 600 survivors on rafts, presumably from the Pola, Fiume and Zara. The search area extended from the scene of the action towards Tripoli, in case the fleeing warships had altered course for that port. A Maryland from Malta also joined in the hunt, but had to make a forced landing on the island of Zante, which resulted in the pilot being killed and the other two members of the crew injured. One of the Sunderlands was involved in an engagement with a Me.110, but the fighter inflicted only slight damage in four attacks. The widespread searches failed to locate any of the enemy warships, which had managed to make enough speed to take them well out of reach of our surface forces. About 1,000 Italian survivors were rescued by the British Navy in the area of the battle, and that number would have been greater had not German dive-bombers molested the rescue operations.

Summing up the part played by the R.A.F. in the Battle of Matapan, there was no doubt that the patrolling Sunderlands made an invaluable contribution with their shadowing reports. These enabled the naval C.-in-C. to form an accurate picture of enemy dispositions and led to a series of successful air attacks from Greece. It is not too much to say that the success of the action was due to close co-operation between air reconnaissance and the naval and air striking forces. One

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B. App.  
March.

defect disclosed was the lack of a W/T station at Maleme - where F.A.A. aircraft were based - working on the reconnaissance aircraft frequency.

/Also

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<sup>1</sup> On the morning of the 28th, while aircraft were searching the Ionian Sea for Italian naval units, a No. 228 Squadron aircraft was carrying Mr. Eden and Sir John Dill from Malta to Athens on a mission connected with the position in Yugoslavia.

H.Q. B.A.F.  
Greece.  
S.100/1/Ops.  
38A.

Also, the need was felt at Air H.Q. Greece, controlling the Blenheims, for more frequent and up-to-date situation reports and a directive from the C.-in-C. Mediterranean, of the action he required.

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary  
Matapan

One of the most important lessons to the Navy was the necessity of ample strength in aircraft. Apart from the R.A.F. Blenheims, located over 300 miles from the scene of action, the Navy had available only 13 Fulmars, 10 Albacores and four Swordfish in the Formidable, five Swordfish at Maleme, and five catapult aircraft in warships. A feature of many of the aircraft reconnaissance reports was inability to distinguish between the types of Italian warships, e.g., the Abruzzi class cruisers were several times reported as Cavour class battleships.

No.201 Group  
O.R.B. T(viii)  
March.

The Admiral conveyed his appreciation to the R.A.F. in the following signal: "We have just obtained a success over the enemy in which the Royal Air Force played a notable part. The extent and accuracy of the flying boat reconnaissance under conditions of whose difficulty I am well aware was a large factor in our being able to bring the enemy to action and is yet another example of the response 201 Group always makes to our requirements. The timely bombing of the enemy surface forces by the Blenheims from Greece was also of the greatest assistance in damaging and harassing the enemy and in giving him a dose of what he serves out from his own shore bases. I am most grateful to you all."

A.C.M.  
Longmore's  
Despatches.

An Admiralty message to the Air Ministry read: "I am writing on behalf of the Board of Admiralty to express our great appreciation of the most welcome and invaluable co-operation of the Royal Air Force with the Mediterranean Fleet south and west of Crete. We think the manner in which your squadrons found the enemy and bombed them deserves high praise, and their success no doubt had a great effect on the Italian morale generally."

/The

The Prime Minister wrote: "We express our gratitude to squadrons of the R.A.F. who so intimately and effectively prepared, aided and confirmed the success of these memorable encounters."

(The full diary of air-sea reconnaissance events, maintained by No. 201 Group for 28 March showing how the Sunderlands kept the Navy in constant touch with enemy dispositions, is given at Appendix D).

#### Sunderland Attacks on Submarines.

No. 230 Squadron O.R.B.

During the time Sunderlands were searching and shadowing between the 27th and 29th to enable our Fleet to bring the enemy to battle, other Sunderlands of No. 230 Squadron, from Aboukir, were engaged almost continuously with a group of submarines in the waters between Crete and Libya. The presence of enemy submarines in this area at that time was significant, for they were lurking on the flank of the route the enemy might well have expected our Fleet, sailing from Alexandria, to take. It was in fact a Sunderland patrolling in advance on the Fleet's route, on the morning of the 27th, which had the first encounter with a submarine. This was in position 32 degs. 54 N, 25 degs. 22 E. (about 90 miles north of Sollum). The Sunderland, investigating an oil patch on the sea, saw a periscope track. Two attacks were made, with two 250lb. bombs and two 250lb. depth charges, from a height of 60 to 100 ft. After these, the periscope disappeared and a further oil patch was seen near the depth charge marks, but no further indication of damage was forthcoming.

Twenty minutes after this Sunderland had returned, another set out to search the same area. Ten hours after the first attack, this aircraft obtained A.S.V. and visual contacts with a submarine, in position 32 degs. 42 N, 26 degs. 00 E. This submarine was discovered with its decks awash and an attack was made before it could submerge. Bombs were released from 600 feet in a dive and at that time the conning tower was

/still

still visible as the submarine made a crash dive. Six 250lb. bombs burst on the visible surface of the U-boat, which was considered to have been undoubtedly destroyed. The Sunderland returned to Aboukir, and an hour later set out again for a night search of the same area. An A.S.V. contact from a distance of three miles led to the location of a surfaced submarine at 32 degs. 26 N, 25 degs. 14 E. The enemy crash-dived as the Sunderland approached. Seven 250 lb. bombs were dropped from 400 ft. and straddled the swirl of water made by the submarine's dive. Only slight damage could be claimed in this case. This submarine was described as very large.

Immediately upon this Sunderland's return, another set out. This found a raft-like object in position 32 degs. 48 N, 25 degs. 30 E. and a momentary sighting was obtained of a submarine periscope near by. No attack was made. On the night of the 28th, a submarine was sighted by a Sunderland in position 32 degs. 03 N, 28 degs. 45 E. A flame float was dropped and a dive attack made. Three 250lb. depth charges burst within 10 yards of the periscope swirl as the submarine dived. A machine gun attack was also made but nothing further was seen of this submarine.

#### No. 201 Group's Heavy Commitments.

Operations in the Matapan period kept No. 201 Group at full stretch and imposed heavy strain, but worse was yet to come. When on 2 April No. 201 Group sought the brief respite of cutting out the routine W.A.A. patrols for two days, in view of maintenance difficulties and the diminished danger to our Aegean convoys, the Naval C.-in-C. demurred, insisting that these reconnaissances were essential. Ten days later, the Group had to cope with an additional commitment - a series of communications flights between Egypt and Greece. As No. 228 Squadron was still in a partially non-operational state, due to their recent transfer, these flights were assigned to it. Another complication arose soon after the German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece. This was bombing and mine-laying at Scaramanga, /which

No. 201 Group  
O.R.B. April.



which made that base highly dangerous for use by Sunderlands. The presence of acoustic and magnetic mines in Elefsis Bay made Sunderland dispersal impossible, and the refueller movements were restricted. H.Q., M.E., decided that the Scaramanga detachment must move back to Suda Bay, and the transfer was carried out on 18 April. At the same time, routine patrols had to be maintained, and aircraft kept available for evacuation of important personnel from Yugoslavia, movement of personnel between Athens and the Middle East, and special calls for the Navy. The last named included a night offensive reconnaissance from Benghazi to Tobruk for enemy shipping attempting to supply the Axis advance in Libya. On 16 April two Sunderlands evacuated 48 important passengers from Kotor (Yugoslavia) to Greece. About the same time an effort was made by No. 201 Group to clarify its operational position and the priority of various commitments, as well as the matter of control.

O.R.B. entry for No. 201 Group on 17 April illustrates the Group's dilemma: "A short review of the situation at this point will show the impossible situation confronting the Group in attempting to do justice to the various commitments on hand. On 17 April, of the nine aircraft under the Group, two were at Alexandria under inspection, one was at Alexandria in serviceable condition, two were in the U.K., and four were serviceable at Scaramanga. The multiplicity of control and attempted control made confusion inevitable. H.Q., B.F.C., signal A982/12/4 ordered two Sunderlands to stand by at short notice for a special job under direct orders of A.O.C., Greece. H.Q., B.F.C., Operation Instruction No. 30 dated 17 April virtually removed the control of Sunderland aircraft from Group.<sup>1</sup> On the same day C.-in-C. Med.

/asked

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<sup>1</sup> This order, to the detachment at Scaramanga, stated: "All Sunderland flying boats at and remaining at Scaramanga from time of this order are to come under direct control of A.O.C., Greece. They are not to be used or sent away without his specific authority. You are to keep this H.Q. informed of the state of serviceability and commitments you have to meet from 201 Group, H.Q., R.A.F., M.E., and C.-in-C., Mediterranean's orders. A.O.C., Greece will decide if having regard to number of aircraft available these commitments can be met. This instruction over-rides any you receive from 201 Group.

asked for patrols to cover the shipping movements for Operation M.D.2. Under the above Operation Instruction it was necessary to obtain permission from H.Q., B.F.G., before employing the Group's aircraft on these patrols. H.Q., R.A.F., M.E., however, ruled that further aircraft to the two already under A.O.C. Greece's order could only be made available provided that C.-in-C's requirements for M.D.2 were met. The serious nature of the situation in Greece was fully appreciated but it was felt that the situation could have been dealt with equally efficiently had the control remained with 201 Group."

#### The Evacuation from Greece.<sup>1</sup>

In the confused days of the British evacuation from Greece, the Sunderlands played a noble part, relieving our hard-pressed Navy of an extra burden by evacuating hundreds of men, while remnants of the R.A.F. from Greece, backed up by reinforcements to Crete, gave what protection they could to our ships, against overwhelming odds. On 16 April the C's-in-C., meeting in Admiral Cunningham's flagship, took the decision to withdraw our troops from Greece. It was an operation requiring swift organisation and inter-service planning, for it had to be carried out before the 28th to avoid the moon period, and must not occupy more than three or four days in view of the momentum of the German mechanised advance. All available cruisers and destroyers were sent into the Aegean to act under the orders of Vice Admiral Pridham-Wippell, Second in Command, Mediterranean Fleet.

Although No. 230 Squadron detachment had left Scaramanga, the risks in using that base had to be accepted later, as there were urgent journeys with stores and naval passengers to organise the sea evacuation. On the 18th, a Sunderland took King Peter of Yugoslavia from Crete to Egypt. On the 22nd, passengers from Scaramanga to Crete included Prince George of Greece and other members of the Greek Royal

/Family

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<sup>1</sup> The campaign in Greece is treated as a separate A.H.B. Narrative.

No. 201 Group Family. The next day, important passengers evacuated included O.R.B. King George of Greece, the Crown Prince Paul, the British Minister in Athens, Mr. Palairot, and his family.

On 21 April the O.C., No. 201 Group, Wing Commander G. Francis, was put in charge of the R.A.F. evacuation plan. This provided for the utilisation of all available Bombay and other transport aircraft in the Middle East, as the Sunderlands were unable to cope with the numbers. The aid of B.O.A.C. flying boats was also enlisted. As many R.A.F. personnel as possible were brought out by air, the evacuation starting on the 17th, when Wellingtons of Nos. 37 and 38 Squadrons moved back to Egypt.

The evacuation of R.A.F. personnel by Sunderlands began on the 19th, when members of No. 230 Squadron were brought from Scaramanga to Suda. It was intended that the Bombays should fly out passengers from Greece, but these, with Lodestars of No. 267 (Com.) Squadron, brought out only five loads before continued enemy raids made Elefsis and Menidi unusable. Thereafter, these aircraft worked between Crete and Egypt. The surviving aircraft of Nos. 11, 84, 113, 211(B) and 208 (A.C.) Squadrons, consisting of 24 Blenheims and four Lysanders, flew to Egypt on 22 and 23 April, the Blenheims having already evacuated a number of airorews on journeys between Greece and Crete. The remnants of Nos. 33 and 80 Squadron, Hurricanes, numbering six, with 14 Gladiators of Nos. 80 and 112 Squadrons, flew to Crete on 22 April. Fourteen Blenheims of No. 30 Squadron which had been defending the Piraeus and our forces near Athens, flew to Maleme on the 18th and ferried over 300 R.A.F. personnel out of Greece between then and the 23rd. These formations in Crete were earmarked for the protection of Suda Bay and evacuation convoys from Greece. But even before this emergency our convoys had experienced serious losses in the vicinity of Crete from aircraft in the Dodecanese, which were a persistent menace to our lines of communication.

Meanwhile, the Sunderlands were ferrying between Scaramanga

/and

Ibid; and  
H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

No. 201 Group  
No. 228 and  
No. 230 Squadron  
O.R.B's

Suda Bay, but on the 23rd an aircraft of No. 230 Squadron, after an unsuccessful attempt to take off from Scaramanga on three engines, was attacked at its moorings and destroyed by Ju. 87's, along with its refuelling vessel. The last trips from Scaramanga were made at 2 a.m. on the 24th when two Sunderlands got away under fire, carrying 80 passengers who included Lt. Gen. Sir T. Blamey and Air Vice Marshal J. H. D'Albiac. For the next few days, air evacuations were carried out from Navplion, Githeon and Kalamata. On the 25th, a Sunderland of No. 228 Squadron staggered off the water at Kalamata with 72 passengers aboard.

About 1,700 of some 2,200 R.A.F. personnel who were at Argos on 24 April, awaiting evacuation by sea, moved by road to Kalamata and Githeon, and those who could not be taken by air were subsequently removed in ships, about half of them crossing to the island of Kithera in small vessels, and were later transferred to Crete. During the flights to Kalamata, another Sunderland was lost through a crash on alighting in the dark.

The number of personal adventures in these exciting days was legion, but one episode is worthy of record. Left at Scaramanga was a Shell refueller launch which had been used by No. 230 Squadron Detachment. A pack wireless set was installed, with machine guns, and the remainder of the valuable stores were taken aboard. Captained by S/Ldr. Alington and manned by another officer, two wireless operators and a Greek, with two nursing sisters as passengers, the launch left Scaramanga on the 25th and reached Suda after a four days' journey, calling at Navplion and Malea.

Flying boats and transport aircraft continued the evacuations from Crete to Egypt. In the evacuation by Sunderlands and two B.O.A.C. flying boats from Greece to Crete and Crete to Egypt, a total of 1,529 passengers was carried, and 225 hours flown, over a period of 16 days. The Greek Crown Jewels and 1,000lbs. of Greek State documents were taken from Suda to Egypt on 1 May by a B.O.A.C. aircraft.

/Meanwhile,

Meanwhile, the Navy was tackling the formidable task of taking 50,000 men off various beaches. By the 23rd, massed air attacks on the Piraeus had destroyed 23 vessels and closed the port. Consequently, six embarkation points were chosen - Rafina, Raftis, Megara, Navplion, Monemvasia and Kalamata. The sea evacuations had to be carried out by night, to avoid enemy air attack, and by daylight it was advisable to be outside the range of Ju.87s. The parallel of 37 degs. N. was taken as the safety line (the limit of enemy dive-bomber range). The warships and transports used lighters to lift the men from the beaches.

When the ship evacuation started, on the 24th, it became necessary for the Sunderlands to resume Ionian Sea reconnaissances to guard against any Italian attempt to interfere with surface forces. That no such attack materialised was probably due to the fact that the Italian Fleet, licking its wounds after Matapan, considered it better to leave interference to the Luftwaffe. The Sunderland crews, on reconnaissance by day and evacuation by night, were stretched to the utmost, lacking sleep or rest for long periods.

In the matter of providing cover for our shipping, Air Marshal Tedder was unduly pessimistic about what our limited and disorganised forces could do. On 25 April he wrote to the Vice Chief of the Air Staff: "The unpleasant part of the whole business is the literal impossibility of giving any effective cover to the evacuation. .... The best we can do is to operate Blenheim fighters from Crete." But six days later he was able to write: "The evacuation appears to have been amazingly successful in the circumstances.

Apart from battle casualties, I think we have got practically every single man and officer back to Crete or here. .... There is no doubt the Blenheim fighters did invaluable service in covering convoys. On various occasions their appearance was sufficient to encourage the Hun to drop his stuff quickly and get away. It is unfortunate that the

/Navy

D. Ops.(O)  
Evacuation  
from Greece.

H.Q. M.E.  
A.O.C. Corr.  
with V.C.A.S.  
10A.

Ibid: 14A.

Navy shot down two of our people, although fortunately without loss of personnel."

H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

D. Ops. (O)  
Evacuation  
from Greece.

The sea evacuation was carried out under sustained air attack, which was frequently mitigated by R.A.F. operations from Crete. Our strength in that island was 14 Blenheims of No.30 Squadron, 9 of No.203<sup>1</sup> Squadron, and six Hurricanes and six Gladiators of Nos.33, 80 and 112 Squadrons (the other eight Gladiators flown to Crete were unserviceable). Blenheims patrolled over convoys to maximum range and Gladiators and Hurricanes gave cover at shorter range and defended Suda Bay. The Hurricanes had to be conserved through shortage. On the whole, enemy air attacks on convoys within our range were dealt with effectively. Between 24 and 28 April the Blenheims did 47 sorties, and on the 29th they put up 13 patrols over convoys leaving Suda for Egypt. Nearly all the Navy's losses through bombing were sustained north of the parallel of 37 degrees - approximately the limit of dive-bomber range. It was the Navy's policy to insist on all ships leaving embarkation points by 3 a.m. to give time for them to be south of 37 degrees by daylight. The failure of a convoy leaving Navplion on the 27th to do this led to disaster. It did not sail until 04.15 hours

A.H.B.II J8/29. and was not clear of the Gulf of Navplion until 06.00 hours.

An hour later a dive-bomber attack was launched which set fire to the steamer Slamet, packed with troops. The destroyers Diamond and Wryneck went to her assistance while the Cruiser Calcutta shepherded the rest of the convoy away. The Diamond picked up survivors and then, with 600 troops on board, was herself sunk by a succession of bombings. The Wryneck met the same fate. The Calcutta's convoy was again overtaken by dive-bombers, the Costa Rica being sunk, but all her troops were rescued by the escort.

The Navy's work of lifting men from the beaches went on until the 30th, when 700 troops who had made their way to Melos were taken off. In all, the Navy removed 50,662 men from /the...

1 No. 203 Squadron moved from Aden on 9 April and flew to Crete from Kabrit on the 24th.

the shores of Greece and took 50,162 of them to safety.

The period covering convoys in the evacuation - "Operation Demon" as it was known to the Navy - was short but hectic for the protecting aircraft. Apart from the hazards of greatly superior enemy forces, including fighters, our aircraft were several times fired on in error by our ships. Blenheims and Hurricanes made several interceptions, but although few of the enemy were destroyed, our fighters achieved their aim of preventing bombers pressing home their attacks.

On the day of its arrival at Maleme, No.30 Squadron went into action. One Blenheim damaged two S.79's over a convoy south west of Melos and drove them off. Another S.79 was damaged over a convoy south-east of Gavdos on the 20th. Two Ju.88's were damaged by single Blenheims of No.30 Squadron on the 23rd and 24th. On the 25th a Blenheim drove off two Ju.88's over a convoy 15 miles south of Yora, probably destroying one. The other was probably destroyed by fire from a destroyer. On the 26th, No.203 Squadron Blenheims drove off a formation of Ju.87's escorted by Me.109's after a combat in which one Blenheim was damaged. The following day three Blenheims of No.203 Squadron tackled a big group of Ju.87's, Me.110's and Me.109's and drove off persistent attacks, one Blenheim being lost. Also on the 27th, a Hurricane was lost in an engagement over a convoy with three Me.110's. The Vice Admiral Light Forces, on 30 April, sent the following message to the R.A.F. in Crete: "Am most grateful for your protection during this operation." On 3 May, when Suda was dive-bombed by 30 Ju.87's and He.111's, Hurricanes destroyed three of the enemy. The next day the Hurricanes shot down one Ju.88 and damaged five more out of a formation of 16 which attacked Suda.

(An account of Blenheim pilots' experiences in the defence of our convoys from Greece is given in Appendix E.)

#### Crete Reconnaissance - an "Insoluble" Problem.

The Luftwaffe occupation of airfields in the south of Greece cramped the usefulness of the Sunderlands still further, for they could not be risked by day in the Ionian Sea or the vicinity of Crete. Thus at the moment when our need to discover enemy intentions about Crete was imperative, we were at the greatest disadvantage in fulfilling it.

Air Marshal Tedder wrote to Admiral Cunningham on 15 May:-

"I have been trying to find a solution to what is actually a quite insoluble problem, i.e. the business of trying to provide you with the reconnaissance you need for the impending Crete operations. The position is, of course, that you are now having to operate in waters quite literally

/surrounded

No.203  
Squadron  
O.R.B.

H.Q. M.E.  
A.O.C./206  
10A.

195.

surrounded by enemy air bases from which shore-based aircraft are operating. That in itself cuts out the employment of Sunderlands which have the range necessary for this role. The only bases we have from which to operate shore-based aircraft are those in the Western Desert, a precarious base in Malta (three Glen Martins were knocked out on the ground there last night) and the still more precarious one at Heraklion.<sup>1</sup> Out of the five long-range Glen Martins with trained G.R. crews which I had in Egypt I have lost three in the last fortnight; at the moment I have one available.

"I fully recognise the vital importance of reconnaissance to your operations, and I am ordering a reconnaissance from the Western Desert to extend to a line south of Zante by 1600 hours tomorrow. If Malta have a serviceable aircraft and crew available they will carry out a reconnaissance earlier in the day to the north of Cephalonia. I am also telling Crete to carry out a visual reconnaissance of Monemvasia with a Hurricane if they can still operate from Maleme ..... I gather you feel it is important to cover the possibility of a sea-borne attack on the 17th. Whether one will be able to repeat it on the following day one literally cannot tell until one knows how things go. This may appear pretty meagre provision, but I hope you will take it as the widow's mite, which in fact it is."

Admiral Cunningham did not agree that the problem was "insoluble", adducing the rather strange argument in reply that "at home they have precisely the same difficulties and the Coastal Command solves them." He continued: "It isn't only a question of the Crete operation, but we must have steady and reliable reconnaissance every day over the Ionian Sea. I quite realise that your resources are meagre, but that seems to me only more reason for pressing the people at Air Ministry to face up to the facts and realise that the air situation out here calls for drastic measures."

Ibid: 12A

/At

<sup>1</sup> The R.A.F.'s remaining aircraft in Crete were flown back to Egypt on 19 May.



At the same time, the Admiral urgently raised the air reconnaissance

Ibid: 11A problem with the Admiralty. "I am thus at this critical juncture entirely bereft of any reconnaissance to cover the approaches to Crete" he signalled, "and to give me timely information of the movements of any enemy sea-borne expedition; nor can I obtain information of what is going on in the Aegean. The vital importance of remedying this situation is evident. It appears to me immediately necessary to fly out reconnaissance aircraft to meet this critical situation and that the aircraft should come with fully trained crews so that they are ready for immediate operation. Request very early information of what can be done. The Crete aerodromes are not available in present conditions for reconnaissance aircraft. It will be evident that the carrier-borne aircraft cannot do this work owing to their low speed and range, but even so the fact that only eight fighters are serviceable would preclude the use of the aircraft carrier on this duty."

Limitations of the Sunderlands' range did not mean that they lacked employment. A new system of patrols had to be devised from Alexandria and Aboukir, to cover the contingency of the enemy's No. 201 Group attempting to pass supplies to Syria from the Dodecanese. A daily O.R.B. search to guard against this was instituted, in the seas between Rhodes and Cyprus, using Famagusta as a calling point. This patrol was uneventful, except that on 17 May a Sunderland in the vicinity of five destroyers and a hospital ship being attacked by enemy aircraft was itself bombed, unsuccessfully, by a Ju. 88.

Early in May, No. 201 Group was strengthened by the addition of a flight of three Dornier H seaplanes of the Yugoslav Air Force whose crews flew them away before Yugoslavia was over-run. These relieved the Sunderlands of the routine anti-submarine patrols off Alexandria. The unprecedented threat to our shipping

H.Q. M.E. through the loss of Greece and the enemy advance to the Egyptian Operational frontier led to plans being devised to give fighter assistance to No. 29, 1 May 1941. naval ships and convoys from four bases: a radius of 35 miles from Ras el Tin, covered by No. 252 Wing, 70 miles from Suda Bay, by R.A.F.,

/Crete,

Crete, 35 miles from Valetta, by R.A.F., Mediterranean, and 35 miles from Tobruk, covered by No. 204 Group. Assistance took the form of pre-arranged escort patrols and response to emergency calls.

Crete - a Bitter Lesson to the Navy.

..... Though the naval losses in the evacuation of Greece were the writing on the wall, the Navy in the Crete episode ignored the perils of operating ships in waters over which the enemy had complete air control and paid dearly for it.

Air Commodore  
Collishaw's  
Report.

When the battle of Crete began,<sup>1</sup> No. 204 Group provided what cover it could for our ships, with Egypt-based aircraft. It achieved effective protection up to 250 miles from shore - an unparalleled feat up to that time - in spite of enemy air mastery over Crete. The aircraft used were Blenheims, Marylands, Beaufighters, long-range internal tank Hurricanes and Hurricanes fitted with external reinforcing tanks.

Reconnaissance was done by No. 39 Squadron (Marylands), which had been specially trained in G.R. and ship recognition during the previous month. During the German airborne landings, this squadron claimed to have shot down several Ju. 52's and damaged many more. While the evacuation was in progress, Sunderlands of No. 201 Group fetched out parties by night from Sphakia on four occasions, without incident.

The difficulty in providing adequate air cover for our forces in Crete and the evacuating ships was primarily that of remoteness of air bases from the scene of action. Blenheims were at the limit of their range. Beaufighters which were sent from Malta and England - Nos. 252 and 272 Squadrons - were the best answer to the problem. The contrast between the losses suffered by our Navy when fighter protection was and was not available was significant. In cases where cover was provided, it was always effective.

/The

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<sup>1</sup> The air operations in Crete and the evacuation are described in the R.A.F. Narrative "The Campaign in Crete".

The R.A.F.'s contribution to the Crete evacuation evoked Admiral Cunningham's best thanks. He added in a letter to Air Marshal Tedder: "It does show what can be done even with improvised long-range fighters. What could we not do if they would only give us the proper ones ..... The co-operation with the squadron and the fighters the last trip was, I believe, quite surprising, and the Phoebe was using her R/T for fighter direction. The consequence was that they were never attacked. I fear we shall need a lot of fighter help in the future, especially on the Tobruk route, but I know well we can count on you and your gallant lads."

Our naval casualties in the operations were two battleships and one aircraft carrier damaged; two cruisers sunk and four damaged; six destroyers sunk and eight damaged; and sixteen small craft lost. At least 262 air attacks on H.M. ships were recorded, but many more took place. Only 20 enemy aircraft attacking our ships were claimed as shot down for certain.

The principal lesson of the naval operations was that surface ships could not operate close to enemy bases without fighter protection, except at the price of heavy losses. It was surprising, in view of the weight of air attack, that more damage was not inflicted, and that our ships were able to operate at all. Responsibility for our ships operating after the tremendous risks had been experienced by the Navy lay with the Chiefs of Staff. Four days after the opening of the attack on Crete, the C.-in-C. Mediterranean informed the Chiefs of Staff that the Navy could not guarantee to prevent seaborne landings without suffering losses which, added to those already sustained, would seriously prejudice our command of the Eastern Mediterranean. Their reply was that the Fleet and R.A.F. were to accept whatever risk was entailed in preventing any considerable enemy reinforcements from reaching Crete. Although seaborne landings were prevented, and a limited amount of supplies and reinforcements were maintained until airborne invasion had compelled evacuation, it

is doubtful, in view of the heavy losses incurred by the Fleet, how long this could have been maintained.

It was fortunate for our Fleet that its hard task was not complicated by the appearance of the Italian Fleet.<sup>1</sup> The enemy had many favourable opportunities for interfering with surface craft. It was perhaps a measure of the Germans' opinion of the fighting value of their allies that apparently no role was assigned to the Italian Navy.

H.Q., M.E.  
Correspondence  
with V.C.A.S.  
29A.

Our Navy's task was hazardous enough against the Luftwaffe alone. Its acceptance of the perils when these were all too obvious surprised Air Marshal Tedder. On 29 May he wrote:- "This morning, Cunningham sent up Evetts, who has been working at Alexandria on evacuation, to say that naval losses were becoming prohibitive ..... Cunningham of course was in Alexandria, and after some considerable delay we managed to get through to him on the telephone and he said he had decided to continue on the full scale originally planned. It is, of course, sheer lunacy that vital decisions like this, where the three Services are deeply concerned, should have to be made at two places some 125 miles apart. Personally, I cannot help feeling that Cunningham was wrong, since I feel naval losses are getting beyond what can be accepted. It is, however, his responsibility and he knows the air risks from bitter experience now."

Ibid: 30A.

Again, on 3 June when Crete had been evacuated, Air Marshal Tedder wrote to the V.C.A.S.:- "It is quite clear that the Navy cannot go as much as 100 miles from Alexandria to north and west without having a fighter escort overhead. The escorts to the various convoys going to and from Crete have involved a considerable effort from our fighter operations, but there is no doubt they have been entirely successful. No escorted ship has been seriously hit, if hit at all. One of the earlier convoys coming round from the north of Crete got a bad hammering

/in

Admiralty  
Battle Summary:  
Matapan.

1 The C.-in-C's view was that the Greece and Crete operations were conducted under the "cover" of the Battle of Matapan - that the rough handling the Italian Fleet received served us in good stead by discouraging its activity.

in the Kaso Straits. Unfortunately, it was some two hours late in its rendezvous with the fighters, who were not warned of the alteration. The other loss was due to an unfortunate afterthought on the part of the Navy, who thought it would be a good thing to send along a couple of anti-aircraft cruisers to give a hand. No. 204 Group were not warned, and consequently there were no fighters and the Coventry<sup>1</sup> was sunk.

"I hope that by now at long last, the Navy do realise the precise value of their anti-aircraft gunfire. I have talked with a number of them about it and what defeats them is the converging attack adopted by the dive-bombers. Against the high level bombing A.A. fire is pretty useful. There does therefore seem to be a strong case for converging dive-bombing attack against heavily defended ships.

"The result of all this is, of course that we now have an additional and possibly heavy commitment. I gather that Cunningham is now saying that nothing less than six squadrons of Beaufighters is of any use. I need hardly say that I have not given support to such demands. On the other hand, if and when the Navy can usefully go to sea again, it will probably want more than one and a half squadrons of Beaufighters to give them cover throughout daylight for the two or three days they are at sea."

Air Marshal Tedder's prediction about the Navy's demanding greatly increased fighter protection proved correct, as will be seen in the succeeding section. The Admiral's fears about our command of the Eastern Basin being jeopardised were realised. Even if our Fleet had not been temporarily crippled, it was in no position to sail these seas as confidently as it had done before.

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1 This should have read "Calcutta".

P O R T   B O M B I N G<sup>1</sup>Wellington Reinforcements.

H.Q. Med.  
S247/36/1/Air.

In the absence of air formations which could strike at the enemy's supplies in transit across the sea, disruption by port bombing was an acceptable alternative. In applying this, as was seen in the previous section, the Chiefs of Staff in October 1940, regarded Benghazi as the focus of prime importance, and a beginning had been made with bombing from Malta. Wellington reinforcements flowed in steadily, and by the end of November, Nos. 37 and 38 (Wellington) Squadrons had arrived in the Middle East from England.

For a few weeks the Wellington unit in Malta operated without any identity and had no commanding officer. After their first few operations, a series of accidents occurred at Luqa which lowered morale in the unit, and it was some time before the pilots regained confidence in this aerodrome as suitable for Wellingtons. To this end, the runways were extended and obstructions removed, while stone pens were built to protect the aircraft from bomb blast and machine-gunning. At first, no maintenance crews with knowledge of Wellingtons were available, and personnel were drawn from various units in the island. Later, a small party of skilled men arrived from England and were supplemented by drafts from convoys as they arrived. The aircrews consisted mostly of men expert in night bombing from England - some had done over 40 operations - but many were war weary and in need of rest.

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/13, 15A.

Concerned about the position, the A.O.C., Malta, signalled Air Ministry on 3 December: "In spite of commendable effort by individuals, Wellington unit lacks cohesion and verve, while lack of squadron spirit is marked,

/and

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1. The attacks mentioned in this Section are primarily those against shipping and port installations. They were often part of operations of wider scope, and it should be noted that they by no means represent the total bomber effort, much of which was against military targets and aerodromes.

and in my view detrimental to success of operations. "Consider very useful work can be done from here in spite of aerodrome and other limitations, which can be overcome by unit properly established. Present uncertain policy considerable handicap."

These representations led Air Ministry on 11 December to give the Wellington unit separate identity as No. 148 Squadron.

Air Commodore Maynard's birthday message to the squadron stated: "You have been born and also reached years of discretion at the same time. Your pre-natal activities indicate a healthy child."

Thus there were now four heavy bomber squadrons in the Middle East and Malta - Nos. 70, 37, 38 and 148 - to apply their weight in support of our Cyrenaica offensive.

#### Attacks on Italy-Albania Supply Line.

The history of bombing operations against supply centres and ports for a few months from November onwards bristled with alterations in priorities, brought about by differing views on the importance of objectives and the fluctuating strategical considerations, particularly in Greece. Air Staff policy signalled on 13 November was to continue pressure against Italy and her communications with Greece, and this was applied mainly by bombing Bari and Brindisi from Malta and Valona from Greece. On 1 December, H.Q. M.E., ruled that Messina or Tripoli could be attacked when the weather prevented bombing of the main targets.

On the night of 13 November Malta Wellingtons followed up the F.A.A. attack on the Italian Battle Fleet in harbour by 10 sorties on Taranto harbour and docks, causing fires and several explosions. Twenty one Wellington sorties were made against Bari between 15 and 23 November, causing fires on the jetties, quayside and town. Brindisi quays and fuel tanks were hit by six Wellingtons from Malta on the night of 28 November.

H.Q. MED.  
S721/Air.

H Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. App.  
December.

H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

203.

In November, a detachment of No.70 Squadron operated from Greece to supplement the Blenheim bombings of Albanian ports, and also made a few sorties against Bari and Brindisi. Durazzo wooden jetty was fired by four Wellingtons of No.70 Squadron on the night of 12 November and was still burning fiercely when Blenheims bombed port facilities there the next day. Early in December, the main weight of attack from Greece fell on Valona, which received 34 Blenheim sorties between 25 November and 8 December. Several ships were hit and damage was done to wharves. This series of daylight attacks was expensive, however, as Italian fighters were active, and cost us five Blenheims. An Italian destroyer in Sarande harbour was hit by Blenheims on 4 December, and also machine gunned. This attack, in support of the Greek advance, led to the capture of the destroyer when Greek forces entered the port. Up to the middle of December, Valona and Durazzo received steady attention from Blenheims and Wellingtons, as large numbers of merchant vessels were using these ports, but there was no evidence to show that the attacks seriously hampered the Italian supply effort.

Softening-Up for Desert Offensive.

H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

"Softening-up" bombing for Wavell's attack in Cyrenaica began on the night of 7 December and continued intensively for a few days with attacks mainly directed against aerodromes. Already, attacks on Tobruk and Derna had dislocated enemy supplies, causing him to rely on road transport for supply of his forward troops. A full-scale offensive was developed against supply centres, ports and aerodromes. In the first week of our drive, 150 sorties were directed against Bardia and 145 against Tobruk. A ship was hit in Derna harbour by two Wellingtons on the night of 13 December. Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm went to Tripoli on the nights of 13 and 20 December, hitting two

/ships



ships with bombs, firing the seaplane station and laying magnetic mines.

H.Q. M.E.,  
O.R.B. App.  
21 December.

About this time the C.-in-C., Mediterranean, specially requested bombing of Italian battleships lying at Naples, to harass them during our passage of an important convoy through the Mediterranean to the Middle East. A raid by eight Wellingtons from Malta on the 14th sufficed to drive the battleships from Naples, five hits being scored on a concentration of warships at the quayside. Two battleships had returned to Naples by the 23rd and they were attacked again from Malta on 29 December and 8 January. In the latter attack, by eight Wellingtons, one stick of bombs fell near the stern of a Littorio battleship and explosions were caused among merchant vessels. The following night, seven Wellingtons of No.148 Squadron from Malta dropped 20,000 lbs. of bombs on naval units, shipping and marshalling yards at Messina, causing fires.

H.Q. Malta, however, had been instructed on 18 December by H.Q. M.E. to regard Benghazi and Tripoli ports as the primary objectives, in support of the Desert offensive. This led to a series of raids on Tripoli from Malta. On 23 December nine Wellingtons scored hits on a jetty and customs houses. On 1 January ten Wellingtons straddled three moored cruisers, hit two merchant ships and caused fires among shipping which were visible 60 miles away. An attack by six Wellingtons on 5 January damaged the power station and bombs also fell among merchant vessels. The next night, two merchant ships were hit in a raid by six aircraft. Benghazi next received attention from Wellingtons of the Desert squadrons. On 8 January four ships between 7,000 and 10,000 tons moored at the central mole were hit in an attack by seven Wellingtons of No.37 Squadron. Odd Wellingtons returned to the same port on the 10th and 11th; on the 13th it was raided by five Wellingtons and by a similar number the next night.

/Naval

Naval Targets Subordinated to Greek Campaign.

By the end of December, the C.-in-C., Mediterranean, recognising that the naval action could not achieve interdiction of enemy supplies, had turned to the air as offering the best solution to the problem. In a memorandum to the A.O.C.-in-C., M.E., on 28 December, he admitted that "owing to the short sea passages involved, it is evident that the stoppage of supplies reaching Libya and Albania cannot be effected by naval action alone until Italian naval power is largely eliminated." He wanted the employment of the bombers at Malta "relating more closely to the naval situation and to naval operations." This meant attacking battleships, cruisers and concentrations of merchant ships in harbour. With the exception of Taranto, the enemy still used ports within easy range of Malta for harbouring warships and assembling supply ships, such as Brindisi, Messina, Palermo and Naples. The Littorio battleship damaged in the F.A.A. raid on 11 November lay in dock at Taranto and at Brindisi the battleship Roma was in course of construction. Although only a few weeks earlier the C.-in-C., Mediterranean did not favour bombing Sicilian targets until Malta's defences could better withstand retaliatory attack on the dockyard, he now asked for Malta's bombers to be laid on the above naval targets and for the A.O.C., Mediterranean, to be empowered to attack such targets and for the A.O.C., Mediterranean, to be empowered to attack such targets on his own initiative, as opportunities must be seized as soon as possible after their disclosure by reconnaissance.

These arguments had a ready response from H.Q., M.E., with the instruction to Malta that as a temporary measure the Wellington effort could be directed against naval targets, on priorities to be indicated by the Admiral. The A.O.C.-in-C., justified this step by the necessity of

/destroying

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/13  
25A.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. December,  
App. 40.

destroying Italian sea communications and securing our own.

If it was discovered that this policy did not give adequate support to the Greeks, it was proposed to achieve this by operating more Wellingtons from Greece. This decision evoked

Ibid: App.4  
January.

the Admiral's thanks, and he gave a list of targets which included the Italian Battle Fleet, Palermo and Tripoli, concentrations of shipping in ports, transport facilities and torpedo factories. The C.A.S. however, took a different view

App. 13

and on 8 January sent a signal which resulted in the sea communications between Italy and Albania becoming No.1 priority again for bombing from Malta. He doubted whether attacks on naval targets in the Central Mediterranean, even though supplemented by operations of Wellingtons from Greece, would afford the requisite direct support to Greece. The Greek advance had almost halted and the Italians were building up in Albania for a counter-stroke. On 13 January H.Q., M.E., advised Malta that the British Government had decided it was essential to afford maximum possible assistance to Greece. The

Ibid:  
December,  
App. 15.

A.O.C., B.A.F., Greece, also urged the importance, from a prestige point of view, of hitting Albanian ports, and consequently Malta was asked to attack Valona and Durazzo to alleviate the Greek Staff's disappointment at the lack of heavy bombers in Greece. In the last five weeks of 1940 only one Wellington raid had been made on Durazzo, and B.A.F., Greece, had been unable to use the Blenheims by night against this target, through lack of range and the pressure of daylight operations. A contributory cause of the respite in operations against Albania from bases near Athens was the weather.

App. 12

Losses and damage incurred by the Blenheim squadrons in Valona operations were also exceeding replacement capacity, in view of our contribution to the Desert offensive. To relieve the position, 10 Wellingtons of No.70 Squadron were sent to Eleusis on 8 January for operations in the moon period, but

App. 20

bad weather again hampered their use against Albanian ports.

App. 32.

This detachment was unable to raid Durazzo before returning to Egypt on 22 January, and a further call from B.A.F., Greece for Malta Wellingtons to attack Durazzo had to remain unsatisfied, because with the island fighting for its life the maximum bomber effort had to be turned on the Sicilian aerodromes where the German dive-bombers were concentrated. For the same reason, H.Q., M.E., refused a request from Force H for Malta's bombers to attack Cagliari aerodrome during a Fleet Air Arm attack on Sardinia on 1 February. H.Q. M.E., acceded to Malta's request that

Feb. App. 3.

No.148 Squadron should be released entirely from any Albanian commitment, as the weather was against such attacks, and port and aerodrome raids in Italy and Sicily provided full employment for the squadrons. The Malta Wellingtons were occasionally used on targets in Cyrenaica, but the policy was that "concentrations of German aircraft wherever located should receive attention first."

January  
App. 50.

Policy was changed towards the end of February, when reconnaissance disclosed considerable shipping in Tripoli and Valona. H.Q., M.E. defined Malta's bombing priorities as:-

(1) Valona, (2) Tripoli, (3) Sicilian aerodromes, (4) Naples.

February  
App. 53.

The C.A.S. considered that with the maintenance of the Italian Army dependent on seaborne supplies, the primary targets must be Valona and Durazzo, even for the Blenheims. On 12

H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

February four Wellingtons of No.37 Squadron bombed Durazzo. On 8 March this attack was repeated, fires being started. Next followed a series of Fleet Air Arm attacks on Valona, on 12th, 14, 15 and 16 February, in which a cruiser, destroyer and two ships were hit by torpedoes from Swordfish. On the 16th also, F.A.A. Swordfish torpedoed two ships in Durazzo harbour.

/Enemy

Enemy warships bombarding Himare, south of Valona, on 4 March were attacked by 13 Blenheims of Nos.211 and 84 Squadrons, 10 Hurricanes of Nos.80 and 33 Squadrons, and 13 Gladiators of No.112 Squadron, 16,000 lbs. of bombs being dropped. No damage was claimed, but one cruiser was believed to have been hit. Seven Wellingtons of No.37 Squadron caused fires in Durazzo docks on 17 March. Wellingtons from Greece and Egypt had by this time been raiding objectives in the Dodecanese - mainly aerodromes - to discourage the operation of minelaying aircraft over the Suez Canal and reduce the scale of attack on our convoys to Greece. In March, Blenheims from Greece were also applied to this task, the feeling of H.Q., B.A.F. being that with the limited number of aircraft March App.16. available, direct escort to convoys would be unproductive by comparison with night bombing of airfields. On 25 March a 7,000 ton ship at Astropalia, in the Dodecanese, was hit by Blenheims of No.30 Squadron. In April, the land operations in Greece demanded nearly all our air effort in that country against Military targets and the Wellingtons of Nos.37 and 38 Squadrons left Greece on 17 and 18 April, when we were falling back.

#### Effort Against Tripoli.

H.Q. M.E. weight felt in our advance to El Agheila. Nos.37 and 38  
O.R.B.  
January App.21. Squadrons were based at Shallufa in January and with No.70 Squadron at Kabrit constituted No. 257.Wing. A maximum bomber effort was applied to Tobruk between 17 and 20 January, at the request of the G.O.C., Western Desert, designed to repeat the successful tactics at Bardia and reduce enemy resistance and our casualties. This "maximum effort" was by modern standards a puny one - 10 Wellingtons a night - but daylight attacks by Blenheims also played a part in reduction of the fortress.

With the fall of Benghazi, it was possible to bomb Tripoli comfortably from Cyrenaica by using Benina as an

/advanced

February  
App. 37.

advanced base for heavy bomber refuelling. This was a highly necessary course in view of the way German reinforcements were pouring across to North Africa from Italy, but in face of persistent German air attack in the Benghazi area, fighter protection was needed at Benina while refuelling was in progress by day. On the night of 24 February nine Wellingtons of No. 148 Squadron caused big explosions in the area of Tripoli power station and the Spanish mole and left one ship ablaze. Four Wellingtons of No. 70 Squadron which followed a few hours later found fires still burning.

H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

Tripoli was raided on seven nights between 7 and 18 March, usually by three or four aircraft, though on the 16th six Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron scored hits on the quays and shipping, causing fires. On the 18th the port was raided by four Wellingtons and nine Swordfish of No. 830 F.A.A. Squadron. The latter hit one ship and planted mines. Between 28 March and 6 April, eight night raids were made on Tripoli, involving 25 Wellington sorties, and some shipping was hit. On 30 March, when an attempt was made against ten ships lying off the harbour, no success resulted.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B.  
March. App. 1.

The problem of operating Wellingtons from Malta in face of the damaging Luftwaffe attacks on the airfields had to be tackled in March. A month earlier, H.Q., M.E., had suggested removal of the Wellingtons if their presence prejudiced other operations. Reviewing the position on 1 March, the A.O.C. Malta preferred to keep the bombers "to avenge the recent blistering blitz", but their retention hinged on the question whether Malta's fighter defence was adequate. "Policy decision therefore depends on possibility obtaining fighter reinforcements to ensure reasonable chance of protecting satisfactorily these valuable Wellington aircraft", the A.O.C., added.

/In

March App.5

In reply, H.Q. M.E., promising fighter reinforcements in a few days, suggested that the number of operational Wellingtons in Malta should be limited to ten at a time, any excess to be moved to El Adem, which would be No.148 Squadron's base. Shuttle bombing of Tripoli between El Adem and Malta was suggested. At the same time, the Chief of the Air Staff informed H.Q., M.E., that he was reluctant to surrender the power of bombing at short notice from Malta the many objectives which could be best reached from there, adding "Success of past activities of 148 Squadron is indicated by efforts made by Germans to neutralise it."

H.Q. M.E.  
S.49916 18A.

Another heavy German raid on Malta, however, brought the matter to a head, and a decision to move all Wellingtons from Malta<sup>1</sup>. They flew to Egypt at intervals between 9 March and the end of the month, the intention being to use Malta when practicable as an advanced refuelling base. The squadron re-assembled at Kabrit, some of its crews obtaining a much-needed rest. It was operational again early in April, a detachment returning to Malta, the remainder working from Fuka.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B.  
April App.4.

German movement into Tripoli was in full spate in March. After the Axis counter-attack had started at the end of the month, our bombers continued their efforts against this port. Early in April, H.Q., M.E., concluded that the most profitable form of port attack was concentration on quaysides and port installations rather than on individual ships at anchor. In response to representation from H.Q., Malta, whose reconnaissance indicated the desirability of heavy attack on Tripoli, H.Q., M.E., on 4 April gave permission for six Wellingtons of No.148 Squadron to be retained in the island, with Tripoli as the primary target. This step was highly desirable since the German push had sent our heavies back in

App.6

/Cyrenaica

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1. See also previous sub-section on Malta's defence.

App. 7

Cyrenaica and out of range of Tripoli again, and bomber strength had been affected by a detachment of No.37 Squadron going to Greece. Malta emphasised the importance of being supplied with crews experienced in Mediterranean operations instead of having to use scratch crews of aircraft in transit from Britain. On 12 April Air Marshal Tedder impressed on Malta the "urgent need for most intensive attack possible on Tripoli". He considered that a heavy, sustained attack was of paramount importance at that juncture, the alternative target being Palermo, the despatch port. The number of Wellingtons to be retained in Malta for these tasks was increased to nine.

App. 27.

Acting in each case on Glen Martin reconnaissances, No.148 Squadron attacked Tripoli harbour and shipping four times between 13 and 20 April with 22 sorties and 30 tons of H.M. which inflicted damage on shipping and port facilities. The attack on the 20th was followed by a dawn bombardment of the port by the battleships Warspite, Barham, Valiant and Malaya, the cruiser Gloucester and destroyers, lasting 42 minutes. Over 500 tons of shells fell on the harbour and shipping.

Effort to Deny Benghazi to the Enemy.

As the Luftwaffe had prevented our use of Benghazi as a supply port during the brief period of occupation, we were encouraged to believe that a strong effort on our part would deny it to the enemy in the same way when he took over again. But there was no doubt that about the middle of April the enemy was getting in some shipping there, which was probably due to our inability to mount a heavy enough scale of attack. This situation led Air Marshal Tedder to observe: "It seems strange that he should be able to run ships in as he has done in broad daylight without any escort. Wellingtons

H.Q. M.E.  
Correspondence

/and



with V.C.A.S. and Blenheims have had some successes there, but it is a very awkward proposition. We had hoped that some of the Fleet

would have a crack at Benghazi on their way back from Tripoli, but for some reason they did not."

Then on 1 May, the Prime Minister signalled the Naval

H.Q., M.E.  
S.21299, 194A.  
Part III

C.-in-C., "We are making extreme efforts to reinforce you from the air ..... It is now necessary to fight hard for Crete which seems soon to be attacked heavily and for Malta as a base for flotilla action against the enemy communications with Libya. Constantly improving attitude of U.S.A. and their naval co-operation justifies risks involved ..... But above all we look to you to cut off sea-borne supplies from the Cyrenaican ports and to beat them up to the utmost. It causes grief here whenever we learn of the arrival of precious aviation spirit in one ship after another. This great battle for Egypt is what the Duke of Wellington called 'a close run thing', but if we can reinforce you and Wavell as proposed by operations 'Tiger' and 'Jaguar' and you can cut off the tap of inflow, our immense armies in the Middle East will soon resume their ascendancy."

H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

To discourage enemy use of the port, the main weight of our bombing capacity was directed against Benghazi from the middle of April to the end of May. Between 21 April and 4 May, 53 sorties by Wellingtons inflicted heavy damage on the port facilities. Low-flying patrols by Blenheims in daylight, designed to stop petrol supplies reaching Benghazi, were laid on west of the port and had some success. On 3 May two Blenheims of No.45 Squadron caught two ships at sea and set one on fire.

H.Q., M.E.,  
O.R.B. May  
App. 17.

At the end of April, as accommodation was needed at Malta for Blenheims on shipping attacks and for Beaufighters, the Wellington detachment was withdrawn to the Desert, where

/bomber

App. 31.

bomber strength had been depleted by the transfer of detachments of Nos. 37 and 70 Squadrons to Iraq. The heavy squadrons in the Desert had by this time moved back to

App. 53.

main bases in the Delta area, and on 10 May were ordered to operate from there against Benghazi and Desert targets, landing only at advanced airfields to refuel on homeward flights. Three aircraft a night were ordered to operate permanently against Benghazi, a proportion of the remaining effort having to be applied to airfields on the Greek mainland and Crete.

Benghazi was bombed most nights in May, over 50 Wellington sorties being flown against the port that month. The heaviest attack was by seven aircraft on the 30th. A raid by a single Wellington on the 18th caused 28 explosions on the mole, and among other successful attacks were those on the 7th and 11th.

Air Commodore  
Collishaw's  
Report.

Although the bombings did not deny the port to the enemy, he was able to land only sufficient material to maintain his forward troops, and was unable to do any dumping. Only a few small ships were able to discharge cargo, under severely handicapped conditions. Air Commodore Collishaw ascribed the long period of Axis inactivity after reaching the frontier to the enemy's transport difficulties and lack of fuel through R.A.F. action against the alternative communications.

THE RED SEARisks in Shipping Route Protection.

The Italian failure to damage our Red Sea life-line must rank high among that nation's many inglorious performances.

A.C.M. Longmore,  
Despatches.

As Sir Arthur Longmore put it, the immunity enjoyed by our Red Sea convoys was no compliment to the Regia Aeronautica. It seems strange that the enemy made such a feeble effort against this vital prop, on which the defence of the Middle East depended, particularly since he was in an excellent strategical position to do so, being on the flank of our convoys for some 800 miles. After November 1940, he made no attempt to interfere, though he still had about 45 modern bombers, 68 bombers of obsolete types, three or four submarines and eight or nine destroyers.

D. Ops. (O),  
Defence of  
Aden.

His reason for not interfering from the air was doubtless pre-occupation with the land campaigns and the effectiveness of our blockade in forcing conservation of fuel; and once he had been pushed on the defensive by our pincer movement on East Africa from north and south in January he had nothing to spare for seaward attack. Nevertheless, while the enemy had the potential force, it was necessary for us to protect convoys. Even so, we had to take risks in depriving our sea traffic and the Aden base of full air protection - hazards which were not to the liking of the naval C.-in-C., East Indies. His representations in November for stronger defences at Aden met with the argument from the C.'s-in-C., Middle East that such a step could not be taken at the expense of other Middle East theatres, that a major land threat to Aden was unlikely to materialise, and that the weakness of our air strength must be accepted.

Ibid:

The naval point of view was also put by the Senior Naval Officer, Red Sea, through the A.O.C., Aden: "A little clear

/thinking

DO/AML/4 33A. thinking on the part of the Axis would show them that Aden is the key to the Middle East, and once that is realised Aden will be untenable unless adequate fighter and bomber forces and A.A. defences are provided, covering the aerodromes, port and outer harbour." Sir Arthur Longmore was unable to promise

Ibid: 34A. any alleviation, stating: "I quite agree with what you say about Aden being important and the Red Sea route safe, but we are already taking such colossal risks that I am really becoming almost shock-proof". Sir Arthur Longmore, however, was far from oblivious to the importance of protecting the life-line, for in a message to the C.A.S., on 9 January, when the

DO/AML/2 53A. Middle East was being combed for squadrons to reinforce Greece, he wrote: "It must not be forgotten that the Red Sea convoy route owes its comparative immunity from air or submarine attack largely to the escort work of the squadrons from Aden and Port Sudan. This route still remains vital."

Already H.Q., R.A.F., Middle East had begun to make inroads on our air resources in this theatre to strengthen the position in the Middle East, and this process continued as our commitments deepened in Greece. Aden still had No.203 Squadron for convoy work, No.8 Squadron (Blenheims and Vincents) for offensive action, and No.94 Squadron (Gladiators) for the defence of Aden. No.203 Squadron, however, lacked numbers, which led A/V/M. Reid, A.O.C., Aden, to inform H.Q., M.E:-

H.Q. R.A.F., "The number of convoys passing through the Red Sea is continually M.E.

DO/AML/4 33A. on the increase, and unless more aircraft arrive soon we shall be forced to refuse escort to a number of them." The escort commitment for these Blenheim IV fighters was from longitude 45 degs. E. in the Gulf of Aden to lat. 16 degs. 30 N. in

254W/12/1/Air the Red Sea, only one aircraft operating at a time unless 48A.

U-boats were suspected to be in the vicinity. Blenheims on long convoy escorts often used Kamaran Island as an advanced base for remaining overnight.

The A.O.C., Aden, fearing that the reduction in our air striking force would induce the enemy to adopt a bolder bombing programme, also wanted a flight of modern fighters to defend Aden, for with the enemy consolidation in British Somaliland, Aden was more vulnerable. This desire went unsatisfied.

Enemy on the Defensive.

As good targets presented themselves in Red Sea ports, these were regularly bombed from Aden by No.8 Squadron and No.14 Squadron (Blenheims) from Port Sudan. Between 25 November and 20 January, Aden mounted 37 sorties on Assab, some of them at night, damaging quays and installations. Massawa was the target for No.14 Squadron. Damage was done to various installations, but on 5 January a special mission against a submarine moored in the harbour failed in its object. The enemy occasionally attempted to raid Port Sudan with small numbers of S.79's, escorted by CR.42's, but all these attempts were driven off by Gladiators. Blenheims kept close watch on the aerodromes flanking the Red Sea to see that no threat developed against our convoys.

By the end of January, the enemy's lack of enterprise against our sea route induced a change of policy for No.203 Squadron. Since the last attack on a convoy (on 4 November), 31 convoys had been given air protection and no enemy aircraft had been encountered. The Italian bombers were by now pre-occupied with the menacing land situation. Consequently, the A.O.C., Aden received agreement from H.Q. M.E., and the C.-in-C., East Indies, to convert one flight of No.203 Squadron to bombers to attack targets in Abyssinia, as it was considered that standing patrols for all convoys were uneconomical. Convoy escorts were therefore provided only on special occasions. At the northern end, No.254 Wing was

/also

H.Q. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B.  
App. 43-46  
January.

254W/12/1/  
Air 64A.

also absolved from its convoy escort commitment except for local patrols over convoys entering or leaving Port Sudan or unless special request was made by the Navy.

H.E. M.E.  
Operational  
Summaries.

From February onwards, the squadrons at Aden and Port Sudan which had convoy commitments were thus able to lend their weight to support of our land offensives. The Navy's chief remaining anxiety was Massawa, where the enemy had his destroyers and submarines and about 35 merchant ships. Seven Albacores of the F.A.A. carried out a dawn dive-bombing attack on Massawa on 21 February, but results were not observed, and the best that could be claimed was a probable hit on a destroyer.

DO/AML/4  
52A.  
56A.

When Berbera was recaptured by landings from the sea on 16 March No.203 Squadron provided cover for the ships. Just before this, the C.A.S. had described the retention of a fighter squadron at Aden as a comparative luxury in view of commitments in Greece and Libya. The A.O.C., Aden, resisted the proposal to remove this squadron, suggesting that it could divide its efforts between Aden and Berbera defence and assist in mopping-up. He argued that the enemy could still attack Aden from the Dessie - Makalle area and Aden had been deprived of six A.A. guns. He was over-ruled, however, No.94 Squadron being ordered on 24 March to transfer to Egypt, Air Ministry's view being that the risk of attack on Aden was slight.

Ibid: 59 &  
47.

#### Coup de Grace to Italian Naval Strength.

When, about the middle of March, it was clear that Massawa would soon fall to our troops, the Navy became concerned about the likelihood of action by the Italian naval forces based on that port. It seemed probable that the eight or nine destroyers there would at least make a last despairing throw before they were overwhelmed. This led to No.203 Group laying on daily reconnaissances of Massawa with Blenheims, and the Navy brought 17 Swordfish from H.M.S. Eagle into the Red Sea to operate from shore bases in the Sudan. Naval dispositions were also made to

254W/12/1/  
Air, 146.

/guard

guard against a sudden enemy naval attack - H.M.S. Capetown and Kingston were based at Port Sudan for operations off the Eritrean coast and H.M.S. Caledon and Kimberley were based at Suoz. The R.A.F. was unable to mount an attack on the Italian ships in harbour, which the C.-in-C., East Indies wanted to prevent enemy interference with our establishment of the Mersa Kubra base.

In the event, the Italian naval sortie from Massawa was far more ignominious than we expected, and involved no desperate bid against our shipping. Two German merchant ships left Massawa towards the end of March. The Oder (8,516 tons) was intercepted by our naval forces near Perim and scuttled herself. The B. Rickmers (4,168 tons) did the same when intercepted by the destroyer Kandahar 60 miles off Massawa.

254W/12/1/Air.

An incident on 1 April tended to show that the enemy naval forces were in a state of confusion and despondency and did not know what to do for the best. In the morning, an F.A.A. Swordfish found an Italian destroyer about 70 miles north of Massawa and shadowed it. The destroyer made a change of course and the Swordfish, short of fuel, had to return to base. An R.A.F. Blenheim which set out to continue the shadowing found the destroyer wrecked in shallow water. It had been abandoned, and near by were empty boats. Another Swordfish about the same time located a second destroyer steering for Massawa at high speed, presumably carrying the crew from the abandoned ship. It was assumed that the enemy had either accidentally run aground or took fright on being shadowed and scuttled herself.

Destruction of the remaining destroyers by combined air and naval action followed in the next few days, resulting from our troops' advance on Massawa from Asmara. R.A.F. reconnaissance on 2 April showed that five destroyers had

Summary of  
Naval Events.

left the port. Next day, Blenheims of No.14 Squadron located a destroyer near Massawa and bombed it without result. Instead of trying to reach Assab, the port still in Italian hands further south, the fleeing destroyers sailed north. At 0511 hours on the 3rd, four of them were located by Swordfish 30 miles east of Port Sudan. The Swordfish sank one of them and severely damaged a second, which was finished off by Blenheims at 1145 hours. These were the Nazario Sauro and Daniele Marin. The other two, the Pantera and Tigre, had fled in the direction of Jidda, and at 1400 hours, Wellesleys of No.223 Squadron located them. They were aground on the Hedjaz coast, 12 miles south of Jidda, and crews taking to the boats. H.M.S. Kingston and the Wellesleys attacked them. On this mission, a Wellesley force-landed in the Hedjaz territory and a second Wellesley which put down to pick up the crew could not take off. The rest of the formation then landed, picked up the crews and flew back to base after destroying the force-landed aircraft. Blenheims later completed the destruction of the grounded Pantera and Tigre.

Reconnaissance of Massawa harbour on the 5th, 6th and 7th, showed that nearly all the 30 or so merchant vessels there had been destroyed or scuttled, and that the destroyer Giovanni Acerdi had been sunk at the harbour entrance. Just before our troops entered Massawa on the 8th, Wellesleys of No.47 Squadron bombed military targets in the town and No.223 Squadron attacked some small ships in the harbour which shelled our advancing forces. No.237 Squadron (Lysanders) joined in the bombing of ships and hit one vessel. A few small ships escaped from Massawa to neighbouring islands but were soon rounded up.

On the day of Massawa's fall, one of the two destroyers unaccounted for, the Vincenzo Orsini, was found in the harbour by a Swordfish and bombed. The other missing one, the Cesare

/Battisti



Battisti, which left on the 2nd, was reported on the 9th to be aground 100 miles south of Jidda. The enemy left Massawa harbour a mass of wrecks and carried out extensive demolitions, including destruction of the floating dock.

The annihilation of Italian naval forces in the Red Sea coincided with the cessation of enemy air reinforcement to East Africa. It was estimated that his air strength had been reduced to 25 bombers and 20 fighters. This satisfactory position made more strength available for other theatres. No.14 Squadron was moved to Egypt on the 8th - the attack on the destroyers on the 3rd was its last operation in the Red Sea area - and on the 10th No.203 Squadron was transferred to the Middle East.

H.Q. M.E.  
DO/AML/11.

C.O.S. 109th  
and 129th  
Meetings.

Just before the fall of Massawa, the Chiefs of Staff ruled that giant liners such as the Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary could proceed up the Red Sea to Suez, and the United States Government instructed that its ships would use the Red Sea as soon as Assab and Massawa were in our hands.<sup>1</sup>

H.Q. M.E.,  
O.R.B. App.41,  
May.

To guard against the remote contingency of air attack on giant liners, which might have had undesirable repercussions on the use of the Red Sea by American ships, a few Blenheims of No.8 Squadron at Aden were converted to fighters for convoy protection. During the passage of important ships, daily reconnaissances were made of landing grounds in the Assab area.

The Red Sea was so secure from the middle of April that the Navy discontinued the convoy system.

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1. Assab fell on 11 June.

G I B R A L T A RMore Effort Diverted to Atlantic.

The R.A.F.'s role at Gibraltar between November 1940 and June 1941 continued much the same as before, with constant vigilance over the Straits and patrols over our convoys. The bulk of the effort was on routine anti-submarine patrols, and though submarine sightings were rare, valuable information about neutral shipping movements was often gleaned in the process. In the spring, increased numbers of U-boats on our convoy routes in the Western Approaches led to more effort from the Rock being devoted to the Atlantic.

To carry out its long and regular patrols, No.200 Group had only the six Londons and three Swordfish of No.202 Squadron, but was occasionally helped by Fleet Air Arm aircraft. It was planned to replace the Londons gradually with Catalinas, and on 6 May the first replacement of this type arrived from Britain.

No.200 Group  
O.R.B.

Fears of Attempt to Force Straits.

In this period of the war, Gibraltar lay under the threat of a sudden attack by Spain or a German onslaught through Spain. The possibility was also present in the minds of planning staffs in London of an attempt by the Italians to break into the Atlantic as a diversion to a German invasion of Britain. Although it was unlikely that the Italians would have agreed to a forceful venture of this type, it was considered the correct strategy if the enemy had decided to risk all on an invasion. In fact, in face of the naval weight which Italy could have brought to bear, our naval strength and Gibraltar's defences could hardly have resisted the Straits being forced.

C.O.S. 143rd  
Meeting  
April 1941.

C.O.S. (41)  
109, February.

But the Italian Navy, still licking its Taranto wound,

/was

War Cabinet  
Resume  
February.

was far too pre-occupied with the dangers from our Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean to pay attention to Force H, which sallied as far as the Central Basin without hindrance to cover convoys bound for Malta and the Middle East. On 9 February, indeed, the Renown, Malaya, Sheffield and destroyers sailed to the enemy's doorstep and poured 337 rounds of 15 in. and 1,000 rounds of lighter shells into Genoa, damaging the Ansaldo electric works, power station, docks, harbour and merchant shipping. At the same time, the Ark Royal's aircraft laid mines in Spezia harbour, bombed Leghorn, Pisa aerodrome and railway junction, all with negligible opposition.

Plan for a New Air-Strip.

H.Q. Coastal  
Command  
S.15,055 57A.  
C.O.S. 20th  
Meeting  
January.

Nevertheless, the capacity of our air defence of the Rock to resist attacks if the fortress was in a state of siege, cut off from defence by carrier-borne fighters and prevented by enemy activity from using the landing ground on the isthmus, was nil. With this contingency in mind, Fortress H.Q. in January, in response to a Chiefs of Staff request, considered a scheme for constructing a small landing ground on Europa Flats for the operation of fighters. By demolishing some buildings, filling in a small quarry and carrying out other levelling, it was considered possible to construct a strip 300 yards long and 40 yards wide which could be used by aircraft of the Grumman type with the aid of catapults and arrester gear. To reduce vulnerability of aircraft on the ground, it was proposed to make hangars by tunnelling into the rock.

This was, however, a long-term project, and while Spain remained passive, the "neutral" landing ground sufficed. This strip, in fact, became very active in the spring as a staging post for reinforcing aircraft from Britain to the Middle East and Malta. The first delivery flights via Gibraltar were made in March, and in May the flow totalled 80 aircraft of various types.

/Anti

Anti-Submarine Tactics Altered.

Ibid: 58A.

The lack of submarine sightings in the Straits, coupled with suspicions that some submarines were getting through, led in January to an alteration in the timing and arrangement of air patrols<sup>1</sup>. Gibraltar aircraft were putting in an average of 180 hours a month patrolling the Straits, yet there had been no confirmed U-boat destruction there since the start of the war. It was considered that our patrols were too regular and that submarine commanders were familiar with the timings. The enemy tactic for getting through the Straits was supposed to be to dive during the hour before sunset, making the passage during darkness. Then, too, the duration of our search patrols, three hours, was considered too long for efficiency. To remedy the position, timings and durations of patrols were rearranged, but did not produce any increase in submarine sightings.

Other Reconnaissance Tasks.

Ibid: 51A.

Between November 1940 and June 1941, aircraft of No.200 Group carried out about 450 patrols and 200 special sorties. A number of these were concerned with watch on French shipping and naval movements, as French vessels continued the practice of keeping in Spanish territorial waters to pass through the Straits and elude our contraband control. Shadowing of French ships by aircraft led to several interceptions by the Royal Navy for contraband control purposes. An incident on the night of 15 December led the Navy to congratulate the R.A.F. on the promptitude with which a report was investigated. Following up an intelligence report that three tons of silver was to be transferred from Malaga to an Italian warships, an aircraft patrolled outside Malaga harbour in the moonlight.

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Admiralty document 1. The presence of at least one Italian submarine was confirmed in the Western Approaches early in the New Year.  
"Navies of the British Commonwealth at War".

The aircraft sighted a small boat with a swirl of water alongside such as might be produced by a submarine crash-dive. No action was taken by the aircraft, and the boat returned to harbour.

Another useful function was performed on 29 March by a London on convoy escort restraining a British merchant vessel, which believed it was being chased by a U-boat, from opening fire on the submarine. The submarine was in fact British.

The miscellany of other tasks performed by the aircraft of No.202 Squadron included the photographing of Spanish and Moroccan ports, while the start of the aircraft delivery flights via the Rock, involving losses on passage, entailed searches for missing aircraft, generally in the sea west of Gibraltar. Our flying boats were

No.200 Group not troubled by Italian aircraft, though on 12 March a Caproni 135 O.R.B. was encountered by a London off Cape de Gata. The enemy made three half-hearted approaches but did not fire. Later, the flying boats had to deal occasionally with F.W. Condors, but this was over the Atlantic. Winter and spring gales caused more losses to the flying boats than operations. On 15 February a London broke from its moorings and was wrecked, and a Sunderland was also damaged in the same storm.

Ibid:

Between 10 and 12 April a gale of exceptional velocity sank a London at its moorings, and a Sunderland also sank after breaking loose. Two more Londons were damaged on 24 April by H.M.S. Wellington as she was sailing from the harbour.

SECTION III(1 June 1941 to 17 November 1941)STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE PERIOD

The second half of the year 1941 marked the lowest ebb of our fortunes in the Mediterranean after the disastrous events of April and May. The Axis Powers now obtained great advantage by their possession of airfields along the Cyrenaican coast and in Greece and Crete in addition to those of Sardinia, Sicily and Southern Italy, while the only bases for our naval and air forces were those in Egypt, the Levant, Cyprus and Malta. To these must be added the isolated fortress of Tobruk which remained a "thorn in the flesh" to the enemy's hold on North Africa.

From the beginning of the period under review it can be said that aircraft controlled the Mediterranean. For the next six months (and indeed for two years) the main concern of the opposing forces was a battle for supplies. The Mediterranean had become increasingly dangerous for our surface warships and even more hazardous for our merchantmen. Freedom of sea movement was vital for our campaigns between Egypt and Tunisia where the great distances and meagre land communications necessitated adequate supplies by sea for any advance to be made by our military forces. On the other hand, the knowledge that the freedom of the Mediterranean was denied to ourselves made it incumbent upon us to prevent the enemy from enjoying its use. Had he fully exploited the advantage which he derived from short sea routes our position in the Middle East would in all likelihood have become untenable.

From the entry of Italy into the war although our air forces had made every effort to disrupt the enemy's

supplies by attacks on his shipping in transit and on his bases and ports, the numbers and equipment of our aircraft had been quite inadequate. Nevertheless, we succeeded in building up efficient day and night reconnaissances and a powerful striking force which in close co-operation with the Royal Navy became one of the deciding factors in the war at sea in the Mediterranean.

In the meantime the "back door" to the Middle East had been closed against the Axis Powers. Our conquest of Eritrea (which culminated with the capture of Assab on 11 June) and the re-conquest of British Somaliland had safeguarded the Red Sea and had removed a direct threat to Aden and to our supply lines from South Africa. The campaign in Abyssinia had virtually ended with the surrender of the Italian Viceroy, the Duke D'Aosta, at Amba Alagi on 17 May. In the eastern area of the Mediterranean the Iraq rebellion had been smashed at the end of May and our successful campaign in Syria was about to begin. In August, Persia was occupied by British and Russian forces and our lines of communication through the Persian Gulf were thus assured. But before this transpired we had to keep a close watch on Cyprus. The nearest Axis naval and air bases were only some 300 miles distant and necessitated static fighter defence and constant sea reconnaissances to negate any attempt by the enemy to capture the island.

Meanwhile, in the Central Basin of the Mediterranean war area the efforts of the Axis Powers and ourselves to build up supplies continued during the so-called 'lull' in the land operations which preceded our 'Crusader' campaign in November (1941). During this period the general situation improved in our favour as a result of the Germans directing the main weight of their assault against Russia (which began in June). This shifting of the German effort to the north instead of

to the south afforded us a valuable breathing space in which to prepare for our coming offensive in the Desert. On the other hand, the Eastern Mediterranean was practically surrounded by enemy bases from which his surface vessels could operate almost unchecked. Moreover, the enemy was able to switch strong air forces from Crete to Sicily and vice versa in order to attack our shipping at either end of the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the Axis strangle-hold on the western Mediterranean prevented our convoys sailing from the United Kingdom to Egypt after the end of May, although a few convoys successfully ran the gauntlet to replenish Malta during the succeeding months.

#### Air-Sea Warfare.

With regard to the air-sea warfare the period was noteworthy in the following respects:-

- (1) The increased protection of our shipping by air patrols.
- (2) Attacks on enemy shipping by aircraft and submarines.
- (3) Air attacks on enemy ports and bases (particularly from Malta).
- (4) Several successful convoys to Malta.
- (5) The relief of Tobruk.
- (6) Closer co-operation between the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force.

#### Attacks on Enemy Shipping.

R.A.F. M.E.  
Review No.3.

The enemy had the advantage of alternate routes, either east or west of Malta, for running his supplies to North Africa. Naples was his main embarkation port from which his supply vessels were usually routed, as follows:-

- (1) South-west to Palermo and thence in a more westerly direction making landfall in Tunisia in the



Cape Bon area before turning south down the coast to Tripoli and Benghazi.

- (2) South through the Straits of Messina and thence north-west towards Corfu (off Greece) before continuing along the Grecian coast and south to either Benghazi or Derna.

The other ports of embarkation were normally through Taranto or Brindisi from which enemy shipping was routed as in

- (2). There was also a subsidiary route which ran through the Corinth Canal and thence south to Crete and again south to Derna or one of the other small Cyrenaican ports. This subsidiary route was increasingly used for the passage of smaller vessels. Small ships were also used to carry material off-loaded at Benghazi along the coast of Cyrenaica.

The use of these different routes was constantly varied by the enemy according to the strength of our attacks and also depending upon whether our attacks were being made from Malta or Egypt.

The Navy and the R.A.F. watched these routes although their efforts were not closely co-ordinated until No. 201 Group was re-constituted as a Naval Co-operation Group in October (1941).

#### Axis Counter Measures.

To combat our attacks on his shipping in transit the enemy employed the following counter measures:-

- (1) Increased A.A. defences for merchant vessels.
- (2) Stronger naval escorts for convoys.
- (3) Increased fighter cover where possible.
- (4) The use of small craft sailing singly and routed evasively.
- (5) The use of air transport for ferrying men and material.

R.A.F. Ops. in  
West: Desert  
and East:  
Med.: 18 Nov.  
'41 to  
19 May '42.  
Appendix "A"

- (6) The use of naval surface vessels for carrying supplies.

During the period June to November (1941) it was estimated that our air and submarine attacks<sup>1</sup> accounted for upwards of 100 merchant and 20 naval ships destroyed in addition to many merchant and naval vessels damaged and probably sunk, and that the Axis Powers lost nearly half of their shipping plying between Europe and North Africa.

Attacks on Ports and Bases.

In addition to the severe losses which they sustained in sea transit the Axis Powers lost a great deal of material from the bombing of their ports and bases by the Royal Air Force, much of their supplies being destroyed either before shipment at their European ports of embarkation or soon after arrival at their African bases. It is not possible, however, to assess the damage caused which included stocks of fuel, ammunition and other supplies in addition to the destruction of docks, harbours and railway facilities. Between June and November our Malta-based aircraft made 544 sorties against Tripoli, Benghazi and the smaller harbours on the Gulf of Sirte, while our aircraft based in Egypt made 143 sorties against supply bases in Greece and Crete, and 1,014 sorties against Benghazi as well as regular attacks on Derna and Bardia. Numerous attacks were also delivered against Sicilian ports and aerodromes from both Malta and Egypt.

Axis Difficulties in Building Up Supplies.

It is known from enemy sources that the lack of a powerful Italian Fleet Air Arm and the withdrawal of the Luftwaffe from Sicily had a very adverse effect on the Axis endeavours to build up their supplies in North Africa. In the

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<sup>1</sup> All Naval claims were made by submarines, except on one occasion in November when surface units destroyed ten merchantment and two destroyers (see page 270 infra).  
G. 199913/JIL/6/48

Essay: "The  
War at Sea  
in the Med:"  
Part I.N.I.D  
1/G.P/19.  
(A.H.B.I.S.10)

the opinion of (the German) Vice-Admiral Weichold "only an operational and tactical collaboration with the German air force could have altered the situation. (But) all proposals made by the German Admiral for the use of German air forces in the Mediterranean sea warfare were turned down by the Luftwaffe". Commenting on the Axis shipping losses at this period, Vice-Admiral Weichold states:- "It was no longer possible for all convoys to include ships loaded with heavy material. This caused a remarkable decline in the transport of heavy vehicles. The German Admiral had on 18 August already pointed to this shortage of shipping space and asked for help (as follows):- "..... Apart from the possible mounting of an offensive in this theatre, which owing to the geographical situation would necessarily increase the demand on transport, the mere maintenance of the military forces overseas requires more tonnage than will be available in the future if the present rate of losses continues. An appreciable decrease in losses is in no way to be reckoned with. Thus, from a military point of view, it is of the utmost necessity that the question of building new ships to replace the losses should be investigated, especially in the case of Italy. Moreover, the speediest methods of production should be sought so that there shall be no vacuum endangering the present theatres of war or becoming a serious hindrance to future operations. This problem is a joint German-Italian concern of a military nature and of the utmost urgency.....' As with all German-Italian problems, this one was neither solved nor dealt with effectively".

Position of the Land Forces Prior to the "Crusader" Campaign.

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East:Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May '42

After Rommel's capture of Benghazi early in April (1941), our land forces retreated to Halfaya on the Egyptian frontier, although a garrison still held Tobruk

G. 199913/JLL/6/48

/which

which was then invested by the enemy. Thereafter, until the opening of the "Crusader" offensive, the position of the opposing forces remained virtually unchanged.

The enemy's defence line stretched from Halfaya south-westward to Sidi Omar and Sheferzen, with strongly held points at Fort Capuzzo, Mussaid and Hafid, and (Italian) garrisons held Jalo and Augila, due west of the Siwa Oasis and south-east of Jodabya. Our forces held a line of strong points south and south-west of Sidi Barrani as far as Jarabub and the Siwa Oasis. Both our own and the enemy's forces constructed minefields, anti-tank defences and gun emplacements at considerable depth.

Operation "Battleaxe" and Enemy Reconnaissance in Strength.

Ibid; &  
Narrative  
Reports  
(AHB.II.  
J1/15)

During the Summer two large-scale attacks were made, the first by ourselves and the second by the enemy. The attack by our forces - known as operation "Battleaxe" - was made in June (following upon the arrival in Egypt of a special convoy of medium and infantry tanks) in an attempt to relieve Tobruk. After capturing Fort Capuzzo and advancing into the Sidi Aziez area our land forces were surprised by strong enemy armoured units, and in the ensuing battle the greater part of our infantry tanks was lost through running short of petrol in the area occupied by the enemy. Our attack thus proved abortive and our forces had to withdraw.

The enemy's attack was made in September. It amounted to a reconnaissance in strength (in which 120 tanks were employed) with the object of testing our defences and discovering the strength of our armour. The enemy column advanced as far as Rabia, south-west of Sidi Barrani, where the R.A.F. attacked it while re-fuelling and inflicted considerable damage. As a result of this

repulse the enemy abandoned his enterprise and withdrew.

Preparations for "Crusader".

R.A.F. Ops. in  
the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May '42

During the Summer and Autumn preparations were made for the "Crusader" campaign. The general aim of this offensive was, essentially, to destroy the Axis armoured forces in Cyrenaica and thus prepare the way for the invasion of Tripolitania. The following subsidiary aims were also envisaged:-

- (1) To relieve Tobruk.
- (2) To remove the threat of invasion of Egypt.
- (3) To establish forward sea and air bases capable of interfering with Axis plans in Italy, Sicily, Greece and Crete.
- (4) To deter pro-Axis activities in Tunisia.
- (5) To facilitate the passage of our shipping through the Mediterranean.
- (6) To force a possible withdrawal of enemy forces from the Russian front.
- (7) To re-establish our prestige in the Middle and Far East.

The campaign was timed to take place when the enemy had been sufficiently weakened by our preliminary air offensive: in fact it began on 18 November.

Although the plan for "Crusader" allowed for a special preparatory period of five weeks (October-November), the R.A.F. and submarine attacks continued throughout the Summer and Autumn, especially against enemy sea communications in the Mediterranean, as already mentioned above. The effectiveness of these operations is thus

corroborated by (the German) Vice-Admiral Weichold:-

"The increased activity of the British air force and submarine service considerably restricted the movement of Italian

G. 199913/JIL/6/48

/shipping

SECRET

235.

shipping and affected the supply of the African armies, and British reconnaissance planes sighted almost every convoy which was then attacked by fighter aircraft or British submarines operating far up the Tyrrhenian Sea. Operating from Egypt, the British air force attacked the Libyan unloading ports and increasingly bombed Benghazi and Derna: Italian "flak" and fighter protection, especially in the beginning, was completely lacking. Not once was the shipping lying in the harbours or roadsteads successfully protected. In the middle of September losses in the reinforcement for Africa were so great that they obviously exceeded the daily reports of the German authorities in Rome".

/THE CENTRAL BASIN

THE CENTRAL BASINMalta's Strategic ImportanceJPS.(41)  
467

The strategic importance of Malta with its constant threat to the Axis sea-route to Tripoli and air bases in Sicily (and also as a staging-post for air reinforcement to the Middle East) was becoming more apparent in the Summer of 1941, and in accordance with the recommendations of the Joint Planning Staff<sup>1</sup> it was decided that Malta should be made self-supporting for as long as possible. Although the provisioning of the island was impracticable from the east, it was considered that the (temporary) absence of the Luftwaffe from Sicily might afford opportunities for supplying the island from the west, and the Joint Planning Staff recommended that such reinforcement should be made as soon as it was possible to do so.

In spite of persistent enemy air attacks the defence of Malta was at that time sufficiently assured to constitute a base from which R. A. F. and F. A. A. squadrons could continue their attacks against enemy shipping in transit. These operations considerably reduced the enemy's flow of supplies to Tripoli and destroyed his shipping which he could ill afford to lose and had small hope of replacing.

COS (41)  
215th Meeting

1 At a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on 18 June, the J.P.S. had been instructed to examine and report on the policy to be pursued with regard to Syria, Tobruk, Cyprus and the provisioning of Malta. The three C's.-in-C., Middle East, felt that the comparative lull in the Mediterranean offered the least favourable conditions for sending supplies to Malta, but nevertheless several convoys were sent from the west to the island (as will appear hereafter). (A survey of our strategic policy in the Middle East for the period under review - including the decisions taken thereon by the Chiefs of Staff and the Committee of Defence - is contained in Part II of R. A. F. Narrative "The Crusader Offensive").

Air Reconnaissance and Shipping Strikes from Malta.

The appointment of Air-Vice-Marshal Lloyd as A. O. C., Mediterranean followed soon after the arrival of the first Blenheims at Malta which had been sent to operate against enemy shipping.<sup>1</sup> Air-Vice-Marshal Lloyd's previous appointment had been that of S.A.S.O. of No.2 Group, Bomber Command (from which the Blenheims had been sent) and he was therefore conversant with the tactics employed by the aircraft of No.2 Group against enemy shipping off the Dutch and

A-V-M.Lloyd's  
Account of  
Malta

Norwegian coasts.<sup>2</sup> Before Air-Vice-Marshal Lloyd left England, Sir Charles Portal had impressed on him that "Malta's main task was to sink Axis shipping running from Europe to Africa", and on his arrival the Air-Vice-Marshal at once began to study "the life and habits of the Axis shipping".

As already mentioned,<sup>3</sup> the enemy's main embarkation port for sending supplies to North Africa was Naples, and Tripoli and Benghazi were his chief ports of disembarkation. The enemy convoys from Naples to Tripoli sailed by two routes, one being to the west of Sicily through the Sicilian Straits (i.e. between the western end of Sicily and the Cape Bon area), and the other being east of Sicily through the Straits of Messina. Of these two routes the western route was more generally used, the convoys sailing from Naples to the Sicilian Straits, thence to the vicinity of Pantellaria Island and from thence to the Tunisian coast along which they sailed for a considerable distance; they then sailed across the open sea to the coast of Tripolitania which they hugged until reaching Tripoli. The nearest point to Malta on this route was approximately 140 miles. Both the Italians and the Germans showed considerable skill in sailing /their

1 See page 161 supra

2 See page 160 supra

3 See page 229 supra



their convoys so as to expose them to the minimum of interception from Malta, and their sailings were so timed that their convoys would pass the nearest point to Malta during the hours of darkness. It was found that the convoys could best be attacked in daylight when approaching the Sicilian Straits, or at night when passing through the Straits, as also at any time during the following day - especially when they reached the "middle section" of their voyage as this area was nearest to Malta and furthest from Sicily and North Africa.

Ibid.

The convoys using the eastern route through the Straits of Messina were more difficult to attack; their usual procedure was to arrive at the Straits just before dark and either to remain in the Straits during the night and pass through next day, or to sail through the Straits at night and then to hug the Italian coast as far as Taranto under the protection of strong fighter escorts. From there the convoys sailed across the Ionian Sea, making landfall on the North African coast about 100 miles to the east of Tripoli, and thence along the Tripolitanian coast-line under fighter cover from Tripoli. When the convoys entered the Ionian Sea they were difficult to locate: the distance from Malta to the Balkan coast is some 400 miles and it was not possible for Malta's small force of Marylands of No. 69 Squadron (which averaged only four serviceable aircraft) to search that large sea area in addition to their other tasks.

The method of reconnaissance of enemy convoys was for No. 69 Squadron's Marylands (and, later, P. R. U. Hurricanes)<sup>1</sup> to photograph the ports of arrival and departure. These photographs were then interpreted by /expert

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<sup>1</sup> Two P. R. U. Hurricanes arrived in May and a third on 18 June.

expert Intelligence Officers who kept a record of every enemy ship shown in the photographs, each ship having its own "history sheet" giving its size, shape, probable speed, the nature of its (presumed) employment, its movements from the time that it came on the record, and such details as to whether it was loaded, partially loaded or empty, and its exact position in the harbour. In this manner a list was compiled of all the enemy shipping in Naples, Taranto, Brindisi, Trapani, Palermo, Tripoli, and other minor parts, and a good knowledge was obtained of the particular ships which were being used for the North African convoys. With regard to Naples, a regular routine was observed which showed to within a period of twenty-four hours when a convoy would be ready to sail. This was accomplished by photographs of ships assembling in the port and of their movement to one of the quays (invariably used by the convoys and known to the R. A. F. Staff at Malta as "The North African Quay" - and, later, as "Rommel's Quay"), the progress of loading the ships being photographed from time to time until it was apparent that all the ships of a particular convoy were fully loaded and ready to sail. Sometimes, however, there was a delay of one or two days before the convoy put to sea, the time of sailing generally being just before dark. On these occasions the Marylands had, therefore, to make quick reconnaissances of the harbour at dawn on the following morning to discover if the convoy had sailed or not: if it had sailed, a search was at once made to locate it. If, and as soon as, the convey was located it was kept under constant observation by day but this could not be maintained during the night. As at that time the Radar aids (which were perfected later on in the War) were lacking, it was necessary to make a further search on the next morning. The enemy was fully cognisant

of the R. A. F's difficulties in re-locating his convoys, and the convoys sometimes put back to one of their embarkation ports during the night so as to confuse our reconnaissance aircraft. Another ruse was for the convoys to steam at a slow speed during the night so that our reconnaissance aircraft would thereby be many miles out of their reckoning as to the point at which they expected to re-sight them. An instance of a successful ruse by the enemy was that of a convoy of five ships from Naples which was seen sailing to the Sicilian Straits. A striking force from Malta was briefed to attack it on the following morning off Pantellaria Island (where it was expected to be found) but during the night the convoy put back to Palermo - a fact which was not discovered by the Marylands until the afternoon, after several hours had been spent in a (naturally) fruitless search in the vicinity of Pantellaria. In spite of these ruses by the enemy, the number of sightings of convoys which were followed by day strikes by the Malta Blenheims and night strikes by the Malta torpedo-carrying Swordfish caused him considerable losses, as is illustrated by the following account of shipping strikes:-

H. Q. M. E. Op.  
Summaries;  
R. A. F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol. 1, (Shipping  
Losses Assessment  
Committee's  
Reports); List  
from Enemy  
sources of  
Italian merchant  
ships sunk.

On 3 June, five Blenheims of Nos. 82 and 139 Squadrons attacked a convoy escorted by six destroyers (south of Pantellaria Island), which had been sighted by a Maryland. Good results were obtained, one merchant vessel of 8,000 tons being blown up and another (of 5,000 tons) being hit by four bombs and set on fire.<sup>1</sup> One of the /Blenheims

<sup>1</sup> These results were confirmed by photos; the two ships were the Beatrice C. (6,132 tons which was carrying ammunition) and the Montello (6,117 tons).

Blenheims was hit by debris from the exploding ship and dived into the sea. During their return to base one Blenheim was engaged by enemy fighters, one of which was hit and probably destroyed. On 11 June, two Blenheims of No.82 Squadron attacked at mast height a convoy of six merchantment escorted by three destroyers and three auxiliary vessels. One merchant ship (of 5,000 tons) was set on fire by five direct hits.<sup>1</sup> one Blenheim struck the mast of one of the ships and crashed into the sea.

Meanwhile, No.139 Squadron had returned to the United Kingdom on 5 June.

During the latter half of June, operations against enemy convoys totalled 24 sorties by Blenheims and Marylands, and Swordfish of the F. A. A. On the evening of 25 June, four Marylands of No.69 Squadron and seven Swordfish of No.830 Squadron, F. A. A., attacked a convoy of four 20,000 ton merchant vessels off the Sicilian coast. One ship was set on fire by a 500lb. bomb dropped by a Maryland and the other three ships were claimed to have been hit with torpedoes by the Swordfish.<sup>2</sup>

In the first half of July, only one attack was made on shipping at sea, viz. on the night of 12/13 July when four Blenheims of No.110 Squadron<sup>3</sup> bombed a convoy outside Tripoli harbour, sinking a 5,000 ton tanker and a schooner and setting a 1,000 ton merchant vessel on fire.<sup>4</sup> In the last

/two

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- 1 This was officially assessed as 'severely damaged'.
  - 2 The first ship was officially assessed as 'damaged' and the three others under Category IV (i.e. no observed result, near misses, or no definite claim).
  - 3 A detachment of this Sqn. with 17 aircraft from the U.K. had relieved No.82 Sqn. at Malta on 4 July. (The aircraft employed in these subsequent attacks were Blenheims of No.110 Sqn. and Swordfish of No.830 Sqn. F. A. A.).
  - 4 The tanker and the schooner were officially assessed as 'sunk', and the 1,000 ton M.V. was assessed as 'severely damaged'.

two weeks of this month convoys and shipping in harbour were attacked successfully, an estimated total of 37,000 tons of shipping being destroyed. These operations included an attack in the Central Mediterranean on 15 July by three Blenheims on two merchant ships of 8,000 tons and three 4,000 tons escorted by four destroyers. The two largest merchantment were hit with 250 lb. bombs, one being set on fire and the other damaged.<sup>1</sup> On 22 July, four Blenheims attacked a convoy, off Pantellaria Island, consisting of four merchant ships escorted by five destroyers: one 8,000 ton ship carrying ammunition was blown up and two other ships (of 7,000 and 6,000 tons) were damaged. On the same evening the convoy was again attacked by five Swordfish which sank the fourth ship - a 7,000 ton tanker - and damaged one of the destroyers with a direct hit on the stern.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the Malta fighters were equally active, five enemy E-boats and nineteen aircraft of various types being destroyed, our own losses being numerically small.

Air H.Q.  
Med:  
O.R.B. July

Operation "Substance".

Meanwhile it had been decided to reinforce Malta by a third fighter squadron (No.126) of Hurricanes. It was arranged that the pilots should be flown to Malta and that the other personnel and equipment and eight months stores for the other R. A. F. units on the island should be sent in an Admiralty reinforcing convoy from Gibraltar towards

A.M.  
CS.9947, 2A

Ibid. 7A

/the

- 1 These were officially assessed as 'severely damaged' and 'damaged' respectively.
- 2 The 8,000 ton ammo ship was, apparently, the German ship Freussen (8,230 tons) which was officially assessed as 'sunk'; the two other M.V's were assessed as 'damaged' and the destroyer as 'severely damaged'. (The tanker was the ex-Norwegian ship Brarena of 6,996 tons.

the end of July. This convoy - consisting of six store ships and one troopship (with some 4,500 troops) - was controlled by Admiralty operation "Substance" which was also responsible for protecting the passage of seven other transports going empty from Malta to Gibraltar. Force 'H' - reinforced by certain ships of the Home Fleet<sup>1</sup> - was to escort the convoy bound for Malta as far as the Narrows between Sicily and Tunisia, and thereafter Force 'X'<sup>2</sup> was to take the convoy through the "Narrows" to Malta. Meanwhile the empty transports from Malta, sailing on 23 July (the same day that the east-going convoy reached the Narrows), were to pass through that area on the same night by a different route. In order to assist in protecting the east-bound convoy, Beaufighters of Nos. 252 and 272 (of No. 201 Group) were sent to Malta in addition to eight Beaufighters which were being sent as a reinforcement to the Middle East Command. Long and short range Hurricanes of No. 274 Squadron (No. 204 Group) were also provided as escorts for the convoy and H.M. ships.

The convoy sailed on 21 July and, after parting with Force 'X', the main body of Force 'H' cruised south-west of Sardinia to await the return of Force 'X' and to "endeavour to distract attention" from the empty transports on their passage westward. To support these operations Admiral Cunningham arranged a diversion in the Eastern Mediterranean by which he led the enemy to believe that their ships would risk meeting the Mediterranean Fleet should it put to sea

/to

- 1 Force 'H' comprised the battle-cruiser Renown, the battleship Nelson, the a/c carrier Ark Royal (30 Swordfish and 24 Fulmars), the cruiser Hermione and six destroyers, under command of Vice-Adml. Somerville.
- 2 Force 'X' comprised the cruisers Edinburgh, Manchester and Arethusa, the minelayer Manxman (serving as a cruiser) and eleven destroyers, under command of Rear-Adml. Syfret. There were also eight submarines patrolling off Sardinia, Sicily and Naples during the operation.

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Admiralty  
Battle Summary,  
No. 18 C.B.  
3081(11)

A.M.  
CS. 9947, 13A.

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary, No. 18  
C.B. 3081(11)

Admiralty  
Battle Summary,  
No. 18. C.B.  
3081 (11)

Ibid

Admiralty Hist.  
Section Narrative  
"Ops. of the Med.  
Fleet & Force  
'H'".

Admiralty Battle  
Summary, No. 18  
C.B. 3081 (11)

H.Q. M.E. O.R.B.  
July Appx. 9 &  
H.Q. M.E. Op.  
Summaries.

Admiralty Battle  
Summary, No. 18  
C.B. 3081 (11)

Ibid.

to attack the convoys. This diversion was known as Operations M.E. 2 and M.E. 3 which were entrusted to the Vice-Admiral 1st. Battle Squadron with his flag in the Queen Elizabeth. Meanwhile the convoy of empty transports had only one destroyer for escort: this entailed a considerable risk but it was not possible to give them a stronger protection without twice running the gauntlet of the Narrows, or calling on the Mediterranean Fleet.

During the first two days of the Malta-bound convoys passage No. 201 Group's Blenheims carried out anti-submarine patrols while Marylands of No. 69 Squadron from Malta reconnoitred between Sardinia and Sicily and kept watch on the Italian ports. In order to divert enemy fighter and bomber action against the convoy, the Malta Wellingtons (of No. 143 Squadron detachment)<sup>1</sup> bombed the harbour and railway sidings at Naples on the night of 20/21 July, starting large fires and explosions, and Blenheims (of No. 110 Squadron) bombed the Sicilian landing-ground of Bagghio-Rizzo, destroying three grounded S. 79's and damaging several other aircraft. Meanwhile, on the night of 18/19 July, Fulmars of the Fleet Air Arm had bombed Catania aerodrome. The Italians had, apparently, some 50 torpedo-carrying aircraft and 150 bombers (of which 30 were dive-bombers), approximately half of each type operating from Sardinia and half from Sicily. They also had (probably) five serviceable battleships and ten cruisers located between Taranto, Messina and Palermo.

The transports bound for Malta and most of the other warships that joined Admiral Somerville came from the United Kingdom with the Nelson, the rest - including

/Admiral

<sup>1</sup> On the next day (22 July) No. 148 Sqn. detachment was moved to No. 257 Wing, Egypt. Its place was taken by No. 38 Sqn.  
G. 199913/JIL/6/48

Admiral Syfret's flagship Queen Elizabeth were already at Malta with Force 'H'. In order to conceal the convoy's passage to the Mediterranean as many ships as possible entered the Mediterranean on the night of 20/21 July escorted by the Nelson, Edinburgh and Manxman and eight destroyers. The Manchester, Arethusa and the other three destroyers joined the convoy in the morning: unfortunately the troopship Leinster ran ashore whilst turning out of Gibraltar Bay and 1,000 troops were thus left behind. The fleet then sailed east in two groups, Sunderlands (of No.204 Squadron, Gibraltar)<sup>1</sup> giving anti-submarine protection to each group.

On 23 July, as the fleet was approaching Sardinia, enemy aircraft began their attacks. The Ark Royal's fighters met the enemy bombers about twenty miles from the fleet and shot down two of them for the loss of three Fulmars. The Manchester was hit by a torpedo from an enemy aircraft and was forced to return to Gibraltar, and the destroyer Fearless was torpedoed and totally disabled. During the passage of the fleet through the Narrows enemy aircraft were still engaged by the Ark Royal's Fulmars until the Beaufighters from Malta arrived and relieved them. The Beaufighters were, however, not identified and were fired on by our ships.<sup>2</sup>

Ibid:

Enemy air and E-boat attacks continued throughout the night of 23 July and the transport Sydney Star was torpedoed but managed to reach Malta, and the whole convoy arrived safely at Malta on 24 July, the escorting fleet returning to Gibraltar. In the meantime the empty transports had sailed on the morning of 23 July escorted by the destroyer Encounter. One of the transports - the Hoegh Hood - was /damaged

- 
- No.200 Grp. & No.204 Sqn. O.R.B's, July.
- 1 Six Sunderlands of No.204 Sqn. had arrived on 17/18 July as a temporary reinforcement to No.200 Grp., Gibraltar.
  - 2 According to Admiralty Battle Summary No.18 the Beaufighters "did not identify themselves".



SECRET

247.

damaged by a torpedo but all reached Gibraltar.

During the "Substance" operations twelve enemy aircraft were destroyed<sup>1</sup> and two others probably damaged: our losses were six Fulmars and one Beaufighter destroyed. The diversion (operations M.E. 2 and M.E. 3) ordered by Admiral Cunningham was carried out successfully by the Mediterranean Fleet on 23 and 24 July, the fleet steering to the westward on 23 July and turning east again after dark thus misleading the enemy as to our intentions.

Vice-Admiral Somerville's appreciation of the work of the R. A. F. during the operation was reflected in his signal (of 26 July) to the Vice-Admiral, Malta:-

Information  
from Admty.  
Hist:Section.

"Thanks for assistance rendered in execution of "Substance" and in particular for prompt action taken to deal with emergencies as they arose. Grateful if you would convey my appreciation to A. O. C. Medn: and 200 Group for their effective co-operation which contributed so much to the success of operation".

Enemy Attack on the Grand Harbour, Malta.

On the following morning (25 July), the Malta Hurricanes attacked an enemy force of one BR.20 and one S.79, escorted by forty Macchi 200's, which were attempting to reconnoitre the Grand Harbour, Malta at a height of 22,000 feet. The Hurricanes shot down the BR.20 and the S.79 and three of the Macchi: none of the Hurricanes was lost. Next morning (26 July), before dawn, a force of enemy light naval forces escorted by a number of fighters attacked the Grand Harbour - in which the ships of the "Substance" convoy were berthed. The surface craft proved to be E-boats and smaller torpedo-carrying craft: they came under point-blank fire of our shore batteries and were

/repulsed

<sup>1</sup> These included two JU.87's destroyed and one S.79 damaged, by the Beaufighters, which also probably sank one E-boat.

repulsed with heavy losses, five E-boats and eight torpedo-carrying craft being blown up or sunk. The remaining E-boats were pursued by our Hurricanes which sank four of them and damaged others and destroyed three of the escorting Macchi 200's. One of the Hurricanes was lost but the pilot escaped unhurt. In his Report on this action the Vice-Admiral, Malta, Sir Wilbraham Ford, stated:-

".....The photographic reconnaissance on which the attack was to be based must have been at least four days old ..... In a desperate attempt to get (further) photographs two bombers escorted by over thirty fighters were sent over on D.1., but thanks to a magnificent effort by our fighters both the bombers together with three fighters were shot down ..... The determined search for, and destruction of, every retiring M. T. B. by our Hurricanes turned a failure into a disaster".

Meanwhile, on 19 July a detachment of No.105 Squadron (Blenheim IV's) arrived at Malta, and at the end of July No.110 Squadron detachment left for the United Kingdom. The Beaufighter detachments of No.252 and 272 Squadrons - which had been loaned to Malta for Operation "Substance" - returned to Egypt on 6 August.

#### Low Level Bombing by Blenheims.

During August and September the Blenheims of Nos.105 and 107<sup>1</sup> Squadrons did good work by low level bombing attacks. Flying in numbers varying from ten to two they struck at enemy shipping wherever it was sighted by the Marylands and P. R. U. Hurricanes of No.69 Squadron. In August, several attacks by Blenheims and Swordfish aircraft were made on convoys in the neighbourhood of Lampedusa Island. These included an attack

/by

1 No.107 Sqn. arrived at Malta from the U.K. on 20 August.

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by Swordfish on 31 July/1 August in the Central Mediterranean on a convoy of four merchantmen escorted by five destroyers in which one vessel of 5,000 tons was torpedoed and set on fire.<sup>1</sup> On the night of 6/7 August, seven Swordfish made a torpedo attack on a convoy of six merchant ships escorted by six destroyers: one 7,000 and one 6,000 ton merchantmen were claimed as sunk and one destroyer damaged.<sup>2</sup> At dawn (on 7 August) four Blenheims attacked the same convoy off the Kerkenna Islands, hitting one 8,000 ton ship with two 250 lb. bombs and one 6,000 ton ship with one 500 lb. bomb: one of the Blenheims was damaged by A. A. fire.<sup>3</sup> Other operations included an attack on the night of 14/15 August by nine Swordfish on a convoy of five merchant vessels escorted by five destroyers 30 miles south of Lampedusa Island: one ship of 6,000 tons and another of 3,000 tons were torpedoed and sunk, and another 3,000 ton ship was hit.<sup>4</sup>

During the night of 17/18 August, seven Swordfish bombed and torpedoed a convoy of five merchantmen and a 10,000 ton tanker escorted by six destroyers, some 20 miles west of Lampion Island. The tanker was hit and damaged and one ship (the Maddalene Odero of 5,479 tons) was hit and subsequently beached by her crew at Lampedusa Island. Next morning, two Blenheims attacked the beached ship at half-hourly intervals with 250 lb. bombs and set it on fire.<sup>5</sup> during this operation four enemy fighters /unsuccessfully

1 This was officially assessed as 'severely damaged'

2 The 7,000 ton ship (probably the Nita of 6,813 tons "sunk by torpedo aircraft 25 miles south of Lampedusa" on 6 August - A.H.B.1, S.13 -) was officially confirmed as sunk: the 6,000 ton ship was assessed under Category IV.

3 These two ships were officially assessed as 'damaged'

4 The 6,000 and 3,000 ton ships were officially confirmed as sunk: the second 3,000 ton ship was assessed under Category IV.

5 This was officially assessed under Category I (i.e. sunk or constructive loss).

unsuccessfully attacked one of the Blenheims. On 24 August, four Blenheims bombed two 800 ton schooners and an escort vessel off Nifolia in the Gulf of Sirte.<sup>1</sup>

On the night of 27/28 August, six Swordfish located and attacked with torpedoes (near Lampedusa Island) a convoy of four merchant ships escorted by four destroyers which had been previously reported by our reconnaissance aircraft: a 5,000 ton vessel was set on fire.<sup>2</sup> On the next day, five Blenheims bombed two 3,000 ton merchant ships in the Central Mediterranean: three hits were scored on one ship which was left in a sinking condition<sup>3</sup> and the other ship was damaged with a bomb through her deck.<sup>4</sup>

It was estimated that during August, 20% of enemy shipping from Sicily and Italy attempting to reach Libya or Tripolitania was sunk by our Naval and air forces, of which proportion slightly more than half was accounted for by air attacks. These results were, however, considered insufficient and the question of stepping up our attacks on shipping to curtail enemy communication with North Africa received further consideration.

#### Intensive Offensive Against Enemy Shipping.

At the end of August the aircraft at Malta which could be used to interrupt enemy sea communication with North Africa were:-

7 Marylands (which had been fitted with bomb racks)<sup>5</sup>  
32 Blenheims  
15 Wellingtons  
12 Swordfish

/Up

<sup>1</sup> One schooner and the escort vessel were officially assessed as 'severely damaged' and the other schooner as 'damaged'.

<sup>2</sup> This was officially assessed as 'severely damaged'

<sup>3</sup> " " " " " 'sunk'

<sup>4</sup> " " " " " 'damaged'

<sup>5</sup> A.H.Q. Med: and No. 69 Sqn. O.R.B.'s June.

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251.

Up to the first week of September it had been found that the percentage of occasions on which the striking forces found enemy convoys originally located by the reconnaissance Marylands had not been entirely satisfactory, as out of 35 recent sorties the Blenheims had located the convoys in 24 cases. On the other hand, the Swordfish had achieved considerable successes with their night torpedo attacks.

As a result of our attacks during the past few weeks the Italians were now sending out their convoys with considerably stronger protective escorts (including air escorts of fighters)<sup>1</sup> than formerly. In the opinion of the A. O. C. Mediterranean (Malta) Blenheim attacks on shipping by day were likely to involve heavy casualties, although the Blenheims were still invaluable for attacking lightly escorted ships and would have the effect of delaying strongly escorted convoys in their "turn round". Air Marshal Tedder, however, advocated that heavy bomber attacks should be made on ships in harbour (as was being done at Tripoli), but the Air Ministry considered that although heavy bombing of embarkation and disembarkation ports might give good results, experience of enemy bombing of British ports showed that a very heavy scale of attack would be necessary: further, that even if sufficient bombers (Wellingtons) could be operated from Malta the supply situation on that island would not permit them to operate at the required effort over a long period. In the opinion of the Air Ministry the sinking of enemy shipping in transit would be more effective and would produce more lasting results. It was therefore decided to send an additional Blenheim squadron to Malta,

/if

A.M.  
OS.10581  
5A  
(26.8.41)

Ibid. 9A  
(27.8.41)  
Ibid. 12A  
(28.8.41)

A.M.  
OS.10732, 1A.

1 These fighter escorts operated from Sicily, Pantellaria and North Africa.

No.18 Sqn.  
O.R.B.

if the A. O. C. Mediterranean would be able to maintain it, but it was not until 10 October that this squadron, (No.18) left for Malta.

A.M.  
CS.10581,  
15B  
(31.8.41)

In the meantime Admiral Cunningham had also been considering the question of stepping up our attacks on enemy shipping. He considered that although "recent air attacks on Tripoli convoys by Swordfish at night and Blenheims by day had proved very successful, the following factors were likely to reduce the success of these operations":--

- (a) The enemy convoys might be routed via the Ionian Sea and thus be out of range of night attack by Swordfish.
- (b) The improvements in the A. A. defences of convoys rendered low-flying attacks by Blenheims increasingly hazardous.

He suggested that the remedy for (a) was longer range torpedo aircraft, and that "unless the Beaufort is likely to prove satisfactory for torpedo attacks, the Albacores with internal auxilliary tank appeared to be the only solution", and that the remedy for (b) "appeared to be an immediate requirement for a squadron of high speed dive-bomber aircraft such as the American Curtis S B 2 C". In view of "the vital importance of keeping steady pressure on Libya lines of communication", which bad weather and longer nights would make increasingly difficult, the Admiral requested the Admiralty that "immediate steps should be taken to do everything possible to meet the situation".

These suggestions put forward by Admiral Cunningham were seen by the Prime Minister who thereupon asked the Chief of the Air Staff for his comments. In his reply the C. A. S. pointed out that if the convoys were routed via

Ibid:  
17A  
(5.9.41)

/the

the Ionian Sea - and so out of range of the Malta-based Swordfish - there would be corresponding delay in the movement of enemy shipping which would reduce the rate of the flow of supplies to North Africa. He admitted that this would make it more difficult for our aircraft to attack ships, particularly if they sailed sufficiently close to the coast of Greece to receive protection from the shore-based fighters, but he postulated that it would not prevent any day attacks being carried out by the Blenheims as these aircraft had sufficient range to cover the whole of the Ionian Sea. In any case he maintained that there was no reason to suppose that the Beauforts would not prove satisfactory for night torpedo attacks. With regard to attacks by Blenheims, the C. A. S. submitted that their recent successes showed that they were still effective for low flying attacks against shipping. He felt, however, that the time might come "when strengthened Italian A. A. defences on their replacement by German (defences) will make Blenheim attacks by day too dangerous to consider the possibility of using dive-bombers".

Ibid. 25A

On 19 September Admiral Cunningham and Air Marshal Tedder sent a joint signal to the Admiralty and Air Ministry Chiefs of Staff detailing their requirements for the increased interception of enemy convoys to Libya which, as we have seen, had sustained considerable losses during the month of August.<sup>1</sup> Their requirements included

(i) Reconnaissance aircraft

The success of our air and submarine attacks had been largely due to special intelligence  
/obtained

<sup>1</sup> The signal quoted these losses as 22 ships sunk excluding probable sinkings or damaged ships. Of these, submarines sank 10, T. B's 5, Medium bombers 4, and 3 were sunk in harbours by Heavy bombers. The total estimated tonnage sunk was 83,780 tons.

obtained from reconnaissance aircraft, and additional numbers of these aircraft were needed (unless the Maryland bombers - based in Egypt - were to be diverted from attacks on enemy land communications in Tripolitania). Air Marshal Tedder considered that four G.R. Maryland type aircraft would meet the immediate need for reconnaissance of the Libya sea routes although the total G. R. aircraft in the Middle East for missions over ports and routes where enemy fighter opposition would be encountered was still insufficient. Moreover, the problem was further complicated by the enemy's occupation of Cyrenaica which restricted the efficacy of reconnaissance of the shipping route between Greece and Cyrenaica.

(ii) Submarines

The existing force of eighteen submarines allowed only about six to be at sea at any one time if crews and ships were to remain efficient.

(iii) Torpedo-bombing aircraft.

Longer range T. B. aircraft were urgently needed, and long-range Albacores were suggested for this purpose.

(iv) The fitting of A. S. V. to aircraft searching for ships.

This would give greater chances of interception especially in weather conditions during the Winter which were likely to increase the difficulties of location.

As a result of this signal the Air Ministry decided to send three long-range A. S. V. Wellingtons to Malta (with  
/experienced



255.

Ibid: 25B,  
20B.

A.M.  
CS.1097, 2A

A.M.  
CS.10732,  
10A, 10B.

A.H.Q., M.E.,  
Op. Summaries;  
R.A.F. Anti-  
Shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol. 2;  
List from  
Enemy sources  
of Italian  
Merchant  
ships sunk.

experienced crews trained in G. R. and A. S. V. work) in addition to an Albacore squadron (No. 828 of the F. A. A.) which the Admiralty arranged to send by the carrier 'Argus'. The Albacores had a radius of action approximately 80 miles greater than the Swordfish but some 60 miles shorter than that of the Beauforts which were the longest ranged torpedo-carrying aircraft then existing. The long-range A. S. V. fitted to the Wellingtons enabled a track of 60 miles in width to be searched for enemy surface vessels: the Wellingtons were also fitted with an additional I. F. F. so that the Malta-based Swordfish carrying short-range A. S. V. would be enabled to 'home' on the Wellingtons from approximately 60 miles.

During September the Marylands and the three P.R.U. Hurricanes of No. 69 Squadron made daily reconnaissances over the Italian convoy routes, and our attacks on shipping in transit continued with considerable success. These operations included a torpedo attack on the night of 2/3 September by nine Swordfish on a convoy off Cape Spartivento of five 6,000/8,000 ton merchant vessels escorted by seven destroyers. One ship was blown up<sup>1</sup> and another was hit amidships.<sup>2</sup> The attack was a complete surprise and caused great confusion. Two days later the remnants of this convoy while sheltering in Crotonne harbour were bombed by five Blenheims: one 6,000 ton ship was hit<sup>3</sup> but accurate A. A. fire prevented observation of other results. One of the Blenheims was shot down

/On

- 1 This was the motor vessel Andrea Gritti (6,338 tons).
- 2 This was, apparently, the Pietro Barbara (6,330 tons) which was officially assessed as sunk.
- 3 This was officially assessed as "damaged".

On the night of 6/7 September seven Swordfish attacked a convoy of three medium-sized ships escorted by three destroyers, 20 miles off Pantellaria Island. Three torpedo hits were scored on a 6,000 ton vessel,<sup>1</sup> and a 6,000 ton tanker was hit by two torpedoes which caused very considerable damage.<sup>2</sup>

In the second week of September the attacks from Malta against enemy shipping were increased. On 11 September, three Blenheims attacked a convoy of two merchantmen and one destroyer in the Central Mediterranean; one of the merchantmen - the S.S. Alfredo Oriani of 3,059 tons - was sunk. On the same night seven Swordfish torpedo-attacked a convoy of six merchant ships, escorted by six destroyers, off Kuriat Island: one 6,000-ton ship was hit amidships and left apparently sinking and an 8,000-ton ship and a 5,000-ton ship were damaged.<sup>3</sup> Next day eight Blenheims renewed the attack on this convoy, hitting the damaged 6,000-ton vessel and leaving it on fire.<sup>4</sup> At 23.20 hours the Swordfish again attacked this convoy which was by that time off Zuara. Six torpedoes were released and two 6,000 ton ships were hit.<sup>5</sup> The remaining ships of the convoy were attacked by seven Wellingtons (of No. 148 Squadron) on 13 September when a direct hit was scored on a 12,000 ton ship which was set on fire,<sup>6</sup> and two other (medium) vessels were damaged.<sup>7</sup>

Ibid:

On 17 September, four Blenheims attacked with 500 lb. bombs a 1,000 ton merchantman and two schooners, off Zuara. One schooner caught fire and was abandoned by her crew,<sup>8</sup> and the other (the Filuccio of 248 tons) which was /probably

1 This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".

2 " " " " " " "severely damaged".

3 These two ships were officially assessed as "severely damaged" and "damaged".

4 This was the S.S. Caffaro (6,476 tons) which eventually sank.

5 These were officially assessed as "damaged".

6 This was officially assessed as "damaged".

7 These were officially assessed as "damaged".

8 This was officially assessed as "sunk".

probably laden with ammunition - blew up with such violence that the low-flying Blenheim making the attack crashed into the sea as a result of the explosion. Another of the Blenheims was shot down by machine-gun fire from the third vessel. On the same night five Swordfish attacked a convoy of five large and medium sized merchant ships with four escort vessels, off Trapani. Three torpedoes were fired causing an explosion believed to have been in a 6,000 ton vessel, but results could not be observed owing to a smoke screen combined with A. A. fire from the convoy and shore batteries.<sup>1</sup> On 20 September, four Blenheims attacked a 2,000 ton merchant ship off the Kerkennah Islands, scoring a direct hit amidships: the ship was left sinking.<sup>2</sup> On the following day (21 September), two Blenheims attacked a 24,000 ton liner escorted by six destroyers, off Kuriat Island. Direct hits were obtained on the liner which stopped, emitting clouds of steam and smoke;<sup>3</sup> as the aircraft left, the destroyers opened up heavy A. A. fire.

Meanwhile, on the initiative of the A.O.C., Mediterranean (Malta), attention was being given to tempting and vulnerable targets presented by enemy reinforcements of personnel, fuel and stores being conveyed in large passenger coaches and petrol trailers by road between Tripoli and the Cyrenaican ports of Homs, Misurata and Sirte. On 22 September, six Blenheims (of No. 105 Squadron) made a low level bombing attack on the barracks at Homs and also machine-gunned concentrations of troops,

/while

- 
- 1 This was officially assessed as "severely damaged"
  - 2 This was officially assessed as "sunk".
  - 3 This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".

while five Blenheims (of No.107 Squadron) made a similar attack on Misurata. Considerable damage was caused to buildings in each of these attacks in addition to a heavy death roll of personnel. On 24 September the Blenheims attacked enemy M.T. convoys on the Misurata-Sirte road, blowing up four lorries and severely damaging some thirty others, and scoring a direct hit on a petrol tanker which was set on fire and destroyed. These attacks took the enemy completely by surprise and were practically devoid of any return fire.

#### Air Reconnaissance Combats.

The success of Malta's air attacks on enemy shipping (as also on enemy ports and bases)<sup>1</sup> was largely due to the continuous reconnaissances carried out by No.69 Squadron's Marylands and P. R. U. Hurricanes, based at Luqa aerodrome. Several combats occurred with enemy aircraft during these reconnaissances, and in September two enemy aircraft were shot down. The first of these successful encounters took place on 24 September when a Maryland patrolling the Eastern Ionian Sea sighted a small enemy convoy escorted by a Cant. The Maryland forced the Cant. on to the water, where the crew surrendered, and then destroyed the Cant. with machine-gun fire. The second occasion occurred on 29 September during a patrol by a Maryland over the sea-plane base and aerodrome at Elmas (where between twenty-five and thirty seaplanes and twenty aircraft were observed): two Macchi 200's attacked the Maryland which shot down one of them into the sea. On 20 October a Maryland patrolling over Lampedusa and Pantellaria Islands attacked a JU.52 which was severely damaged and believed to have been destroyed. On the  
/following

A.H.Q. Med;  
and No.69  
Sqn's.  
O.R.B's

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1 See sub-section "PORT BOMBING" - A. From Malta -  
pages 319 - 323 infra.  
G.199913/JLL/7/48

following day a Maryland on reconnaissance over Tripoli attacked two low-flying seaplanes but was chased off by a CR.42 and two Macchis.

(As a typical illustration of the work of No.69 Squadron's Marylands and Hurricanes, the entries of this Squadron's O. R. B. for 30 September are given in Appendix "J").

Compiled from  
No.69 Sqn's  
O. R. B's.

During June to October (inclusive) aircraft of No.69 Squadron flew a total of 2,465 hours on reconnaissances and patrols (which equals an average of 493 hours per month).

Operation "Halberd".

A.M.  
CS.10677, 1A

In the meantime, at the end of August, the Governor of Malta had signalled to the Air Ministry the urgent need of replenishing the island with some 80,000 tons of supplies to bring the stocks up to proper strength. He pointed out that the steadily increasing scale of our offensives from Malta, when added to the normal process of maintaining supplies, was making the whole co-ordination of supply increasingly complicated and that this was being made even more difficult by the unavoidably long intervals between convoys. It was thereupon decided to send a convoy to Malta as soon as practicable to carry the necessary stores and also additional personnel and equipment, fuel and spares, for a six months period, for the R. A. F. squadrons based on the island.

Ibid: 2A,3A.

The Admiralty arranged that this convoy should be a repetition of operation "Substance" and should sail about the middle of September. The fullest possible air reconnaissance was laid on by the A. O. C.-in-C. Middle East, in consultation with the C.-in-C., Mediterranean, and it was resolved that all available Beaufighters should

/operate

Ibid., 10A,  
24A.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

operate from Malta as fighter protection for the convoy in the Skerki Bank area (west of Maretimo Island), and the approaches to Malta. In all, thirty-six Beaufighters were requisitioned for this purpose from the Middle East Command. Moreover, it was arranged that strategic bombing should be carried out by the R. A. F.<sup>1</sup> on enemy air bases with the object of pinning down and destroying enemy aircraft at their bases with a view to preventing air attacks upon the convoy.

A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. Sep:

Before the convoy left Gibraltar the dispositions of the whole of the Italian Navy were known to our Commanders from information obtained by long range reconnaissances made by a P. R. U. Spitfire sent out to Malta from the U. K. The excellent photographs and visual and sighting reports which this Spitfire obtained were also indirectly responsible for the increased effort of Malta's shipping strikes during September.

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary,  
No. 18.  
C.B. 3081(11)

The "Halberd" convoy consisted of nine transports with troops and stores for Malta and three empty ships which were to return to Gibraltar. Force 'H' (commanded by Vice-Admiral Somerville) gave protection to the convoy on the same lines as in operation "Substance", but on this occasion Force 'H' was considerably strengthened and comprised three battleships, the Nelson, Prince of Wales and Rodney, the aircraft-carrier Ark Royal, five cruisers, the Kenya, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Hermione and Eurayalus, and eighteen destroyers. The whole fleet assembled in the Straits of Gibraltar on 25 September: on reaching the "Narrows" (on 27 September) the fleet divided, the east-going convoy sailing on to Malta with all the cruisers and half the destroyers (comprising Force 'X' under Rear-Admiral Burrough) while the main body (Force 'A') drew off to the westward to wait for the return of Force 'X' and to distract /the

1 By Hurricane-bombers, Blenheims, Beaufighters and Wellingtons.  
G. 199913/JLL/7/48

261.

the enemy's attention from the three empty transports coming from Malta. Meanwhile nine submarines were carrying out anti-submarine patrols off Sardinia, Sicily and Southern Italy, and the Mediterranean Fleet had put to sea (on 26 September) to make a diversion. The R. A. F. squadrons from Gibraltar<sup>1</sup> and Malta provided patrols and reconnaissances and (later) fighter protection for our ships when the convoy approached Malta.

At 12.50 hours on 27 September an enemy attack was made on the fleet by some twelve torpedo aircraft escorted by six C.R.42's. Eight Fulmars of the Ark Royal intercepted them about 10 miles from the fleet and shot down one aircraft and drove off the others. One Fulmar became separated from the rest and was, unfortunately, shot down by the Prince of Wales on her return. Six of the enemy aircraft succeeded in reaching the fleet and dropped torpedoes at a range of 5,000 yards from a height of 300 feet: none of our ships was hit and three of the enemy were shot down. Seven more Fulmars were sent up by the Ark Royal towards the end of the engagement. A second attack occurred about 13.30 hours by six or seven enemy aircraft; three of these flew through the barrage and the first released a torpedo from a height of 200 feet which hit the Nelson causing considerable damage. This aircraft was shot down by the Prince of Wales and the Sheffield, and another one by the destroyers. The Fulmars intercepted the rest of the enemy aircraft, but one Fulmar was shot down by the Rodney.

About 13.45 hours a third attack was delivered by

/some

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A.H.Q. Coastal 1  
Cmd: S. 15,055,  
125B.

The Gibraltar aircraft were seven Catalinas from Nos. 202 and 209 Sqns., and three Hudsons from No. 233 Sqn. The area covered by these aircraft was from 17° west to the Straits of Gibraltar and as far as 9° east.

some ten or eleven aircraft: most of these were driven off by the fleet's gunnery, one being shot down by the Ark Royal and Nelson and another by the Fulmars. Further attacks were made during the afternoon but proved abortive, the enemy aircraft being driven off by the Fulmars. The enemy attacks were still continuing when the R. A. F. reconnaissance aircraft reported that two Italian battleships and eight destroyers were in position  $38^{\circ} 20''$  north,  $10^{\circ} 40''$  east, steering  $190^{\circ}$  at 20 knots (i.e. about 74 miles  $0.70^{\circ}$  from the Nelson at 14.04 hours.).<sup>1</sup> About twenty minutes later a further signal was received reporting four enemy cruisers and eight destroyers 15 miles west-south-west of the enemy battle fleet, steering the same course and speed. But before our ships could approach them the enemy ships had turned away and steamed at high speed to the northward thus precluding any hope of our forcing an action.<sup>2</sup>

During the night attacks were made on the convoy by enemy torpedo aircraft one of which sank the merchantman Imperial Star soon after 20.30 hours. The rest of the night was uneventful, and at 06.15 hours next morning Fulmars and R. A. F. fighters from Malta arrived which (according to Rear-Admiral Burrough) "gave excellent protection for the remainder of the passage". Some hours later (13.30) the convoy reached Malta with no further losses, although during the forenoon there had been several attacks by Italian aircraft which had been driven off by the Malta fighters.

/Operation

- 1 R.A.F. Malta reconnaissance aircraft had already reported on the previous day (26 September) that the Italians had three battleships, six cruisers and some destroyers at Taranto, and two battleships, one cruiser and some destroyers at Naples.
- 2 The reason why the Italians avoided an engagement was (according to the German Vice-Admiral Weichold) that they believed Force 'H' had two aircraft carriers at its disposal while the Italians had no effective co-operation between their fleet and their air force.



A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries

Operation "Halberd" demanded extensive activity by our fighter aircraft and it produced a new development in bombing in the Middle East Command, as Hurricanes were fitted for the first time with bomb racks carrying four 40 lb. bombs beneath each wing. These Hurricanes acted in connection with the special operations against enemy air bases (already alluded to), and fighter and cannon-equipped Blenheims, and Fulmars of the Fleet Air Arm were also employed for that purpose.

The above mentioned operations against enemy air bases began on 26 September when three Blenheims bombed and machine-gunned twelve enemy bi-planes on the ground at Foram. Next day Beaufighters severely damaged ten aircraft with cannon and machine-gun fire at Borizzo, and also nineteen seaplanes at Elmos Seaplane base and aerodrome where two S.79's and one Cant. seaplane were attacked and probably destroyed. The Beaufighters then attacked Marsala Seaplane base damaging seven seaplanes and machine-gunning the hangars, radio station and buildings. On 28 September eighteen Hurricane bombers made three attacks on Comiso aerodrome to pin down enemy aircraft while the "Halberd" convoy was entering the Grand Harbour, Malta. Forty-seven enemy aircraft were seen at Comiso of which two were set on fire and others damaged, and damage was also caused to hangars and buildings. On the following day five Hurricane-bombers, escorted by six Hurricane-fighters, again attacked Comiso aerodrome dive-bombing from 9,000 feet and dropping 1,200 lbs. of H.E. and 300 incendiaries near the hangars and dispersal areas. In addition to these operations Wellingtons made heavy bombing attacks on Palermo and other enemy bases. These operations greatly facilitated the final stage of the "Halberd" convoy's voyage. At the same time continuous /anti-submarine

G. 199913/JLL/7/48.

anti-submarine and offensive reconnaissance patrols for "E"-boats and enemy naval forces were carried out, a flight of long-range Marylands being specially detailed for inclusion in these duties.

A.M.  
OS.10677,  
38A.

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary,  
No.18  
(CS.3081(11))

A.M.  
OS.10677,  
38A.

The absence of enemy bombing during operation "Halberd" was attributed by Vice-Admiral Somerville to the R.A.F. attacks on enemy aerodromes and bases, as described below. The Vice-Admiral also paid tribute to "the excellent co-operation" by the R.A.F. fighters whose services to the convoy were specially remarked upon by Rear-Admiral Burrough. The Admiralty also expressed their grateful thanks to the Air Ministry for the work of the R.A.F. in the operation.

#### Further Shipping Strikes

A.H.Q.M.E.  
Op. Summaries;  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol. 2.  
List from  
Enemy sources  
of Italian  
merchant  
ships sunk.

Meanwhile the Malta squadrons were continuing their strikes on enemy shipping in transit. On 26 September, three Blenheims attacked a convoy of three merchant ships of 3,000 tons each and one small ship, off Tripoli. The small ship received a direct hit, blew up and sank in flames, and a near miss (probably causing damage) was obtained on one of the other ships, all of which were machine-gunned. On 29 September, six Blenheims carried out a sweep for enemy shipping in the Gulf of Sirte. After a long and unsuccessful search a schooner was sighted and bombed, three miles north of Buerat: although no hits were recorded she suffered damage from several near misses. Meanwhile, on the previous day, two Beaufighters scored hits on two torpedo-boats and a Cant. 506, off Cape San Marco, but results were not observed: intense A.A. fire was encountered and two Macchi 200's attempted to intercept the Blenheims.

On the night of 4/5 October, seven Swordfish attacked a convoy of four 8,000-ton and two 4/6000-ton merchantmen, escorted by five destroyers, in the Central

/Mediterranean

Mediterranean. Direct hits were scored on one of the 8,000-tonners and on one of the 6,000-tonners, sinking the latter,<sup>1</sup> while the third ship was thought to have been damaged.<sup>2</sup> This operation was followed on the night of 8/9 October by an attack by four Swordfish on a small convoy between Sicily and Cape Bon, when two hits with torpedoes were obtained on a 6,000-ton merchantman which sank in a few minutes.<sup>3</sup>

A remarkable attack was made by a Blenheim on the night of 7/8 October on a 2,000-ton ship, 35 miles west of Tripoli. The Blenheim scored two hits on the ship and also machine-gunned it from a height of only twenty feet. The ship began to sink while the Blenheim was still over it, the crew escaping in boats.<sup>4</sup> The night of 10/11 October was marked by a successful attack by seven Swordfish on a convoy of four merchant ships, escorted by five destroyers, which had been located by reconnaissance aircraft some 50 miles east of Kuriat Island. The Swordfish opened the attack with torpedoes and bombs, sinking two medium-sized ships<sup>5</sup> and damaging the two other vessels which stopped<sup>6</sup>. An hour later Wellingtons (of No. 38 Squadron) continued the attack from low level dropping 23,750 lbs. of bombs and also machine-gunning the ships: four direct bomb hits were obtained and one ship was set on fire. The remnants of the convoy were again located some hours later by the Swordfish about 80 miles north-west of Tripoli and were attacked with torpedoes. Two direct hits were claimed on an 8,000 ton /vessel

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- 1 The 8,000-ton ship was officially assessed under Category IV ("not observed", near miss, or believed hit): the ship which sank was the motor vessel Rialto (6,099 tons).
  - 2 This ship (of 5,000 tons) was officially assessed under Category IV.
  - 3 This was officially assessed as sunk.
  - 4 This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
  - 5 These two ships were the Zena (5,219 tons) and the Casaregis (6,485 tons).
  - 6 These were officially assessed under Category IV.

vessel, which stopped with fuel oil pouring from it.<sup>1</sup> The whole convoy was thus dispersed; at least two vessels had been sunk and the others damaged. On the next day (11 October) three Blenheims attacked a convoy of one 3,000 ton vessel and one 1,000 ton cargo boat escorted by a corvette and a twin-engined monoplane, some 60 miles north-west of Sirte. The Blenheims dropped 3,500 lbs. of bombs and scored two direct hits on the larger vessel which was set on fire and left apparently sinking, while the cargo boat was left burning furiously.<sup>2</sup> Two of the Blenheims were shot down by A. A. fire; the third Blenheim was chased out to sea (having expended its ammunition) by the escorting aircraft, but it eluded pursuit and returned safely to its base.

Enemy Convoy Escorts Strengthened.

The successful attacks of the Blenheims on enemy shipping resulted (as had been foreseen) in the Italians employing stronger and heavier escorts for their convoys which considerably increased the danger of heavy losses to British aircraft while engaged in their low-flying attacks. Both Air Marshal Tedder and the A. O. C., Mediterranean, at Malta, (A.-V.-M. Lloyd) were of opinion that the Blenheims should therefore discontinue their low-flying attacks - save in exceptional cases - but the Chief of the Air Staff ruled that even if heavy losses occurred the Blenheims should continue their attacks as he felt that "everything must be done from Malta to prevent enemy supplies and personnel reaching Cyrenaica" until the opening of the 'Crusader' campaign.

/He

A.H.B. 1  
S. 13

1 This was, perhaps, the Brinsizza (7,933 tons) "sunk by an air torpedo on 14 October, in position 34° 18' N., 12° 16' E." (i.e. approximately 80 miles north-west of Tripoli, as stated by the R.A.F. records. The attack is given as having been made at 03.40 hours on 11 October: it may therefore have been that the Brinsizza survived until 14 October and then succumbed to the damage which she had sustained). It was officially assessed as sunk.

2 Both these ships were officially assessed as 'severely damaged'.

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Op. Summaries

He had reason to believe, however, that the Italians did not intend to run further convoys to Tripoli, and it therefore seemed probable that heavily escorted convoys would be few in number. As a secondary objective the Chief of the Air Staff ruled that the Blenheims should be employed in attacks on enemy land and sea supplies between Tripoli and Benghazi and also on any supply targets in that area. These instructions were carried out, an instance of the Blenheims' secondary objective being an attack which they made (on 6 November) on the Mellaha aerodrome (outside Tripoli) in which buildings and M.T. were severely damaged and a petrol dump set on fire.

During the remainder of October and the first two weeks of November our attacks on enemy shipping were increased in preparation for the coming "Crusader" offensive. Between 14 October and 11 November more than 60 sorties were made by Malta aircraft against shipping in transit. These included an attack by five Swordfish on a convoy of four merchantmen escorted by five destroyers, south of Pantellaria Island, on the night of 17/18 October when three 4-6,000 ton ships were attacked with torpedoes: later reconnaissance discovered one of these ships missing which was presumed to have been sunk.<sup>1</sup> On the following night a Wellington on special search patrol sighted the same convoy 85 miles north-west of Tripoli. The Wellington dropped flares as a signal for Swordfish to attack, and five Swordfish attacked the convoy which then consisted of four merchantmen escorted by four destroyers. Three direct hits were obtained on the largest ship, starting large fires, and another of the ships

/was

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<sup>1</sup> This was probably the Italian ship Caterina (4,786 tons) sunk "by air attack 62 miles off Tripoli on 18 October" (A.H.B.1.S.13): it was officially confirmed as sunk.

was believed to have been damaged.<sup>1</sup>

R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vol. 2.

On 23 October, four Blenheims bombed a merchant ship which had been previously located by a reconnaissance aircraft some 50 miles north-west of Maretimo Island. One direct hit near the funnel caused a large column of smoke and steam and the crew were seen lowering their boats to abandon the ship. This vessel - the S.S. Achille of 2,415 tons - sank next day. On the night of 31 October/1 November, four Wellingtons (of No. 38 Squadron), proceeding on advice provided by air reconnaissance, made a low level attack on a convoy of two merchantmen escorted by one destroyer, 110 miles west of Derna. Sixty-four 250 lb. bombs were dropped and six hits were scored on a 6,000 ton vessel which was left stationary.<sup>2</sup>

A shipping sweep made on 5 November in the Gulf of Sirte by six Blenheims resulted in an attack on a convoy of two merchant ships escorted by one destroyer. The Blenheims dropped bombs from mast height, scoring hits on one ship which sank.<sup>3</sup> The second ship was straddled by bombs and was also machine-gunned. Two days later (7 November), six Blenheims attacked a convoy of one 3,000 and one 2,000 ton merchant ships escorted by one destroyer, 45 miles west of Argostoli. The Blenheims attacked from a low altitude, scoring two hits on the larger vessel, but intense A. A. fire prevented observation. At 08.00 hours next morning the Blenheims again attacked, hitting the smaller vessel which began to settle down with smoke pouring from the stern: one of the Blenheims was hit by A. A. fire and exploded in mid air. A further formation of six Blenheims found this convoy stationary some two hours

/later,

1 The largest ship (6,000 tons) was officially assessed as 'sunk' and the other ship was assessed under Category IV.

2 This was officially assessed as 'sunk'.

3 This ship was, the Anna Zippetelli (1,019 tons).

later, covered by a JU.88 which they attacked and drove off. By this time the smaller vessel appeared to be sinking and was abandoned by her crew. The Blenheims dropped sixteen 250 lb. bombs from mast height and machine-gunned the destroyer and the second ship, but an effective A. A. screen prevented observation of results: one Blenheim was lost.<sup>1</sup>

During the same week (4 - 11 November) our submarines and light Naval forces sank nineteen enemy ships in transit, one ammunition ship, one oil tanker and two sailing vessels, and damaged four other ships. This achievement, in which reconnaissances by Marylands played a valuable part, was accomplished in a period of four days.

Summary of Air Attacks Against Enemy Shipping in Transit.

From June to November (1941), the number of effective sorties by Malta-based aircraft against enemy shipping amounted to 373. In addition to these attacks our squadrons in Egypt made 32 effective sorties against enemy shipping in transit during the same period.

Destruction of Enemy Convoy by Naval Force 'K'

On the afternoon of 8 November a Maryland of No.69 Squadron, while en route to carry out a reconnaissance patrol from Cephalonia to Corfu, reported an enemy convoy of six merchant vessels escorted by four destroyers and one aircraft some forty miles east of Cape Spartivento and steering in an easterly direction. A British cruiser force comprising H. M. S. Aurora and Penelope and two destroyers (under the operational control of the Vice-Admiral, Malta, and known as Force 'K')<sup>2</sup> sailed immediately from the Grand Harbour to intercept the convoy. Meanwhile an A. S. V. /Wellington

R.A.F. Ops. in  
West:Desert &  
East:Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42,  
Appx. 'A'

No.69 sqn.  
O.R.B. Nov.;  
and Admiralty  
Hist:Section  
Narrative "Ops  
of the Med:  
Fleet &  
Force 'H'"

1 The 3,000 ton ship was officially assessed as 'severely damaged' and the 2,000 ton ship as 'damaged': (the assessments of the earlier attacks on these vessels were all under Category IV.)

2 Force "K" had been formed at Malta on 21 October.

Wellington was sent to shadow the convoy and to 'home' Force 'K' on to it, but the aircraft's Wireless and A. S. V. failed to function. However, Force 'K' made contact with the convoy at 00.40 hours (9 November) and at 00.57 hours the Aurora opened fire and the action soon became general. The enemy convoy - which in fact comprised ten merchant vessels varying from a 10,000 ton tanker to a 4,000 ton ammunition ship - was destroyed, all the merchantmen being either sunk, blown up, or set on fire, and two of the destroyers sunk. In the meantime two more merchant ships escorted by two destroyers were sighted to the northward. H.M. submarine Upholder, which had been lying in wait on the outskirts of the fight, torpedoed and sank two enemy destroyers.

A feature of this successful action was the co-ordination between the reconnaissance Maryland, the lone submarine patrolling the enemy harbour approaches, and the surface force of H.M. ships. Had the cargoes of this convoy reached Libya and been distributed amongst the enemy's forces they might well have given victory to Rommel's 'Afrika Korps' during our coming "Crusader" offensive, but their timely destruction materially assisted our land forces to gain the initiative in their advance.

On the completion of the action Force 'K' set course to return to Malta as it was considered imperative to have fighter protection before dawn. At 08.10 hours a fighter escort of two Hurricanes from Malta arrived over Force 'K', and soon afterwards enemy torpedo-bomber aircraft formations comprising ~~Osprey~~ <sup>1</sup> ~~Osprey~~ 135's escorted by seven Macchi 200's made four attacks on Force 'K'. These attacks were driven off by gun-fire from H. M. ships and by the Hurricanes, the enemy aircraft dropping their torpedoes at a considerable distance from our ships which reached harbour without having sustained any

/casualties

1 Of No.185 Sqn. Two other Hurricanes of the same Sqn. met and escorted H. M. ships at 09.55 hours.  
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casualties or damage: one of the Hurricanes was believed to have been shot down by enemy aircraft.

Aircraft Reinforcement .- Loss of the Ark Royal

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea" Vol.II.  
and  
A.M. S.10972,  
passim

In October and November the R.A.F. Malta was reinforced with aircraft from the U.K. in two operations known as "Callboy" and "Perpetual".

Operation "Callboy" was carried out by the aircraft-carrier Ark Royal, escorted by the battleship Rodney (replacing the damaged Nelson),<sup>1</sup> the cruiser Hermione and seven destroyers which sailed from Gibraltar on 16 October. The Ark Royal carried twelve Albacores (No.828 Squadron, F.A.A. on transfer to Malta) and two Swordfish (of No.818 Squadron, F.A.A.). These aircraft took off from the Ark Royal from a position about 40 miles north-east of Cape Carvallo (North African coast), eleven of the Albacores and one of the Swordfish reaching Malta safely.

Operation "Perpetual" began on 10 November when Force "H", comprising H.M.S. Malaya (flagship), H.M.S. Hermione and seven destroyers escorted the carriers Ark Royal and Argus from Gibraltar. At 10.15 and 11.00 hours on 12 November thirty-seven Hurricanes and seven Blenheims were flown off the carriers from a position about 70 miles east by north of Algiers: three of the Hurricanes failed to arrive at Malta.

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea" Vol.II  
and  
A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. Nov:

While Force "H" was returning to Gibraltar on the following afternoon (13 November) the Ark Royal was torpedoed by a U-boat; she sank at 06.13 hours on 14 November after abortive efforts had been made to raise steam and take her in tow. Thereafter the Ark Royal's place was filled temporarily by the Argus.

/Malta's

1 See page 261 supra. (Vice-Adml. Somerville's flag had been transferred on 14 September to the Nelson).

Malta's Defence.

When the Luftwaffe left Sicily the Italians' air attacks on Malta were somewhat reduced, and at the beginning of June it was noticed that attacks in which only a small portion of the force employed actually crossed the coast, and in which bombs appeared to be deliberately dropped in the sea, were a feature of this period. More often it was an occasional low-flying attack, an occasional reconnaissance or an occasional attempt at bombing, but the Italian Air Force paid heavily for these half-hearted efforts, for the Hurricanes were more than a match for the Macchi 200's which comprised the main force of the Italian aircraft.

R.A.F.'s  
Account of  
the Air  
Battle of  
Malta.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

During the month of July enemy bombers attacked Malta every night except those of 22/23rd and 23/24th., but casualties and damage were only slight. On one occasion the W.T. station at Rinello was damaged, and one grounded Beaufighter was damaged at Luqa aerodrome. On 17 July the Malta Hurricanes intercepted reconnaissance aircraft escorted with a considerable number of Macchi 200's: two enemy aircraft were shot down and one was damaged for the loss of one of the Hurricanes.

In August some of the Hurricanes were formed into the Malta Night Fighter Unit which is described as "a model of collaboration between searchlights, the gun operations room .... and the Hurricanes". The military authorities and the R. A. F. devised a scheme by which the island was divided into two sections, with Valetta upon the dividing line. When a raid was approaching, a Hurricane patrolled each of these areas, being kept informed by radio of the speed, height and course of the raider. The method adopted was for Hurricanes to place themselves on each side of the raider when he was about 15 miles out on his approach to the island, and they would then turn in towards him and set a course towards his presumed

R.A.F.'s  
Account of  
the Air  
Battle of  
Malta, and  
A-V-M.  
Lloyd's  
Account of  
Malta.

/objective

objective, which was usually Grand Harbour. The result of these manoeuvres was that when the raider was illuminated by our searchlights there would be a Hurricane on either side of him, on a converging course and quite close, which would immediately attack the raider. The enemy aircraft generally came in high and straight, and an average taken over a period of several months showed that out of every seven raiders which crossed the coast, five were illuminated; out of every five illuminated, three were attacked, and two out of every three attacked were destroyed.

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries

During August a few enemy raids occurred: on 19 August twelve Macchi 200's approached the island but were chased back to Sicily by our Hurricanes which shot down three of them. At dawn on 21 August three Macchi's made a low-flying attack on Luqa and Hal Far aerodromes, while other aircraft provided a covering patrol above them. Little damage was done and there were no casualties; poor visibility prevented fighter interception or accurate A. A. fire.

A feature of our fighter action was the successful intervention over Malta by the Night Fighter Unit on the nights of 26/27 August when two unidentified enemy aircraft were illuminated by searchlights at 17,000 feet. The Hurricanes attacked with their cannons and severely damaged the enemy aircraft. A similar attack occurred on the night of 4/5 September when one B. R. O. 20 was caught in the searchlights and shot down in flames. Meanwhile on the morning of 4 September eighteen Hurricanes attacked ten Macchi 200's which were approaching Malta; six Macchis were shot down and three were severely damaged; none of the Hurricanes was lost.

/On

On the night of 13/14 October twenty-four enemy aircraft approached Malta with the intention of attacking Luqa aerodrome, but only nine succeeded in reaching their objective. Our Hurricanes shot down one Macchi 200, and six others were damaged by A. A. fire: one of the Hurricanes was destroyed. During October enemy aircraft made frequent attempts to 'strafe' Malta targets but on most of these occasions they were chased back by our Hurricanes which were constantly out on patrol.

"Sink at Sight" Policy.

The position regarding (a) Turkish, and (b) Syrian territorial waters under the 'Sink at Sight' powers promulgated by the Admiralty towards the end of April<sup>1</sup> was further clarified (early in June) as follows:-

(a) Turkish territorial waters.

Care was to be taken to avoid damage to persons and dwelling-houses ashore.

(b) Syrian Territorial waters.

Syria was now regarded as enemy occupied territory<sup>2</sup> and all ships proceeding to and from Syria without our permission were to be sent into a port under British control or sunk.

Ibid. 77A.

Towards the end of the period under review the "Sink at Sight" policy in the Mediterranean was revised (on 14 November), the following areas being declared dangerous to shipping:-

- (a) All waters within 30 miles of any Italian territory.
- (b) The Adriatic Sea.
- (c) The Aegean Sea, excluding Turkish territorial waters.
- (d) That part of the Mediterranean (excluding Tunisian and Turkish territorial waters) lying south of

/latitude

<sup>1</sup> See page 144 *supra*.

<sup>2</sup> See R.A.F. Narrative "The Campaign in Syria - June-July 1941".

latitude  $0.41^{\circ} 18'$  north and east of a line drawn from a position three miles 360 degrees from Cape Bon to a point thirty miles 180 degrees from Cape Spartivento (Sardinia) and thence at a distance of thirty miles from the west coast of Sardinia to latitude  $0.41^{\circ} 18'$  north.

It was further ordered that the following should not be attacked:-

- (i) Turkish coastal traffic which in some areas, owing to navigational difficulties, proceeded outside territorial waters.
- (ii) Turkish sea trade to Egyptian, Syrian and Palestinian ports, provided they adhered to routes ordered by the C.-in-C., Mediterranean.
- (iii) Ships carrying approved cargoes on behalf of the Swiss to Genoa, provided they adhered to routes ordered by the F. O. C. N. A.<sup>1</sup>
- (iv) French Vichy warships (unless encountered within the areas specified in (a), (b), (c) and (d) above) and north and east of a line drawn from a point thirty miles 180 degrees from Cape Spartivento (Sardinia to Marsala (Sicily), and thence to the Libya-Tunis boundary: if encountered to the north and east of this line they were to be sunk. Except in Spanish (or Spanish possessions) territorial waters, ships definitely identified as enemy could be attacked wherever found whether or not they were within the areas (a), (b), (c) and (d) specified above.

/This

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1 F.O.C.N.A. = Flag Officer Commanding North Atlantic.

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This permission was made to extend to the territorial waters of Turkey, Metropolitan France (including Corsica) and French North Africa. The Dardanelles Straits were still to be exempted from attack.

/THE EASTERN BASIN

THE EASTERN BASIN

Admiralty  
Historical  
Section  
Narrative  
'Ops. of the  
Med. Fleet  
and Force 'H'

After the serious losses sustained by the Royal Navy during the Cretan operations<sup>1</sup> our remaining ships which were ready for immediate service were two battleships, two cruisers, one anti-aircraft ship and seventeen destroyers. But a further loss occurred (on 1 June) when the cruiser Calcutta (sailing from Alexandria with H.M.S. Coventry to support a Naval force returning after the completion of the evacuation from Crete) was dive-bombed by a JU.88 and sunk.

The Syrian Campaign

Within one week of the evacuation of Crete the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force were called upon to undertake a new commitment by our projected occupation of Syria. This was necessitated by the German threat to that country which had begun when the Germans obtained control of the airfields at Aleppo and Palmyra while we were fully occupied with the 'Iraq Rebellion in May. Infiltration of skilled personnel continued, in spite of Vichy French assertions to the contrary, and indicated that the Vichy government had given its consent for - or at the least was prepared to connive at - the use by the Germans of northern Syria as a base for the accumulation of forces and material. This threat to our interests in the Near and Middle East could only be countered by the prompt occupation of Syria and orders for the invasion of that country were issued on 6 June.<sup>2</sup>

Ibid:

The French Naval forces in Syrian waters were known to be four destroyer leaders, three submarines, a sloop and a patrol vessel, based on Beirut: our Naval forces were divided into two divisions, known as Force "B" and Force "C", under command of Vice-Admiral King.

/The

1 See page 121 supra.

2 The air operations in Syria are described in the R.A.F. Narrative "The Campaign in Syria - June-July 1941"

The initial operation (on 8 June) was the landing of troops (covered by the Navy), at the mouth of the Nahr Litani River. A small force of Fulmar aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm was detailed for the protection of our ships but was insufficient for the task. In the first week of the campaign two of our destroyers were severely damaged and three Fulmars were lost, and the protection of our Naval forces had to be taken over by our fighters. Regular air reconnaissances were carried out of the whole length of the Syrian coast from Palestine and Cyprus for the remainder of the campaign.<sup>1</sup>

On the night of 12/13 June, Swordfish of No.815 Squadron, F. A. A. attacked Vichy shipping in Djounieh harbour, and merchant ships at Beirut on the following night. Between 18 and 24 June, Blenheims of No.11 Squadron<sup>2</sup> and Albacores and Swordfish of No.829 Squadron F. A. A. made numerous attacks on the harbour and shipping at Beirut, hits being scored on the jetties and three ships, including a destroyer and a submarine. Meanwhile the protection of the Fleet by our fighters had resulted in several combats. On 9 June Hurricanes of No.80 Squadron<sup>3</sup> and Tomahawks of No.3 Squadron, R. A. A. F.,<sup>4</sup> while patrolling over our ships were attacked by a number of Vichy aircraft, three of which were believed to have been shot down and others were damaged: our losses were three Hurricanes (one of which collided with a Dewoitine). On 13 June, Hurricanes and Tomahawks (of the same squadrons) claimed three JU.88's destroyed and three others damaged while our aircraft /were

R.A.F.  
Narrative  
'The Campaign  
in Syria -  
June - July  
1941'

A.H.Q., M.E.,  
Op.Summaries.

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op.Summaries

- 1 The R.A.F.'s commitments for the campaign included:-  
(a) the maintenance of protective fighter cover for the Fleet which was co-operating with the coastal advance of our troops and restricting Vichy shipping.  
(b) attacks on strategical objectives, including ports, shipping and oil installations.

Ibid:

- 2,3,& 4. These squadrons were of the Palestine & Trans-Jordan Command.



Admiralty  
Historical  
Section  
Narrative  
'Ops. of the  
Med. Fleet  
and 'Force H'

were patrolling over our ships. Three days later (16 June) Hurricanes of No. 80 Squadron protecting our ships west of Sidon engaged nine JU.88's, shooting down one and damaging four others. In the meantime, on the night of 9/10 June, twenty German aircraft raided Haifa and obtained a bomb hit on a tanker in the harbour, and on 15 June a force of eight JU.88's dive-bombed our Naval 'Force B' and severely damaged the destroyer Isis. Two hours later a mixed force of JU.88's and Vichy aircraft renewed the attack during which the destroyer Ilex was damaged by a near miss. On the same day the Vichy forces surrendered Sidon, and on 21 June our troops captured Damascus.

No. 201 Grp.  
O. R. B.  
and  
Admiralty  
Historical  
Section  
Narrative,  
'Ops. of the  
Med. Fleet  
and Force 'H'

Meanwhile our bombers had carried out several attacks on Vichy ports and airfields which were continued throughout the campaign.<sup>1</sup> The task of preventing reinforcements reaching the enemy by sea was assigned to our aircraft based on Cyprus. In response to a signal from the C.-in-C., Mediterranean to No. 201 Group on 13 June, two Sunderlands of Nos. 228 and 230 Squadrons were despatched to carry out searches for the Vichy destroyer-leader Chevalier Paul which it was thought would attempt to run from the Aegean Sea to Syria with supplies. On 15 June one of the Sunderlands sighted and shadowed the Chevalier Paul; a striking force of Swordfish of No. 815 Squadron, F. A. A., at Nicosia was then instructed to take over the shadowing and attack her. At about midnight six of the Swordfish sighted this destroyer-leader north of Rouad Island and attacked and sank her with torpedoes; one Swordfish was shot down.<sup>2</sup>

/On

No. 201 Grp.  
O. R. B.

- 1 The bombing of Vichy ports is reviewed in the sub-section PORT BOMBING of this Section of the Narrative.
- 2 One certain and two possible hits were claimed. The Chevalier Paul was seen to sink by the pilot of the shot-down Swordfish, Lieut. Clifford, who was by that time sitting in his rubber dinghy.

R.A.F.  
Narrative  
"The Campaign  
in Syria,  
June-July  
1941"

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

Ibid;  
and  
No. 201 Grp.  
O. R. B.

On 22 June, air photographic reconnaissance showed Vichy destroyers in Beirut harbour: they were attacked by Blenheims of No. 11 Squadron with 250 lb. bombs, one destroyer being severely damaged. Further reports of enemy Naval forces in Beirut harbour resulted in attacks by the Fleet Air Arm on 24 and 26 June but with little result. From 27-29 June our ships bombarded Damour harbour and numerous fighter sorties were flown in their protection, while air cover generally was provided for them by standing patrols. At this time the chief hope of the Vichy forces lay in obtaining reinforcements by sea, and our Intelligence sources indicated the possibility of strong Vichy (and perhaps Italian) Naval forces, escorting transports and supply ships, attempting to break our sea blockade of Syria. Accordingly reconnaissance patrols were carried out by Sunderlands of No. 230 Squadron, Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron, Blenheims of No. 203 Squadron and Marylands of No. 39 Squadron detachment<sup>1</sup> which successfully countered this menace. The harbours of Beirut, Tripoli (Syria), Latakia, Rouad Island and Castel Rosso were covered by these patrols and valuable reports of the movements of enemy ships were made to the C.-in-C., Mediterranean. In addition to these patrols our aircraft also intercepted and attacked enemy shipping on several occasions.

On 3 July, a Swordfish of No. 829 Squadron, F. A. A., torpedoed a Vichy Fleet Auxilliary Yacht in the harbour of Castel Rosso,<sup>2</sup> and the same day two Blenheims of No. 11 Squadron bombed a Vichy cruiser in Cheeka Bay but undershot the target. The following day (4 July) four Albacores of Nos. 826 and 829 Squadrons, F. A. A., and seven Swordfish of No. 815 Squadron operating from Cyprus intercepted and sank a Vichy merchant /vessel

<sup>1</sup> All of No. 201 Grp.

<sup>2</sup> This was officially confirmed as 'sunk'

**SECRET**

R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vol.1.

Ibid: and  
A.H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

vessel south-west of Cyprus, and on the same day four Albacores (No.826 Squadron) sank the Vichy troop-ship St. Didier with two torpedo hits. Meanwhile Beaufighters (of No.272 Squadron), also operating from Cyprus, attacked Vichy shipping on 5,6,7 and 10 July in the Eastern Mediterranean, and at Tripoli (Syria) Tomahawks of No.3 Squadron R. A. A. F. machine-gunned and severely damaged two flying-boats which were left sinking. On 6 July Beaufighters attacked a concentration of caiques off Rouad Island with machine-gun and cannon fire, and on the same day one Beaufighter made a cannon attack on a Vichy merchant ship of 2,000 tons, about ten miles east of Rhodes, which was officially assessed as 'damaged'.

While these operations were in progress fighter covering patrols were provided for H.M. ships operating off the Syrian coast in support of our ground troops advancing northwards. On 7 July, during a number of sorties by Hurricanes of No.80 Squadron, a single JU:88 which was attempting to attack our ships was intercepted and destroyed.

By 9 July the Vichy forces were still resisting but their air force was virtually destroyed and they were without naval support; there being no hope of receiving reinforcements they asked for an armistice which was granted on 12 July.

In his Report of the Syrian coastal operations Vice-Admiral King stated that

"Close liaison was established and maintained with the R. A. F. who did all they could to help and co-operated willingly.

Arrangements for fighter protection worked well and the efficiency of the fighter escorts was of a high order....."

Admiralty  
Historical  
Section  
Narrative  
"Ops. of the  
Med. Fleet and  
Force 'H'"

/Views of

Views of the A.O.C.-in-C. on "The Changed Situation"

A.H.Q., M.E.  
A.O.C.-in-C.,  
Corresp. with  
the P.M.,  
Sec. of  
State &  
C.A.S.,  
Pts.I & II,  
104A

In the meantime Air Marshal Tedder had (on 20 June) signalled his views to the Chief of the Air Staff "on the changed situation in the Eastern Mediterranean" (i.e. since the evacuation of Greece and Crete) from the aspect of interrupting the enemy's sea communications and of securing our own. With regard to Naval operations and fighter cover, he considered that our ships could not operate within the range of enemy dive-bombers without risking heavy losses unless fighter escort cover were maintained during the hours of daylight, and that such cover would have to be maintained by shore-based aircraft owing to the vulnerability of our aircraft-carriers. The A. A. defence of H. M. ships was, however, sufficiently effective against level bomber and torpedo equipped aircraft "to render acceptable the risk of loss due to such attacks". He pointed out that enemy dive-bombers were of two types

- (a) JU.87's, which had a radius of action of 200 miles and were the most dangerous threat but were ineffective against fighter defence unless heavily escorted by fighters, and
  - (b) JU.88's, which had a radius of 800 miles, but were not so effective as the JU.87's although they were a serious threat if no fighter defence was available:
- further, that the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean (except the area east of a line from Daba to the western end of Cyprus) was within effective striking range of JU.87's operating from bases in enemy hands, while the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean (without exception) was within the range of JU.88's. In the Air Marshal's opinion fighter cover

/could

SECRET

could be given by

- (a) Short-range fighters (e.g. Hurricanes, Tomahawks and Martlets) which could deal with both dive-bombers and enemy fighter escorts, but at a range of 100 miles they could only maintain a standing patrol of one hour.
- (b) Long-range fighters (e.g. Beaufighters) which could deal effectively with enemy bombers of any type and also enemy long-range fighters (e.g. ME.110's), but being large and lacking in rear defence they could not operate in the face of enemy interceptor fighters. At an average range of 300 miles the Beaufighters could maintain a standing patrol for one hour. Enemy interception fighters (e.g. ME.109's and G.50's) could operate for interception purposes at a maximum range of 150 miles from their bases in Libya, Sicily, Greece, Crete, and the Dodecanese Islands. The Air Marshal asserted that the Eastern Mediterranean areas in which shore-based fighter cover could reasonably be provided by (a) short-range fighters and (b) Beaufighters could be "readily illustrated on the map", but that in the remainder of the Eastern Mediterranean effective fighter cover could not be provided, and "if ships operate in this area in daylight they will do so under grave risk of serious losses. Therefore, unless and until we can secure the use of air bases in Cyrenaica it is not reasonably practical for our surface ships to exercise control of sea communication except in the extreme eastern end of the Mediterranean as indicated ....."

The Air Marshal stressed that fighter cover for continuous daylight operations by surface craft in this area would involve a fighter force "far beyond any likely to be available, nor are, in fact, operations by the Fleet ever likely to be continuous" and that the "conservation of our fighter forces will have to be an important factor in determining the duration of any particular naval operation". He considered that the fighter commitment involved in a possible naval operation would amount to a maximum daily effort by  $1\frac{1}{2}$  short-range fighter and 3 long-range fighter squadrons.

Ibid:

With regard to air action, Air Marshal Tedder considered that the interruption of enemy sea communications would have to be performed by submarines and air forces. He stated that submarine action was "outside the scope of this signal", but for air action there were two requirements, namely:-

- (a) Reconnaissance, and
- (b) Striking forces.

With regard to (a) he felt that excessive estimates of reconnaissance requirements would lead to an uneconomical use of the air forces and facilities which were available, and that except for special purposes (such as a strategical reconnaissance of enemy naval and land forces) "reconnaissance should be limited to that which can be followed up by air action". It followed, therefore, that routine reconnaissances should be limited to ports and routes against which air action could be effectively taken, such reconnaissances being based on Malta, the Western Desert, the Delta area and Cyprus.

With regard to (b), air action could be directed at the ports of departure, shipping in transit and ports of arrival. The normal weapon against ports of departure and arrival would be

SECRET

bombers using heavy bombs and, occasionally, mines. The Air Marshal felt that the periodical operation of a force of heavy bombers from Malta was essential, the remainder to operate from Egypt and the Western Desert. Torpedo bombers of maximum range would be required against ships in transit as the enemy was able "to route shipping direct to Benghazi outside the daylight range of Blenheim and Maryland bombers".

Ibid:

To carry out the above mentioned operations the Air Marshal specified his requirements as being:-

- (a) five squadrons of fighters (of which three should be long-range)
- (b) three land squadrons and one fighter-bomber squadron for overseas reconnaissance
- (c) three squadrons of torpedo-bombers.

Reinforcement of Cyprus.

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries

During the first week of July (while the campaign in Syria was in progress) German and Italian aircraft (including JU.88's and torpedo-carrying S.79's and S.84's) made several daylight attacks on our shipping at Farmagusta and on the aerodrome at Nicosia. No damage occurred at Farmagusta but at Nicosia one Hurricane and one Albacore on the ground were destroyed and six other aircraft damaged, and some soldiers were killed and wounded. At that time our air units at Cyprus consisted of detachments of the following squadrons, viz. No.80 Squadron (Hurricanes), No.203 Squadron (Blenheims), No.272 Squadron (Beaufighters) and Nos.815 and 826 Squadrons, F. A. A. (Swordfish and Albacores) respectively.

The enemy's air attacks on Cyprus demonstrated the need for reinforcements of the island if we were to maintain our hold upon it - which, in the Prime Minister's view - was of great importance. In a signal to General

A.H.Q., M.E.  
D/A. O. C/1 Part 1  
(C. O. S. Papers)

/Auchinleck

G. 199913/JLL/7/48

Auchinleck (of 6 July) the Prime Minister stressed that "the holding of Syria is a necessary foundation for holding or re-taking Cyprus" and that the campaign in Syria and the safeguarding of Cyprus should take priority over our projected offensive in the Western Desert. General Auchinleck replied that after consultation with Admiral Cunningham and Air Marshal Tedder he had decided to adhere to his predecessor's<sup>1</sup> plan to reinforce Cyprus with one army Division as soon as possible.

Ibid. 71.B.

With a view to implementing the Prime Minister's decision (as already recommended by the Joint Planning Committee on 20 June and agreed to by the Chiefs of Staff) for the retention of Cyprus, the Air Ministry signalled Air Marshal Tedder that in their view the retention on the island of at least one single-engine fighter squadron, with facilities for operating as many additional reinforcing squadrons as possible, appeared to be necessary; that facilities would be required for the occasional operation of a long-range fighter squadron and G.R. aircraft to cover operations of our Fleet in that area, and that facilities would also be required for a small striking force (which, in fact, was already there).<sup>2</sup> Further, that the immediate appointment of a Senior Air Staff Officer and a small Headquarters in Cyprus appeared to be desirable to carry out these measures without loss of time. In response to these suggestions Air Marshal Tedder decided to reinforce Cyprus with No. 259 Wing (under the operational and administrative control of the Palestine and Trans Jordan Command), the remainder of No. 80 Squadron, A. S. P. and Salvage Sections, and stores and equipment for three Hurricane squadrons and one G. R. flight, on a two months basis. (One of these Hurricane squadrons was to be permanently located at Cyprus and the

/other

Ibid. 77A  
and  
J.P.S. (41)  
467

Ibid., 83A,  
84A, and  
H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. July  
Appx. 32.

1 General Wavell

2 A striking force had been formed from the detachments of Nos. 815 and 826 Squadrons F. A. A.



other two would be located in Palestine and Syria but would be moved at short notice to Cyprus, if necessary).

M.E. Joint  
Planning Staff  
Paper No. 54  
(18.6.41) and  
"Report on  
Defence of  
Cyprus"  
(18.6.41)  
A.H.Q., M.E.  
O.R.B. July  
Appx. 32.

The policy and defence plan for Cyprus approved by the C's.-in-C. provided for the establishment of three defended aerodromes with one satellite each. The recent operations in Greece and Crete, had, however, demonstrated the necessity for a large number of landing grounds to provide for the wide dispersal of units in the event of heavy sustained air attacks. Air Marshal Tedder therefore decided that a sufficient number of emergency landing grounds or strips from which squadrons could operate small detachments - refuelling if necessary on the main and satellite aerodromes - should be prepared. Meanwhile the construction of an additional aerodrome at Yeriskipos (near Paphos), a satellite at Larnaca (near Perivolias) and an operational landing ground at Sotira (near Farmagusta) was put in hand forthwith.

Ibid.

The role of the air forces in Cyprus was detailed by Air Marshal Tedder to the A. O. C., No. 259 Wing as follows:-

- (a) Fighter defence against enemy air attack on objectives in the island and on our shipping approaching the island.
- (b) Air attack on enemy air-borne and sea-borne forces.
- (c) Air reconnaissance of enemy naval and air dispositions and movements.
- (d) Co-operation with military and naval forces within the limit of No. 259 Group's resources. This would include operations to cover the Fleet's movements in the neighbourhood of the island.

Admiralty Hist:  
Section  
Narrative "Ops.  
of the Med:  
Fleet & Force  
"H:"

The transport of the 50th Division, No. 259 Wing and No. 80 Squadron to Cyprus was successfully carried out  
/by

by the Royal Navy from Port Said and Haifa in operation

"Guillotine" between 18 July and 29 August, the personnel being embarked in cruisers, destroyers and minelayers. Air

No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B. July

reconnaissances (by No. 201 Group) to protect our shipping movements engaged in the operation against possible attacks by enemy surface forces were carried out until the completion of the operation on 29 August. These reconnaissances took the form of a daily search of Areas I, J and M<sup>1</sup> by Blenheims of No. 203 Squadron and Swordfish of No. 815 Squadron, F. A. A. No. 201 Group's Shipping and Anti-Submarine Patrols.

No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B. June,  
Appx. S.  
et seq.

In June special patrols (known as BTXN and BTKS) were instituted by No. 201 Group between Crete and Libya to give warning of enemy ships approaching Libya or the Eastern Mediterranean. These patrols were performed at regular intervals by Blenheims of No. 203 Squadron and were maintained throughout the period under review.

No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B. entry  
of 9 July  
and  
Appx. I(1)

Following upon the enemy air attacks on Cyprus above mentioned<sup>2</sup> No. 201 Group drew up a cartographic diagram in which the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean was divided into certain natural operational areas designated by letters of the Alphabet.<sup>3</sup> Of these areas the following were made the responsibility of H. Q., R. A. F., Cyprus, viz:-

Area O (an area to the north and east of Cyprus adjoining Area I on the west and extending as far east as Karadash Burnu)

Area E (the Syrian coast as far south as Rouad Island)

Area I (the gulf of Adalya and extending as far south as a line joining Cape Lindos (Rhodes) to Cape Arnauti (Cyprus))

Area M (Rhodes and the coastal area from Seven Capes to Cape Khaledonia)

Ibid.

In order to simplify and standardise the reconnaissance of the operational areas for which H. Q., R. A. F., Cyprus /was

<sup>1</sup> See para. 3 of this page

<sup>2</sup> On page 285 *supra*

<sup>3</sup> A copy of this diagram is given in Appendix "K"

SECRET

was responsible, the following daily scale of reconnaissance was suggested:-

- (i) A.M. reconnaissance of Area M with a periodic examination of Rhodes' harbours, by one Beaufighter.
- (ii) A. M. coastal search of Cape Anamur to Cape Kheledonia including the Gulf of Adalya, by one Swordfish.
- (iii) A. M. coastal search from Cape Kizliman to Karadash Burnu returning by the centre of the channel, by one Swordfish.
- (iv) P. M. coastal reconnaissance from Cape Anamur to Seven Capes, by one Beaufighter or Blenheim.

Ibid.

Meanwhile Dorniers of No.2 Yugo-Slav Squadron and Ansons of No.13 Hellenic Squadron carried out daily anti-submarine dusk patrols (known as P.P.2.C) to a depth of 100 miles north and north-westward of Alexandria.

No.201 Grp.  
O. R. B.  
Entry of  
10 Sep. &  
Appx. G (1)

During September No.201 Group inaugurated two new patrols under the names of "Needle" and "Plug". The "Needle" patrol was carried out daily by two Swordfish (one of which was fitted with A. S. V. when possible) operating from Nicosia between Cyprus and longitude  $30^{\circ}$  east, with the object of giving warning of hostile ships approaching Limassol and Farmagusta. The "Plug" patrol was made daily by two Beauforts flying together from Fuka to a position off Sapienza, and thence singly from datum points  $38^{\circ}$  north,  $21^{\circ} 20'$  east, and  $36^{\circ} 26'$  north,  $21^{\circ} 35'$  east, flying on tracks of  $205^{\circ}$  for 160 miles, returning thence to Fuka (a total distance of 1,050 sea miles). The intention of this patrol was to locate enemy shipping believed to be using a route from the south-west of Greece to Benghazi (due to Malta's offensive strikes against enemy shipping

Ibid., Entry  
of 21 Sep. &  
Appx. J.

/lines

lines to Libya having, it was thought, forced the enemy to give Malta a wide berth).

Admiralty Hist.  
Section

Narrative "Ops. and supply routes off the Egyptian coast, Walrus and Swordfish of the Med:

Fleet &  
Force 'H' "

and  
No. 201 Grp.

O. R. B.  
Oct., Appx. 'J.'

In view of an increasing enemy threat to our shipping

aircraft from the battleships Queen Elizabeth and Valiant

began daily anti-submarine searches between five and fifteen

miles off the coast from Alexandria to Damietta during the

last week of October. In addition to these searches

Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron, Blenheims of No. 203 Squadron

and Sunderlands of No. 230 Squadron were also employed on anti-

submarine and reconnaissance patrols in the Eastern

Mediterranean, and Marylands of No. 39 Squadron made photographic

reconnaissances of the port of Piraeus, the Corinth Canal, the

harbours of Crete, the Dodecanese Islands and other objectives.

No. 201 Grp.  
& No. 203 Sqn.  
O.R.B's Sep.,  
Oct.

During an anti-submarine patrol by a Blenheim (of

No. 203 Squadron) on 5 September a large Italian submarine was sighted on the surface in position  $34^{\circ} 02'$  north,  $25^{\circ} 16'$  east.

The Blenheim made a shallow dive to 1,500 feet and tried to

bomb the submarine amidships but the bomb switch failed to

function; it then lost height to 900 feet and dropped four

bombs in a salvo which hit the water ten to twenty yards beyond

the conning tower. The submarine replied with its rear gun

and then listed to port but continued on the surface and

escaped. On 15 October a Blenheim on the Crete-Libya patrol

sighted an enemy submarine in position  $34^{\circ} 21'$  north,  $23^{\circ} 11'$

east, and dropped a stick of bombs; two certain hits were

obtained causing explosions which raised a great mass of

water just aft of the conning tower. The submarine disappeared

and when the disturbance in the water had subsided bubbles

were seen rising to the surface.<sup>1</sup>

/On

Admiralty  
Monthly Anti-  
Submarine  
Report C.B.  
04050/43(8)

1 This was an Italian U-boat: it was assessed as "probably slightly damaged".

G.199913/JLL/7/48

SECRET

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries

No. 203 Sqn.  
O.R.B. Sep.

On several occasions the R.A.F. patrols came in contact with enemy aircraft, and combats usually developed from these encounters. On 21 October one of three Blenheims of the Crete-Libya patrol encountered an ME.110 south of Crete. A combat ensued in which the Blenheim sustained slight damage while the ME.110 was believed to have been destroyed. On the following day a Sunderland (of No. 230 Squadron) on reconnaissance sighted and attacked an enemy submarine about 50 miles north-east of Aboukir; the Sunderland dropped two bombs from 300 feet within twenty yards of the U-boat which replied with machine-gun fire and then dived. The Sunderland returned for a second run over the target but found that it had dived. Flares were dropped and a second attack was made but no results were observed.

#### Protection of Shipping - Tobruk.

Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval War in  
Mediterranean

The failure of operation "Battleaxe"<sup>1</sup> to relieve Tobruk meant that the bulk of supplies for that port had still to be carried by ships of the Naval Inshore Squadron. At this period (June) enemy air attacks against Tobruk reached their maximum effort, and the work of the Inshore Squadron was correspondingly the more hazardous.

Ibid.

The Inshore Squadron originally comprised the monitor Terror (sunk in February), three River gun-boats from the China Station, the Aphis, Ladybird and Gnat, and (later) the Cricket, the armed boarding-steamers Chakla<sup>2</sup> and Fiona, three small ships (each of about 250 tons) captured from the Italians, and such destroyers as could be made available from operations elsewhere. There were also the fuel tankers, Pass of Balmaha, Hekla, Adinda and Toneline, and several petrol and store carriers. To these

/must

<sup>1</sup> See page 231 supra.

<sup>2</sup> Dive-bombed and sunk off Tobruk in April.

must be added a fleet of eight "A" lighters which plied between Mersa Matruh and Tobruk;<sup>1</sup> these lighters transported 3,500 tons of stores, ammunition and petrol, sixty tanks and 330 personnel during the seige. During the month of June, while enemy air attacks were at their height, the greater part of the supplies for Tobruk were carried by tank landing craft and destroyers, but in July the running of store ships was resumed.

The protection of shipping to and from Tobruk was usually performed by Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons and, on occasion, by Hurricanes of No.1 Squadron, S. A. A. F., and Tomahawks of No.2 Squadron, S. A. A. F.<sup>2</sup> This service was largely in the nature of a routine: it involved a heavy drain on the Desert fighter Squadrons which, as always, were in constant demand for other duties. The A. O. C.-in-C, considered that as far as possible the strength of the protective patrols for shipping on the Tobruk run should not be less than squadron formation, and that in the case of slow convoys all available fighter squadrons should be employed. Nevertheless on several occasions enemy air attacks took a heavy toll of our convoys: for example, on 24 June, Hurricanes of No.274 squadron provided protection for the Pass of Balmaha and two escorting sloops, H. M. S. Auckland and H. M. A. S. Parramatta. This convoy was attacked by three formations of JU.88's and some S.79's: the Hurricanes shot down one S.79 and damaged another but the Auckland was hit several times and sank. The Parramatta shot down two enemy

/aircraft

A.H.Q. M.E.  
O. R. B.  
June  
Appx. 32.

No.204 Grp.  
O. R. B. &  
Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval War  
in Mediter-  
ranean.

Admiralty  
Hist. Section  
Narrative  
"Ops of the  
Med. Fleet &  
Force 'H'"

- 1 The "A" lighters were used following on representations by the R. A. F. that the employment of fighter protection for slow (and therefore vulnerable) convoys entailed a higher degree of losses and unserviceability of aircraft.
- 2 Nos. 1 and 2 Sqns. S.A.A.F. were of No.258 Wing: they were based at Bagush Waterloo and Amriya respectively.

SECRET

aircraft but the Pass of Balmaha was damaged by near misses: she was rescued by the destroyer Waterhen<sup>1</sup> (sent to her aid from Tobruk) which towed her into the harbour.

H.Q., M.E.  
AOC/206  
26A

The insufficiency of fighter protection - as exemplified by the loss of the Auckland - was felt very keenly by Admiral Cunningham. In a signal to Air Marshal Tedder (dated 24 June) the Admiral stated:

"204 Group have made it clear in telephone conversation that while they are most willing to do everything in their power they cannot guarantee adequate fighter protection for supply ships to Tobruk. They further state that cover for supply ships is secondary to other operations ..... It was arranged at C.-in-C's meeting 18 June that advantage was to be taken of this period to run in supplies; if the air protection is to be treated as a secondary operation so far as aircraft are concerned this policy cannot be implemented and the supply to Tobruk must cease, except by destroyer and that also will have to stop if protection cannot be arranged ....."

Ibid; 27A.

To this Air Marshal Tedder replied that although an absolute guarantee was impossible, he had instructed No. 204 Group that fighter cover must take absolute priority.

Admiralty  
Account  
of Naval War  
in Med:

In the meantime the shore defences at Tobruk were gradually strengthened until eventually they did heavy execution on daylight attacks of enemy dive-bombers. This induced the enemy to shell the harbour with artillery batteries, a "spotting" aircraft being frequently employed which enabled the batteries to pursue our ships with salvos of shells. This nuisance was at length overcome in a combined operation between the Royal Artillery within

/the

<sup>1</sup> H. M. S. Waterhen was herself sunk on 29 June by enemy aircraft while proceeding to Tobruk.

the Tobruk perimeter, Swordfish of the F. A. A. and H. M. S. Aphis.

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries;  
Admiralty  
Hist. Section  
Narrative;  
"Ops. of the  
Med. Fleet &  
Force 'H'"

No. 204 Grp.  
O.R.B. June

Meanwhile a number of enemy efforts to attack our convoys sailing to and from Tobruk were broken up by our fighter patrols, although not without some losses to the convoys and to our aircraft. On 29 June, a special convoy comprising two merchant vessels (escorted by H. M. S. Flamingo, Cricket and Southern Isles) carrying military stores, sailed from Mersa Matruh to Tobruk. Next day the maximum effort of No. 204 Group's fighters (comprising Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons and No. 1 S.A.A.F. Squadron and Tomahawks of No. 250 Squadron) was employed in providing continuous air protection for this convoy. During the afternoon six major enemy air attacks were delivered varying from twenty to forty-five JU.87's and 88's escorted by ME.109's and 110's and G.50's which overwhelmed our fighters. In spite of this our aircraft forced several enemy aircraft to jettison their bombs, shot down two ME.110's, two JU.87's, two JU.88's and two G.50's, and damaged one ME.110 and one JU.88 for the loss of one Hurricane and one Tomahawk; moreover, the Flamingo and the Southern Isles accounted for four enemy aircraft and damaged two others. The two store ships succeeded in reaching Tobruk safely although the Flamingo and the Cricket were damaged by near misses.

Ibid.

During July the enemy made further determined attacks on our Tobruk convoys and on Tobruk harbour. On 15 July, ten Hurricanes of No. 73 Squadron, while giving protection to a convoy of two "A" lighters, intercepted fifteen JU.87's and five ME.110's which attacked the convoy, and destroyed six of the JU's and one ME; two Hurricanes were lost and one of the lighters was sunk. Four days later (19 July) eleven Hurricanes of the same Squadron protecting another convoy of /"A"

Information  
from Admtly.  
Hist. Section  
and No. 73 Sqn  
O.R.B. June

G. 199913/JLL/7/48



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295.

"A" lighters encountered twelve ME.109's: the Hurricanes drove off the enemy aircraft before they could attack the convoy; one Hurricane was missing. One of the heaviest attacks occurred on 29 July when twenty JU.87's and ten ME.109's attacked another convoy of two "A" lighters. The escort of twelve Tomahawks (of No.2 Squadron, S.A.A.F) destroyed four JU's and probably destroyed two further aircraft and damaged several others for the loss of two Tomahawks; one of the "A" lighters was sunk.

Ibid; and  
A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op.Summaries

In August, enemy attacks increased on our shipping in and out of Tobruk, and were marked by the rising list of casualties to our ships and protective fighters. On 4 August, the merchant vessel Sotra was damaged off Mersa Matruh, and on 17 August some "A" lighters and the schooner Mario Giovanni (previously captured from the enemy) were damaged, and several "dumb" lighters sunk, by enemy dive-bombing attacks off Tobruk. Next day twelve Tomahawks of No.250 Squadron on shipping protection encountered twenty ME.109's and six ME.110's, the latter armed with bombs. The Tomahawks forced the ME.110's to jettison their bombs five miles away from the convoy; one Tomahawk was shot down. On 19 August the trawler Thorbyrn was bombed and sunk eight miles from Tobruk while towing two lighters, one of which was sunk the other drifting ashore in enemy territory, and on 22 August the Lesbos was damaged in Tobruk harbour by a near miss in an enemy dive-bombing raid.

Operation "Treacle"

Admiralty  
Hist:Section  
Narrative "Ops.  
of the Med:  
Fleet &  
Force 'H'"

No.204 Grp.  
O.R.B.  
August.

In the meantime, in response to strong representations by the Australian Government, it was decided to relieve the 18th Australian Brigade at Tobruk by a Polish Independent Brigade. The operation - known as "Treacle" - involved the transfer of 6,120 Polish

/troops

G.199913/JIL/7/48

troops and 1,400 tons of stores, and the withdrawal of 5,000 Australians.

It was arranged that the transfer of personnel should be made by a succession of runs by the mine-layers Abdiel and Latona alternately, each accompanied by three destroyers (covered by cruisers of the 7th. and 15th Cruiser Squadrons), while the stores were to be conveyed by the Lesbos and the fuel by the Pass of Balmaha. The operation was carried out successfully between 19 and 29 August, and during the process the whole of the fighter effort of No.204 Group was employed. The enemy made dive-bombing attacks on our ships on several nights during the operation, and on the night of 27 August the destroyer Phoebe was torpedoed and extensively damaged by enemy aircraft. On the same night Tobruk was raided by forty dive-bombers and the Canadian mine-sweeper Skud III was set on fire and sank. Several fighter actions took place, notably on 21 August, north of Bardia, when ten JU.87's, eighteen ME.110's, twenty-five ME.109's and a formation of HE.111's were intercepted by a force of some twenty Hurricanes and Tomahawks.<sup>1</sup> One ME.110 was shot down, four were probably destroyed, and eight others were damaged for the loss of three Hurricanes and one Tomahawk, and one Hurricane and one Tomahawk damaged. During this attack the destroyer Nizam was damaged by a near miss.

#### Operation "Supercharge"

Between 17 and 27 September a similar operation was carried out to relieve further Australian units of the Tobruk garrison with British troops of the 6th Division from Syria; 5,000 men and forty tanks were run into Tobruk and a further

/6,000

Admiralty  
Hist:Section  
Narrative  
"Ops. of the  
Med: Fleet  
& Force 'H';  
H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

A.H.Q., M.E.,  
Op. Summaries

Ibid: and  
Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval War  
in the Med:

War Diaries 1 The Tomahawks (seven in number) were of No.2 Sqn. S.A.A.F.  
Nos.1 & 2 the Hurricanes were of No.73 Sqn. and No.1 Sqn. S.A.A.F.  
Sqns.S.A.A.F. and the R.N. fighter Sqn.

SECRET

6,000 time-expired troops were withdrawn. This operation took place with little interference by the enemy except on the night of 23/24 September when enemy aircraft layed mines in Tobruk harbour.

#### Operation "Cultivate"

Ibid. &  
Admiralty Hist:  
Section  
Narrative "Ops.  
of the Med:  
Fleet &  
Force 'H'"

During October the final relief of the garrison was completed when the 9th Australian Division handed over Tobruk to the 70th Division. In the course of this operation the Pass of Balmaha and the Samos were torpedoed by U.-boats and lost, the former with all hands (on 16 October), and the mine-layer Latona was bombed and sunk on 25 October. Meanwhile, enemy submarine activity was increasing and on 21 October H.M.S. Gnat (gunboat) while on passage from Tobruk to Alexandria had her bows blown off by a torpedo: she was towed to Alexandria by the destroyer Griffin escorted by the armed whaler Southern Maid of the South African Seaward Defence Force.

Gen.  
Auchinleck's  
Despatch

The work of the Navy, the R. A. F. and the F. A. A. in operations "Treacle", "Supercharge" and "Cultivate" earned the thanks of the G. O. C.-in-C. who stated that they enabled the relief of the Australian troops from Tobruk to be carried out with negligible loss to Army personnel though at a great strain and some losses to themselves. The G. O. C.-in-C. also stressed the "excellent" liaison between the Army, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force.

#### Further Revival of Coastal Command Controversy.

Meanwhile, the controversy as to Coastal Command in the Eastern Mediterranean between Admiral Cunningham and Sir Arthur Longmore<sup>1</sup> had been revived when the Admiral

/approached

<sup>1</sup> See pages 138 and 139 supra.

approached Air Marshal Tedder on the subject in June. Arising out of a discussion (at one of the periodical Commanders-in-Chief's meetings held on 4 June) on the question of pooling the resources of the disembarked Fleet Air Arm units with the Royal Air Force, Air Marshal Tedder wrote to the Admiral proposing the following arrangements:-

- (i) That No. 803 and 806 F.A.A. Squadrons should join with No. 33 (Fighter) Squadron R.A.F. (Hurricanes) at Edku (to be known as No. 806/33 Squadron under the control of No. 252 Wing of No. 202 Group) and be allocated permanently to the defence of Alexandria.
- (ii) That No. 805 Squadron F.A.A. (Fulmars and Brewster Buffaloes) should be moved from Aboukir to Lake Maryut, its role to be the provision of fighter protection for coastal shipping within its range, or for operations of the Swordfish units when required, under the control of No. 201 Group which would be operating the Beaufighter squadrons (Nos. 252 and 272 when employed on the same duties.
- (iii) That Nos. 815 and 819 F.A.A. Squadrons should also be put under the control of the A.O.C., No. 201 Group, who would be responsible with the commands concerned (i.e. No. 204 Group and the A.O.C. Palestine and Trans-Jordan) should Swordfish and Albacores be required to operate in those areas.

To these suggestions the Admiral replied that owing

to the new situation in which "we have a relatively weakened Fleet faced with an extremely powerful enemy air force based inconveniently close to our bases" he considered that the safety of Egypt and the Middle East now depended on our ability

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<sup>1</sup> In July No. 806/33 Squadron and 803 Squadron (Martlets) were merged into what was known as the "R.N. Fighter Squadron".

SECRET

to keep enemy sea borne forces and supplies beyond the line of Benghazi to Sapienza Island (excluding the Aegean Sea). He therefore postulated that an air organisation must be developed along the Egyptian coast which would provide:-

- (i) A bombing and torpedo force to destroy any surface force moving beyond the line between the western end of Crete and Africa.
- (ii) A reconnaissance force to give information of the movement of enemy surface forces anywhere in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean (Malta as an air base would be an integral part of this item).
- (iii) A fighter force covering our lines of supply and the movements of our surface forces.

"We are" (he continued) "now beginning to form the nucleus of the forces needed for this organisation. We have in Malta a useful though still inadequate force of reconnaissance (Maryland) aircraft. In Egypt there is 201 Group and a Blenheim squadron about to arrive. Finally there are the Beaufighters sent out from the U.K. All these units have been, or are, intended for work overseas. It is from this nucleus that I hope to see built up the air strength which will carry out the objects described in the previous paragraphs, and it is the organisation to operate and control these forces which I am so anxious to see instituted as quickly as possible".

The Admiral expressed himself "willing and anxious" that the Fleet Air Arm should contribute "to the maximum possible to increase the forces available". He considered that the command of this organisation - which in his view was "fundamentally analogous to the Coastal Command at home" - should be carried out by the R.A.F., but

/he

he felt that the Officer in Command should have a nucleus of aircraft belonging to him and should work primarily on the duties specified above. He felt that it was "quite useless to expect efficiency on such highly specialised work as overseas flying, with its problems of navigation, recognition and so forth if the units employed were liable at any moment to be removed for other work". In a final paragraph the Admiral summed up his ideas thus:-

"It is my considered opinion that an Air Command (called a Coastal Command or any other name if that one is unacceptable) is at once needed, designed to operate against sea-borne enemy forces; that this force should be controlled and operated by the Royal Air Force but in the closest collaboration with myself, and that it must have its own units which will not be removed for other duties without prior consultation. To this Command would be attached all disembarked Fleet Air Arm units which could be organised and handled by a Naval Officer working in with the Air Force Commander of the Command".

Ibid 25A  
(27.6.41)

In replying to this letter Air Marshal Tedder agreed to "the principle of a nucleus of specially trained air forces allocated to the formation whose primary role is to co-operate with the Naval forces", and he informed the Admiral that he was building up No.201 Group to serve as that nucleus. But he could not agree that the Coastal Command in the U.K. was analogous to the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, and he felt that Naval operations could not "be properly considered as a self contained activity separate from the main air and land operations in Middle East". He considered that sea, land and air operations were so closely interrelated that effective co-ordination was only possible if the campaign was treated as a combined operation "in the full

sense of that term", and that it was "essential to produce the requisite air situation which would enable our sea and land forces to operate successfully". In his opinion this effect could only be secured by establishing a joint executive operational headquarters which would exercise a co-ordinated direction of all sea, land and air forces in the Mediterranean; it could not be effected by trying to segregate Naval/Air operations. "We will spare no effort" he concluded "..... to meet the Navy's requirements, but specifically to segregate air forces for special duties and thereby to preclude concentration of air effort is at the present time playing into the German hands".

Ibid. 31A  
(6.7.41)

Admiral Cunningham could not, however, agree to Air Marshal Tedder's solution of the problem: he felt that the Air Marshal regarded the proposed organisation "as a comparatively small one" whereas he (the Admiral) considered it should be on a much greater scale covering all our coasts in the Mediterranean. "The arrangements you propose" he wrote "will, it appears to me, merely serve to perpetuate a state of affairs which has proved to be inefficient and whose continuance I cannot countenance. So long as a position exists where important Naval operations can be jeopardised - by the sudden withdrawal of the reconnaissance on which those operations are being based, or where, owing to lack of training, Royal Air Force aircraft fail to transmit vitally important sighting reports and even attack our own surface forces - it is evident that the situation cannot be regarded as satisfactory". The Admiral was convinced that the only way of organising our air forces "to search out and strike at the enemy warships and sea borne supplies" and which could protect our surface forces, was the solution which he had put forward in his previous letter.

Meanwhile he was "still hoping that some way of meeting these requirements may yet be evolved between us out here".

To this letter Air Marshal Tedder did not reply<sup>1</sup> and the controversy still remained unsettled. On 14 August Admiral Cunningham re-opened his bombardment, the first paragraph of his letter stating that "it has become increasingly clear in the past month that the existing organisation for the co-ordination of flying operations over the sea is cumbrous and inadequate". In his opinion the solution lay "in the fulfilment of three prime requirements:-

- (a) The establishment in direct personal touch with my staff of a Royal Air Force Command charged with the co-ordination of all R.A.F. operations over the sea.
- (b) The provision of an adequate scale of reconnaissance.
- (c) The ability to strike rapidly and effectively at targets located by the reconnaissance."

He asserted that

"There can be no question but that the responsibility for the general conduct of operations at sea against enemy ships, or shipping, whether by air or surface forces, rests with the Naval Commander-in-Chief. He alone can hold the balance between the relative merits and need of air surface action in specific cases ..... It has been found by experience that the present system, whereby the control of aircraft for an operation is transferred to the Group or Groups whose immediate area is involved, is unsound as leading to misunderstanding and confusion. Communications, whether by signal or telephone, are usually bad and subject to  
/maddening

1 There is no reply on the file from which the substance of these letters are taken; and no reply has been found in other files bearing on the subject.



SECRET

maddening delays, moreover it is noticeable that distant Groups whose work does not normally lie to seaward not unnaturally lack appreciation of Naval problems and are inclined to regard the work as a tedious and wasteful diversion from their normal duty". The Admiral admitted that the resources of the Middle East were inadequate as to aircraft, but he postulated that "the stoppage of supplies and the destruction of enemy shipping is so important as to warrant a wider appreciation of its priority and an acceptance that a reduction of other air efforts may be necessary". In conclusion, he reiterated his conviction that "the operation of aircraft in connection with sea targets ..... should be the exclusive province of a special command for sea co-operation," and he propounded the following "three main questions" which he desired should "be specifically answered:-

- (a) What steps will be taken now to institute a Royal Air Force Command on the basis suggested above ?  
What will be the status of the Officer Commanding ?
- (b) What aircraft will be put under the control of this Command and what aircraft will come under it in future ?
- (c) Will it be accepted that the aircraft under (b) will not be detached for other tasks than those of the command without prior reference to the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean ?".

The effect of this communication on Air Marshal

AOC-in-C  
Correspon-  
dence with  
the V.C.A.S.  
(16.8.41)

Tedder can be gauged by a letter which he wrote to the  
V.C.A.S.<sup>1</sup>:-

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<sup>1</sup> Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfred R. Freeman.

"I do not know how far this sort of thing has to be taken seriously but in view of possible repercussions at home I am enclosing a copy of a letter I have just had from C.-in-C. Med.

I propose to say that I entirely agree with the three requirements specified in para. 3,<sup>1</sup> but as regards implementing them the essentials are, firstly, a proper joint operations room at Alex. similar to the Coastal Command one at home. We have one at present with 201 Group and have managed to drag the Naval liaison to it, but we need something better than that. At present we cannot get the Admiral to agree to a proper site. Secondly, a combined headquarters comprising all three Services so that the balance between the land, sea and air requirements can be properly kept. I think it is quite wrong for the C.-in-C. Med. to say that he alone can 'hold the balance between the relative merits and needs of air or surface action' since the possibilities of using air action must be balanced with the needs of the Army and the air situation as a whole.

C.A.S. may have told you that he and I and the First Sea Lord staged a discussion on the question at Checkers (sic) but it fizzled out after ten minutes desultory talk. The Naval Staff here are excellent and there is one simple remedy to the whole problem but that I am afraid is beyond my scope".

A month later (15 September) the Admiral wrote a further letter to the Air-Marshal asking if a reply could be

/sent

AOC/206  
38A

<sup>1</sup> i.e. the "three prime requirements" in the Admiral's letter.

305.

sent to his letter of 14 August, particularly with regard to the three questions which he had propounded therein. On 17 September he wrote to the Minister of State, Middle East,<sup>1</sup> (who was about to return to England) asking him to take up with the authorities in London the question of the organisation and allocation of air forces - which the Admiral regarded as "of the very highest importance".

Ibid 39A

On the following day (18 September) Air Marshal Tedder replied to the Admiral's letter of 14 August, explaining the operational role and strength of No.201 Group and stating that an experienced Air Officer (Air Commodore Slatter) had been selected to be the Commander of this Group and was now on his way to the U.K. with a view "to getting up to date as to the organisation and methods of Coastal Command". After further explanatory paragraphs (of considerable length) dealing with reconnaissance and the striking at targets found by reconnaissance, the Air Marshal deprecated the Admiral's contention that the Naval Commander-in-Chief could "alone hold the balance between the relative merits and needs of air or surface action in specific cases". In his opinion that balance could "only be drawn by the A.O.C.-in-C. in close co-operation with both the C.-in-C. Middle East and the C.-in-C. Mediterranean. An essential feature of effective air action, which the enemy has himself observed repeatedly, is concentration of the maximum force at the decisive target. The extent to which this concentration can be effected involves drawing a balance not only between air and sea action but between the concurrent air operations in support

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<sup>1</sup> Captain the Rt. Hon Oliver Lyttelton, P.C.

of the army and also those towards the primary objective of air superiority. This principle has been most clearly reaffirmed by the Minister of Defence, i.e. that for all major operational purposes our plans must govern the employment of the whole air forces throughout the Middle East, and that the question of what proportion, if any, of the air forces should be devoted at any time specifically for the support of Naval or Army operations, should be agreed by the three Commanders-in-Chief in consultation, bearing in mind that the Air Force had its own dominant strategic role to play and that nothing in the arrangements made for close support of our Navy or Army should mar the integrity of the Air Force contribution to any major scheme". In the final paragraph of this letter the Air Marshal expressed the hope that some method would be found of overcoming the difficulties in establishing a Naval Headquarters jointly with those of the Army and Air Force; "the present arrangement by which your headquarters are connected with the C.-in-C. Middle East and myself only by a somewhat unreliable telephone is fraught with the gravest dangers which loomed only too large on occasions such as that of the evacuation of Crete, when vital decisions affecting all three Services had to be made ....."

Ibid 40A

A further letter was sent by Admiral Cunningham to Air Marshal Tedder on 23 September in which the Admiral laid "no claim to an overriding position in regard to the distribution of forces, which is and must remain a matter of the Commanders-in-Chief in conference"; but he maintained "that where operations at sea are concerned, the responsibility for the conduct of such operations with whatever forces can be made available is mine, and the balance between the action of air and surface forces must be worked out by my staff with the advice and co-operation of the Air Officer Commanding,

/Naval

Naval Co-operation Group ....."

No.201 Group Re-formed as No.201 (Naval Co-operation) Group.

Ibid 44B

Meanwhile the matters affecting the controversy were being investigated by the Air Ministry and the Admiralty, and were discussed at a Ministerial Conference held in London on 23 September. After further discussions between the Chief of the Air Staff and the Admiralty an agreement was reached as follows:-

Ibid 46A

- (i) No.201 Group should be designated "No.201 (Naval Co-operation) Group". Operational control of the units in the Group was to be exercised as provided in the agreement, the A.O.C.-in-C, Middle East, being the Service authority ultimately responsible for the employment of all the available air forces under his command in the best interests of all three Services.
- (ii) The primary functions of No.201 (N.C) Group were to be the conduct of operations at sea and co-operation with the Mediterranean Fleet as required by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean. If necessary one or more units of the Group might have to be employed on tasks other than those of their primary functions, but except in emergency this would not be done without prior reference to the C.-in-C. Mediterranean or his representative. Similarly operations of No.201 (N.C) Group might be supplemented by squadrons of another Group.
- (iii) The allocation of operational units to or from No.201 (N.C) Group was to be decided from time time by the A.O.C.-in-C. after consultation with the C.-in-C. Mediterranean and G.O.C. Middle East

/according

according to the needs of the general situation. If either of the latter felt unable to accept the decision, the A.O.C.-in-C. would report to the Minister of State. The C.-in-C. Mediterranean might, however, withdraw units of the Fleet Air Arm at any time if such should be required for service afloat.

- (iv) All R.A.F. and disembarked Fleet Air Arm units whose primary duty for the time being was co-operation with the Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean were to be under the operational control of No.201 (N.C) Group. When units not allocated to No.201 (N.C) Group were detailed for co-operating with the Fleet the A.O.C. No.201 (N.C) Group would co-ordinate the orders of all units and if possible control them operationally.

- (v) The strength of No.201 (N.C) Group was:-

- 2 G.R. Squadrons R.A.F. (Nos.39, Marylands/ Beauforts and 203, Blenheim IV's)
- 1 G.R.Allied Squadron (No.13 Hellenic - Ansons)
- 1 Flying Boat Squadron R.A.F. (No.230 - Sunderlands)
- 1 Flying Boat Allied Squadron (No.2 Yugo-Slav - Dorniers)
- 2 Long-range fighter squadrons, R.A.F. (Nos.252 and 272 - Beaufighters)<sup>1</sup>

Special reconnaissance requirements of the C-in-C. Mediterranean were to be met as far as possible by the central Photo: Reconnaissance Unit. The A.O.C. No.201 (N.C) Group would be responsible for representing priorities to Headquarters, R.A.F., Middle East.

/(vi)

Ibid:

- <sup>1</sup> The combined strength of these two squadrons was only equal to one squadron at that time.

- (vi) So far as the general situation allowed as many air units as possible in the Middle East Command were to be trained to operate over the sea and in co-operation with the Navy, and a pool of observers trained in Naval co-operation who would fly with units detailed temporarily for such co-operation would be formed. As many Naval observers as possible were to be added to this pool, but these might have to be withdrawn at any time for operational work in the Carriers.
- (vii) The broad strategic plan for the employment of units of No.201 (N.C) Group in co-operation with the Navy was to be agreed upon between the A.O.C.-in-C. and the C.-in-C. Mediterranean who would both approve the standing orders for carrying out such co-operation.

These decisions were embodied in a joint Air Ministry and Admiralty directive.

Exercise of Operational Control of R. N. Fulmar Flight.

Pursuant to para. (iv) of the Air Ministry and Admiralty directive (regarding the disembarked Fleet Air Arm units) a conference was held on 25 October between the A.O.C's of No.201 (N.C) Group and No.252 Wing and five Naval Officers, as to the division of responsibility between No.201 (N.C) Group and No.252 Wing in fighter protection of shipping off Alexandria, and to decide who was to exercise operational control of the newly-formed R.N. Fulmar Flight. The following decisions were reached:-

No.201 (N.C.)  
Grp. O.R.B.  
entry of  
25 Oct.Appx.L.

1. Standing Patrols as required by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean, and responses to "Help" calls were the responsibility of No.201 (N.C) Group using Beaufighters and Fulmars, with fighter

direction exercised by H. M. ships, anywhere east of the Ishalie Rocks including, when necessary, within 35 miles of Alexandria.

2. Interception of enemy aircraft entering an area of 35 sea miles of Ras-el-Tin was No.252 Wing's responsibility, using Hurricanes under their own R/T control. . .
3. Ships Positions reported by aircraft returning from standing patrols must be reported to No.252 Wing, to assist in identifying the plot of No.201 (N.C) Group aircraft on standing patrols or passing to and from ships and base.
4. The R. N. Fulmar Flight had been formed with the object of increasing the fighter force available for the protection of shipping, and therefore No.201 (N.C) Group was to have operational control thereof.

By the end of October the following readjustments had been made to the composition of No.201 (N.C) Group:-

No.39 (G.R) Squadron (Marylands and Beauforts) was transferred to the Western Desert Bomber Group, and No.73 (Fighter) Squadron (Hurricanes) was moved from No.204 Group to No.201 (N.C) Group, and No.700 Squadron, F. A. A. (Fulmars and Walruses), the R. N. Fulmar Flight and a newly-formed Sea Rescue Flight came under the

/operational



SECRET

311.

operational control of No.201 (N.C) Group.<sup>1</sup>

Operations in the Delta Area and Suez Canal Zone.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Op.Summaries.

During the period under review the Axis policy was, on the whole, to leave the offensive action in the Western Desert to the Italian Air Force while the Luftwaffe concentrated upon attacks on the Delta area and the Suez Canal zone.

The German air effort was mainly directed against our Fleet and shipping in Alexandria harbour and to impair our air effort by attacks on Port Said, Ismailia, Abu Sueir and Suez, and to block the Canal by mines. These objectives demanded the necessity of bombing and mine-laying by night co-incident with the full moon periods, and day raiding was therefore at a minimum except for extensive reconnaissances which were essential to the success of the enemy's operations.

No.250 Wing  
O.R.B's July  
- Oct:

The operational control of the R. A. F. defence of the Canal was performed by No. 250 Wing (reformed at Ismailia on 1 July) under No.202 Group, which was responsible for the whole of the air defence of Egypt. At this time No.250 operated No.94 Squadron (Hurricanes) and a force of Royal Egyptian Air Force Gladiators. No.94 Squadron was based at /Ismailia

A.H.Q. M.E.,  
Op.Summaries

<sup>1</sup> Composition of No.201 (N.C) Group as at 31 October 1941.

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>
(H.Q.No.201 (N.C) Grp.	Alexandria	
(Adv. G. R. base	Fuka	
No.2 Yugo-Slav. Sqn.	Aboukir	(Dornier { 7 a/c } (Sim. 14 { 1 a/c }
No.13 Hellenic Sqn.	Dekheila	Anson
(No.73 Sqn.	Port Said	Hurricane
(No.73 Sq. detachment	Kilo 8	Hurricane
No.203 Sqn.	Burg-el-Arab	Blenheim IV
No.230 Sqn.	Kasfareet	Sunderland
No.252 Sqn.	Edku	(5 a/c)
No.272 Sqn.	Lydda (tempy. attachmt)	Beaufighter
No.700 Sqn. F.A.A.	Aboukir	Beaufighter
R. N. Fulmar Flight	Dekheila	Fulmar & Walrus
Sea Rescue Flight	Burg-el-Arab area	Fulmar
		Wellington
		(3 a/c)

G.199913/JLL/8/48

Ismailia: its role was to act as a night fighter squadron, with a detachment at Port Said which provided protection for shipping by day. No.250 Wing also operated Nos. 972, 973 and 974 Balloon Squadrons at Port Said, El Kantara and Kasfareet respectively.

No.252 Wing  
O.R.B's June  
- Oct.

The air defence of Alexandria - including the provision of fighter protection to H. M. ships and convoys within its operational area - was under the operational control of No.252 Wing (under No.202 Group). The Beaufighters of Nos. 252 and 272 Squadrons (on loan from No.201 Group) and Fulmars of the F. A. A. assisted on occasion in special defensive commitments, particularly against enemy night attacks. In the earlier part of this period a Flight of No.95 Squadron (Hurricanes, detached at Amrya) was responsible for night fighter defence, and later No.30 Squadron (Hurricanes), based at Edku, undertook this work. Fighter defence by day was performed by Nos.33, 112 (Tomahawks) and 274 (Hurricanes) Squadrons and one Flight of No.30 Squadron. There was also No.971 Balloon Squadron at Alexandria.<sup>1</sup>

AOC-in-C.  
Corresp.  
with CAS,  
Pt. II  
170A.

The C-in-C., Mediterranean, claimed that the defence of the Naval base at Alexandria - and also the port and shipping at Suez - was his responsibility, and he maintained that it was Naval guns and searchlights which kept the enemy from carrying out accurate bombing, and insisted that fighter operations should therefore be subordinated. This was disputed by the A.O.C.-in-C who

/maintained

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<sup>1</sup> Other Balloon Sqns. were Nos.972, 973 and 974 stationed at El Kantara, Port Said and Kasfareet respectively.

313.

maintained that it was "fantastic" to credit the Naval gunnery and searchlights with the fact that enemy bombs had, in most cases, only straddled their objectives and not obtained direct hits. Some weeks later he wrote that the R. A. F. fighters "when allowed to co-operate, are beginning to do rather well", but as they were only beginning to get good results he proposed "to hold his fire" until he had a larger volume of practical evidence on this point.

In June, enemy aircraft made numerous reconnaissances of Alexandria and on 8 June a heavy air attack was made on the town during which mines were dropped in the harbour which was temporarily closed as a result. Further enemy attacks were made on Alexandria on the nights of 20/21, 22/23 and 27/28 June; thirty aircraft operated in the first of these raids and seventeen on the two following nights. On 24 and 25 June, two D. W. I. Wellingtons of No. 1 G. R. Unit swept the Suez Canal channel where it passes through the Little Bitter Lake: this was done as a precautionary measure as a mine had been reported to have fallen in that vicinity during the raid of 22/23 June, but no result was obtained.

No. 1 G. R. Unit,  
O. R. B. July.

A. H. Q. M. E.  
Op. Summaries.

During July air attacks were made on Alexandria, the Delta and the Canal areas. These included an attack by twenty JU.88's on Alexandria on the night of 6/7 July; Hurricanes of No. 94 Squadron endeavoured to intercept the J.U.'s, but results were inconclusive. On the night of 9/10 July, enemy aircraft raided the Suez Canal in two waves, the attack lasting for some hours. The first wave bombed Suez and Shallufa airfield without result, but the second wave started a fire at Abu Sueir aerodrome where

/twenty-six

C.O.S. Papers  
(41) 444  
Annex: (AOO-  
in-C to  
CAS. 14.7.41)

twenty-six of our aircraft were destroyed on the ground  
twenty others were severely damaged and several buildings  
were also damaged. During this attack four enemy aircraft

Admiralty Hist:  
Section  
Narrative  
"Ops. of the  
Med: Fleet &  
Force 'H'"

laid mines in the Canal. On the following night one of  
our ships was sunk at Port Said and a smaller vessel  
was damaged, and mines were dropped at Port Said and  
Ismailia.

A.H.Q. M.E.,  
Op. Summaries.

An enemy reconnaissance on 13 July preceded a  
further attack on the Canal zone by two waves comprising  
twenty-two aircraft, during which bombs were dropped at El  
Kantara and Ismailia and the anchorage at Suez. The S. S.  
Georgic and a smaller ship were set on fire by direct hits,  
and mines were dropped at the Canal entrance. Hurricanes  
of No. 94 Squadron endeavoured to intercept the raiders and  
although our searchlights illuminated the enemy aircraft our  
fighters did not succeed in engaging them. Meanwhile (on  
12 July) a night fighter patrol was instituted to operate  
over the north-eastward end of Alexandria harbour on  
moonlight nights.

The attacks on the Canal were repeated on the night  
of 15/16 July and again on 21/22 July with the object of mine-  
laying in the Canal and the Great Bitter Lakes. A Naval  
camp received slight damage and some houses in Ismailia were  
hit. On the night of 26/27 July, eight enemy aircraft  
attempted to bomb Port Said but the bombs dropped  
harmlessly out to sea.

No. 1 G.R.  
Unit O.R.B.  
July.

Meanwhile the D. W. I. Wellingtons made daily  
sweeps for mines over the Canal and the Port Said area from  
11 to 26 July. In the course of these operations (on  
15 July) one of the Wellingtons collided with the cable of a  
balloon of the Canal Balloon barrage but sustained no

/damage

315.

damage as the cable broke.<sup>1</sup> On 23 July, No.1 G.R. Unit moved back from Kabrit to Ismailia.<sup>2</sup>

A.H.Q. M.E.,  
Op. Summaries

About this time there was a growing effort by enemy torpedo-carrying aircraft to attack our shipping (particularly off the Delta mouth) as it emerged towards Alexandria or Port Said. To combat this menace Flights of No.13 Hellenic Squadron (Ansons) and of No.2 Yugo-Slav Squadron (Dorniers)<sup>3</sup> based at Edku established a daily patrol off this part of the Egyptian coast.

In August, enemy air attacks increased on Alexandria, the Delta and Canal areas during which considerable damage and some civilian casualties were caused at Alexandria and Ismailia, and shipping was damaged at Suez. Attacks on Alexandria were made on the nights of 1/2, 5/6 and 7/8 August: one JU. 88 was shot down and two other were probably destroyed by our fighters. Raids on Ismailia occurred on the nights of 4/5 and 8/9 August and at Lake Timsah on 8/9 August. Interceptions of all these attacks were made by No.94 Squadron's Hurricanes which damaged three JU. 88's, one of which crashed into Lake Burullus its crew being captured. On the night of 13/14 August, a force of JU.88's and DO.17's attacked the Ismailia area: a single Hurricane engaged three of these aircraft but results were not observed. Between 25 August and 7 September enemy aircraft raided the Delta area and the Canal zone on eleven nights: our Hurricanes were on /layer

Ibid:

1 The balloon was flying in contravention to orders: it should have been "bedded down" before the D.W.I. Wellington operations began.

Ibid:

2 The chief reasons for this move were: (1) the Unit being merged in Canal defence it should come under No.202 Grp. for administration (2) the communication between Navy House, Ismailia and the R.A.F. Station, Kabrit was unsatisfactory.

3 Both of these sqns. were of No.201 Grp.

layer and line patrols on ten of these nights but only a few interceptions were made. During the night of 6/7 September fifteen JU.88's and HE.111's were intercepted by Hurricanes of No.94 Squadron which accounted for one JU. and probably destroyed another. A heavy raid was made on Suez by JU.88's on the night of 11/12 September which caused much damage including the destruction of 2/300 tons of oil fuel. Our Hurricanes intercepted three of the raiders and shot down one of them.

Admiralty Hist.  
Section  
Narrative  
"Ops. of the  
Med. Fleet  
& Force 'H'"

As an added protection against the increasing air attacks on the Canal zone the Flamingo and Parramatta were employed in escorting important ships in that area, and the anti-aircraft cruisers Carlisle and Coventry were stationed at Suez and Naval Anchorage "F". In the meantime No.201 Group operated a detachment of Beaufighters - which were best suited for night-bomber interceptions - from Hurgarda aerodrome. These Beaufighters were relieved during September by Fulmars of the Fleet Air Arm as the Beaufighters were transferred temporarily to Malta for operation "Halberd".<sup>1</sup>

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B.Sep.

A.H.Q. M.E.,  
Op. Summaries

Enemy air attacks on Alexandria and the Canal zone were continued during September; one raid - presumably intended for Heliopolis aerodrome - damaged a part of Cairo. Several fighter interceptions were made and two JU. 88's were shot down by our Hurricanes. In the third week of September the raids diminished, probably on account of moonless nights and sand storm conditions. An interesting feature of the latter part of September and the first half of October was the cessation of enemy air attacks following upon a German broadcast to the people of Egypt that there would

/be

<sup>1</sup> See page 257 supra.

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be no bombing during the Mohammedan month of Ramadan. Further south, however, some attacks were made on our shipping in the Gulf of Suez: one ship was sunk at the southern end of the Sinai Peninsular and two ships were attacked off Ras Ghareb. Meanwhile the oiler Tynesfield was mined and sunk in the Canal which was blocked for three days in consequence.

Admiralty Hist:  
Section  
Narrative  
"Ops. of the  
Med. Fleet &  
Force 'H'".

At the beginning of November (when the full moon gave favourable conditions for night flying) enemy air activity increased over the Delta area and the Canal zone. On the night of 1/2 November H. M. S. Carlisle was attacked unsuccessfully near Ras Ghareb, the enemy aircraft returning later up the Gulf of Suez and dropping twelve bombs on the town. This was followed on the night of 3/4 November by an attack on our shipping in the Gulf of Suez, and Suez itself was again bombed but effective anti-aircraft fire drove off the raiders. Meanwhile daily reconnaissance patrols for enemy aircraft were being carried out by the Dorniers of No. 2 Yugo-Slav Squadron. Further enemy attacks - apparently in search of our shipping - were made in the Canal zone on the nights of 6/7, 8/9 and 9/10 November, but beyond slight damage and a few casualties at Port Tewfik these raids were abortive.

/PORT BOMBING

PORT BOMBINGA. From Malta

As had already been proved by the R.A.F.'s efforts during the preceding period, the bombing of enemy ports and bases (as also of his lines of communication and dumps) was - next to the sinking of his shipping in transit - the most effective method of negating his "build-up" of supplies and personnel for his North African army. The chief enemy port of disembarkation for larger merchant vessels was Tripoli which lay within the radius of Malta's bomber force, while the Cyrenaican ports could be attacked by the main bomber strength of the Middle East Command located in Egypt and the Western Desert. Malta's bomber effort was, therefore, mainly occupied with Tripoli while subsidiary targets included Naples, Brindisi and Sicilian harbours and bases.

During May and the first three weeks of June, Malta's attacks on Tripoli had necessarily declined following upon the withdrawal of the detachment of No. 148 Squadron's Wellingtons to the Western Desert in April,<sup>1</sup> but attacks were carried out by Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm and Marylands of No. 69 Squadron. On the night of 7th/8th June, seven Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron, F.A.A. laid mines off Tripoli harbour and dropped bombs on the west end of the harbour as a diversion, starting several fires. On the following night the Swordfish again attacked the harbour with 250 lb. bombs from a height of 4,000 feet which set a small ship on fire and started a fire on the Spanish mole. This attack was repeated on the night of 12th/13th June. With the return of No. 148 Squadron's detachment of Wellingtons (on 24th and 26th June) heavier attacks on Tripoli were carried

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries  
and  
A.H.Q., Med.  
O.R.B. June.

/out

1 See page 146 supra



out, and during the latter part of that month thirty tons of bombs were dropped on the town causing damage to the harbour, railway sidings and buildings. On the night of 26th/27th June the Swordfish dropped 5,000 lbs. of G.P. bombs and 400 lbs. of incendiaries and the Wellingtons dropped 5,500 lbs. of G.P. bombs obtaining hits on shipping and dock quays, and on the next night six Wellingtons made a level attack from 8,000 feet dropping eight tons of G.P. bombs on the Spanish mole. This was followed on 29th June by an attack by nine Blenheims (of No. 82 Squadron)<sup>1</sup> with 250 lb. bombs which completely destroyed some factory buildings east of the town: one of the Blenheims exploded in mid air.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile (on 26th June) the Marylands had attacked the sea-base and Spanish mole with 500 lb. bombs which started several fires.

A.H.Q., M.E.,  
O.R.B. June  
Appx. 34

The employment of Marylands for bombing Tripoli seemed unwise to Air Marshal Tedder who pointed out to A.V.M. Lloyd (the A.O.C. at Malta) that the Marylands - of which the supply was very limited - were the only effective reconnaissance aircraft at Malta, and that "reconnaissance is vital for your and for Naval purposes". In his reply A.V.M. Lloyd stated that the Marylands were intended to be used as a diversion for our Blenheim bombers by operating at a considerable height and thus enabling the Blenheims to make a low approach without being seen. This he considered very necessary in view of the strong enemy defences. But in fact this plan had miscarried through the failure of the Blenheims to rendezvous at the agreed time and place owing to various causes. Meanwhile our aircraft on reconnaissances of Tripoli and the Libyan coast were now carrying bombs "to frighten Tripoli stevedores".

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries  
and  
R.A.F. Anti-  
Shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vol. I.

In July the bombing operation from Malta included attacks on Tripoli, Naples and Sicilian ports. On 6th July Blenheims (of No. 82 Squadron) escorted by Hurricanes made a successful attack

/with

A.H.Q., Med., 1 This Sqn. had arrived at Malta on 18th June.  
O.R.B. June. 2 No details as to the cause of this explosion are recorded.

SECRET

with 250 lb. bombs and incendiaries on shipping in Palermo harbour, sinking three merchant ships totalling 15,000 tons and severely damaging a 3,000 ton vessel. The bombing was followed by machine-gun fire on all objectives and several heavy explosions were caused in the dry dock which added to the general confusion in the harbour. The attack achieved complete surprise and no opposition was encountered. At Naples the railway station, marshalling yards and an aircraft factory were attacked on the nights of 9th/10th and 10th/11th July, by nine and eight Wellingtons (of No. 148 Squadron detachment) respectively. The results of the first raid were unobserved but in the second direct hits were scored on the aircraft factory and fuel storage which were set on fire. With regard to this attack, Count Ciano noted that the results were very bad, not so much from civilian losses as from damage caused to the Italo-American Oil Refineries where 6,000 tons of oil were destroyed. The loss of this fuel was a severe blow to the Italians: "God only knows how much we need it" commented the Count. On the same day (11th July) a single Wellington bombed Ragusa (Sicily) railway station causing a fire and an explosion.

A.H.B.1.S.13  
(Extract Ciano's  
Diary page 376)

Ibid

Meanwhile Wellingtons, Blenheims (of No. 110 Squadron) and Swordfish (of No. 830 Squadron, F.A.A.) had carried out ten attacks on Tripoli harbour and engine sheds between 30th June and 10th July. During these attacks the Swordfish laid mines outside the harbour; several fires and explosions were caused among the docks and some searchlights were destroyed: the station and engine sheds received considerable damage, and several ships - three of 10,000 tons or over - were damaged and other vessels were set on fire. In addition to these raids enemy aerodromes, communications and troops in Tripolitania were also attacked.

G.199913/JL/7/1948

/During

A.H.Q., M.E. 95A  
Part I, 95A  
A.O. 07/47  
During August, our attacks on Tripoli were increased, Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron making fifteen raids on the harbour and town. By that time the supply of bombs in Malta were becoming very low and the petrol stocks were rapidly decreasing. On 27 August A.V.M. Lloyd stressed the need for more and heavier bombs for our attacks on Tripoli "as I am convinced we can make supply through it most hazardous". He maintained that "a few 1,000 lb. bombs on the quay and jetties would not only sink ships alongside but also destroy the buildings and machinery ..... Unloading (of ships) depends entirely on lighters which are limited in numbers and they are usually concentrated in the evenings in a very small area against the town. One 1,000 lb. bomb in the middle of them would sink the lot. Anchorage in the stream are also in a very limited area and ..... a 1,000 pounder may easily disable a ship. Submit

A.H.Q., M.E. ACC/47, Pt. I 96A  
therefore that heavy bombs on Tripoli would be decisive in closing the port". In a signal to the Air Ministry Air Marshal Tedder agreed with A.V.M. Lloyd that more heavy bombers were likely to give best results, and he considered that attacks "on Naples and Brindisi on the same scale as Tripoli and other African ports might be decisive".

A.H.Q., M.E. ACC/47, Pt. I 96A  
As a result of these suggestions the Air Ministry sent twelve 4,000 lb. bombs (by submarine) to be employed by three Wellingtons which had been specially modified to use them and were flown out to Malta. These Wellingtons belonged to No. 104 Squadron, the remainder of which was sent (in October) from the United Kingdom and was to remain at Malta for a period of two months. Air Marshal Tedder decided that the 4,000 lb. bombs were to be used in attacks on Naples and Benghazi and in that order of priority. At the time it was arranged that eight /additional

1 This Sqn. had been sent to Malta early in August, No. 184 Sqn. detachment having been transferred to Egypt on 22 July. G.199913/JL/7/1948

162B  
(10.10.41)

(27.8.41)

additional Marylands should be sent to Malta for increasing attacks against enemy land communications.

A.H.Q., Med:  
O.R.B. Sep.

During September, the Wellingtons made seventeen attacks on Tripoli on which 233 tons of bombs were dropped causing considerable damage to the harbour installations and to the town. Palermo and Messina were also attacked, the former five times and latter twice. Meanwhile, Swordfish aircraft twice laid mines in Tripoli harbour and once at Palermo.

A.H.Q., M.E.  
AOC-in-C. Corresp:  
with the P.M.  
Sec. of State and  
C.A.S. Pts. I  
and II, 196B

In October, Tripoli was attacked thirteen times and six raids were made on Naples. In view of the increasing use and occupation of Naples by German forces the Chief of the Air Staff signalled to the A.O.C.-in-C. that if a small proportion of the Wellington effort were to be employed against the dock area in Naples - accompanied by leaflets addressed to the dock workers - the results might achieve greater dislocation in the German supplies to North Africa than if the weight of our attacks on Tripoli were increased. Air Marshal Tedder agreed to this suggestion, and accordingly an attack was made on the Naples dock area on the night of 21/22 October when the Wellingtons dropped 34 tons of bombs, including four of the 4,000 pounders, six 1,000 pounders besides 500 lb. and 250 lb. bombs. Numerous fires were started which merged into one large conflagration spreading over an area of 400 yards square with flames rising to 1,000 feet. During the attack 12,000 leaflets, calling on the Neapolitans to refuse to load and sail ships for the Germans, were dropped.<sup>1</sup>

Outline of Air Plan Preparatory to "Crusader"

Ibid. 202A

Meanwhile, in response to a signal from the Chief of the Air Staff regarding the outline of the air plan for the forthcoming "Crusader" campaign (required /for

A.H.Q., M.E.  
AOC/47

1 A translation of the leaflet is given in Appendix "L"  
G.199913/JL/7/1948

for the information of the Chiefs of Staff), Air Marshal Tedder replied that the air aim was (a) to gain air superiority and (b) to use air superiority in support of the Army. Operations to achieve this were already in hand "with the immediate object of weakening both enemy land and air forces by interrupting their supplies", but until active land operations began the plan was to strike at enemy supplies on the sea, at ports of loading and unloading, and on roads and dumps where these offered reasonable targets. Malta was the strategic centre for attacks on enemy sea-borne supplies and lines of communications in Tripolitania, and the maximum striking force that Malta could maintain and operate would be maintained there and would include two Wellington squadrons.<sup>1</sup> Light sustained attacks interspersed with heavy attacks (including 4,000 lb. bombs) were to be continued against Benghazi. In Cyrenaica, Swordfish were to be used to identify and illuminate aerodromes, dumps and M.T. or A.E.V. concentrations, the Swordfish operations being followed by Blenheim attacks on these targets. During the period immediately preceding zero day, operations would be intensified against enemy aerodromes.

In pursuance of the above plans Air Marshal Tedder detailed our general bombing policy for Malta as follows:-

Wellingtons

- (a) Sustained light scale "Nuisance" raids on the Naples dock area and shipping.
- (b) Sustained heavy raids on Tripoli.
- (c) One heavy attack on Castel Benito (which - taken in conjunction with our attacks on the enemy's lines of communication - was intended to prevent the Italians from moving their aircraft east of that place.)

/Blenheims

A.H.Q., M.E.  
O.R.B. Oct.,  
Appx. 7  
(31.10.41)

Ibid., 204A

<sup>1</sup> This was later modified by the C.A.S. who sent a further Wellington squadron to Malta so as not to reduce the Wellington force in Egypt by transferring a second squadron from there to Malta.

Blenheims

- (a) First priority: south-bound shipping with special effort against ships en route to Benghazi.
- (b) Second priority: Tripoli-Benghazi land communications
- (c) Third priority: One daylight attack on Castle Benito, if the target appeared to be promising.

R.A.F. Ops. in  
the West: Desert  
and East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42  
and  
A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries

In implementation of these instructions the Wellingtons continued their raids on Naples: they also attacked Brindisi from which place many of the enemy's urgent convoys were routed direct to Benghazi. The first attack on this port was made on the night of 7/8 November when twenty-one Wellingtons obtained hits on the sea-plane factory and barracks, the torpedo-boat base and the railway station, tracks and marshalling yards. Meanwhile the Blenheims were carrying out attacks on the chemical works at Crotone and the railways on the eastern coast of Italy. The Wellingtons also made several attacks on supply targets in Sicily when they were prevented by weather conditions from attacking Naples. At the same time aircraft of the F.A.A. made constant raids on the submarine base at Augusta and - in co-operation with the Blenheims - on the munition factory at Licata. A few attacks were also made against communications at Messina and the sea-plane base and power station at Palermo.

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries

On the night of 2/3 November twenty-one Wellingtons made a successful attack on Castel Benito aerodrome: nearly 30 tons of bombs were dropped causing considerable damage to hangars and buildings, and twelve or more enemy aircraft were left burning on the ground. Four enemy fighters attacked the Wellingtons which shot down one CR. 42: one

/Wellington

Wellington failed to return. This attack was repeated by eighteen Wellingtons on the night of 5/6 November when over 25 tons of bombs (including three 4,000 and five 1,000 pounders) on administrative buildings, hangars and workshops causing fires and explosions in the face of accurate A.A. fire and enemy fighter attacks which were driven off without casualties to our aircraft. Meanwhile, the Blenheims were attacking enemy shipping in transit to Benghazi (including attacks on 5 and 7/8 November already described in this narrative).<sup>1</sup> On 17 November six Blenheims (of No. 107 Squadron) made a mast high attack on two merchant ships of 4,000 and 2,000 tons respectively and one escort vessel near Zante Island (off the Grecian coast). Direct hits were scored on the larger merchantman which caused violent explosions and petrol stored on the deck was set on fire by machine-gun fire, the ship being left burning with columns of smoke which were seen 30 miles away. Accurate A.A. fire was encountered which damaged two of our aircraft.

#### Summary of Malta's Port Bombing Effort

During the period June-November, Malta-based aircraft flew 544 sorties against enemy disembarkation ports in North Africa, of which Tripoli received the greatest number, and 548 sorties against ports and bases in Italy and Sicily. These latter included:-

- (i) Naples (the main embarkation port and supply base in Southern Italy)
- (ii) Brindisi (the most important port in the Southern Adriatic)
- (iii) Palermo (harbour, sea-plane base and power station)
- (iv) Messina (sea-plane base and fuel dump)
- (v) Augusta (submarine and sea-plane base)

/B.

<sup>1</sup> On page 268 supra

B. From Egypt and the Western Desert.

R.A.F. Ops. in the West: Desert & East: Med: 18 Nov. '41 to 19 May '42 and A.H.Q., M.E. Op. Summaries

While our bombers from Malta were operating as narrated above, our bomber squadrons in Egypt and the Western Desert were engaged in attacking embarkation ports and bases in Greece and Crete and the Cyrenaican disembarkation ports of Benghazi, Derna and Bardia.

Ibid., and A.H.Q. M.E. Op. Summaries

Both Derna and Bardia were used by the enemy for small craft from Greece and Crete and they had important petrol and ammunition dumps, while the aerodrome at Derna was the base for enemy air convoys flying between Crete and Cyrenaica. But the main weight of our attacks - as had been the case in April and May - was directed against Benghazi. Attacks were also made on Syrian ports and bases during our short campaign in that country (June - July), and on Rhodes harbour and enemy aerodromes in the Dodecanese Islands (from which enemy aircraft were attacking our shipping in the Mediterranean and our Naval units supporting our ground forces in Syria, and objectives at Alexandria and in the Suez Canal zone. )

The R. A. F. units employed in these attacks were:-

A.H.Q., M.E.  
Op. Summaries

- (i) Benghazi and Cyrenaican ports } Wellingtons of  
Greece, Crete and the } No. 257 Wing compris-  
Dodecanese Islands } ing Nos. 37, 38, 70 and  
148 Squadrons and  
(later) No. 108  
Squadron formed in  
August.

- (ii) Syrian ports } Wellingtons of the above Squadrons,  
Beaufighters of Nos. 252 and 272  
Squadrons (No. 201 Group), Swordfish  
and Albacores of No. 829 Squadron,

/F. A. A.



Syrian ports  
(Cont'd)

F. A. A.: and Blenheims of No.11 Squadron and Swordfish of No.815 Squadron, F. A. A. (Cyprus) against shipping in harbours.

Ibid.

In June and July the Wellingtons constantly attacked Benghazi, and during July it was estimated that their effort combined with the operations by our submarines was restricting the flow of enemy supplies to a level which was barely sufficient to maintain his forces east of Benghazi. During this period the Wellingtons also made several attacks against enemy aerodromes in Greece, Crete and the Dodecanese Islands. Meanwhile in Syria the Wellingtons, Swordfish and Albacores were bombing the docks and harbours of Beirut and Tripoli. In August our bomber attacks against Cyrenaican ports were intensified, particularly against Bardia. Towards the end of the month Wellingtons made several attacks on Tripoli (North Africa), including the night of 29/30 August when 25 tons of bombs and a number of incendiaries were dropped by fifteen Wellingtons on the harbour and shipping from medium low and shallow glide attacks.

AOO-in-C  
corresp. with  
V.C.A.S., 92A  
and  
AHQ, M.E.  
Op. Summaries.

In the meantime (at the request of the C.-in-C. Mediterranean) attacks had been begun on the Corinth Canal with the object of closing it, or at the least of interrupting the enemy's Canal traffic, which it was hoped would force shipping from Italy moving east towards the Aegean Sea to run the gauntlet of attacks from our submarines. The first attack on the Canal was made by thirty-three Wellingtons on the night of 8/9 August when 21 tons of bombs were dropped from heights of 10,000 to 6,000 feet and eight mines were laid in and around the Canal

/entrance

entrance: there was intense and accurate A. A. fire which accounted for one Wellington missing and two others damaged. This attack was followed on the night of 13/14 August by a raid of thirty-two Wellingtons in level bombing attacks from 10,000 feet: 31 tons of bombs were dropped on the south-east bank of the Canal which was reported by three of the crews to have been blocked. The Wellingtons again attacked the Canal on the night of 8/9 September but the results were unobserved.

A.H.Q. M.E.,  
AOC-in-C. Corresp.  
with V.C.A.S.,  
91A (30.9.41)

The policy of attacking the Corinth Canal was queried by the Vice Chief of the Air Staff who considered that "our main object is still to prevent the enemy increasing his strength and resources in North Africa and therefore that a heavy scale of attack should be maintained on Benghazi and other North African ports".

Ibid., 93A  
(2.10.41.)

In his reply Air Marshal Tedder gave the reasons for the Canal attacks and explained his Benghazi policy:

"..... The name Benghazi has for months been printed deep in my mind and in the minds of most of us, and nobody is more conscious than I am that the scale of our effort against it is inadequate. For the first two months or so after I took over my policy was to maintain as heavy a scale of attack on Benghazi as possible, continuously. In practice this turned out to give a comparatively small scale of attack night after night. It also began to have a definitely bad effect on the crews and I came to the conclusion that while continuous nagging was essential, we would only get good results if we staged, during favourable periods, more concentrated attacks. In other words, that it was better to reduce the sustained attack to a few aircraft so as to be able to make a number of heavier attacks with twenty aircraft or more ....."

G.199913/JLL/8/48

/Air

Air Marshal Tedder then mentioned his wish for some Flying Fortresses which he considered would be the best type of aircraft "to sustain some scale of attack on Benghazi by day as well as by night: even small intermittent attacks would, I feel, have a very great effect in slowing down the rate of supply through that port even if it only affected the labour itself ....."

AOC-in-C  
Corresp. with  
the P.M.,  
Sec. of State  
& CAS, Pt. III  
237A  
H.Q. M.E.Op.  
Summaries.

The Air Ministry complied with Air Marshal Tedder's request for Flying Fortresses, three of these aircraft arriving on 29 October and a fourth on 1 November.

During the period 22 September - 14 October, Benghazi was attacked nearly every night and considerable damage was done to shipping and harbour installations: raids were also made on Bardia and Derna. The harbour at Piraeus (Greece) was attacked on the nights of 6/7 and 12/13 October during which 20 tons of bombs were dropped resulting in violent explosions and large fires, and direct hits were scored on buildings and warehouses in the inner harbour.

S.A.A.F.  
Narrative

The attacks on Benghazi were continued for the rest of the month and were concentrated on the Juliana and Cathedral moles. In addition to the Wellingtons, Marylands of Nos. 12 and 21 Squadrons, S. A. A. F.,<sup>1</sup> made several high level bombing attacks on the harbour installations in attempts to disrupt the enemy's off-loading activities.

The first of these attacks was made on 14 October by No. 21 Squadron: from then until 8 November the Marylands made further high level attacks on the port during which some 50 tons of 250 lb. bombs were dropped, which were confirmed by photographs as having been very successful. To assist the

AOC-in-C.  
Corresp. with  
the P.M.  
Sec. of State  
& CAS, Pt. III  
234A.

efforts of the Marylands it was decided to employ the Flying Fortresses, and on 8 November two of these aircraft were

briefed to bomb Benghazi. The first Fortress bombed the target /successfully

<sup>1</sup> Of No. 261 (later No. 3, S.A) Wing, based at Maaten Bagush, under Air H.Q. Western Desert. A.199913/JLL/8/48

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331.

R.A.F.Ops. in  
the West:Desert  
& East: Med:  
18 Nov.'41 to  
19 May '42.

successfully from 28,000 feet, but the results were not observed owing to cloud. The second Fortress force-landed owing to (an unexpected) shortage of fuel, having been last seen some 15 miles south-west of Benghazi. Searches by Hurricanes and Marylands failed to locate it, but on 10 November a Maryland sighted the crew about 75 miles west-south-west of Maddalena. The Maryland dropped water and supplies to the crew and returned later with a Lysander which picked up the captain, the rest of the crew being brought back by a ground column. Before leaving the Fortress, the crew set it on fire and destroyed the special bombsight.

Meanwhile the Marylands had also attacked Derna, and notably on 1 November when nine aircraft bombed the harbour and aerodrome destroying four enemy aircraft on the ground and damaging other dispersed aircraft, and starting a fire in the dock area.

In accordance with the air plan preparatory to the "Crusader" offensive,<sup>1</sup> our attacks on Benghazi were still further intensified during the first half of November. It had been previously intended to conserve our heavy bomber forces for a maximum effort on the night before the opening of "Crusader" and the two following nights,<sup>2</sup> but Air Marshal Tedder considered this inadvisable as the nights in question would be moonless and if the weather deteriorated our effort would be adversely affected. It was therefore decided that the Wellingtons should begin their maximum effort on the night of 5/6 November. Accordingly on that night twenty-two Wellingtons attacked the petrol and stores dumps at Benghazi: 49,000 lbs. of /bombs

AOC-in-C.  
Corresp.with the  
P.M., Sec.of  
State & CAS  
Pt.III 233A

AHQ M.E. Op.  
Summaries

<sup>1</sup> See page 323 supra.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. D-1, D-day and D+1.

bombs were dropped and 900 lbs. of incendiaries which resulted in a large fire on the Juliana mole. This attack was repeated on the nights of 9/10, 12/13, 13/14 and 14/15 November, over 20 tons of H.E. bombs being dropped by eighteen Wellingtons on the night of 12/13 November during which one 4,000 lb. bomb burst in the railway yard and extinguished three searchlights: 12,000 leaflets were also dropped. One Wellington crashed over the target and another one force-landed in enemy territory. On the fourth night nineteen Wellingtons made the attack during which two 4,000 lb. bombs burst on the base of the Cathedral mole. Meanwhile Berka and Derna were also raided on several nights: these raids included an attack on Derna by twenty-two Wellingtons and six Blenheims on the night of 11/12 November when buildings were hit resulting in large fires and explosions.

#### Results of Benghazi Bombing.

Although the bombing of Benghazi preparatory to the "Crusader" offensive did not achieve the closing of the port, yet its use by the enemy was greatly restricted.

According to enemy sources this was due both to the material damage caused and also to the effect on the dock workers and stevedores who left their work and fled for cover whenever an air attack was made. For this reason enemy shipping was only sent to Benghazi when any particular supplies were urgently required, with the result that coastal shipping and mechanised transport from Tripoli was employed which - apart from the time-lag thereby involved - was hampered by shortage of such transport and also (on occasion) of petrol.

/Summary

SECRET

333.

Summary of Bombing Effort from Egypt and the Western Desert.

R.A.F.Ops. in  
the West:Desert  
& East: Med:  
18 Nov.'41 to  
19 May '42  
Appx. "A".

During the period under review our aircraft based in Egypt and the Western Desert made 143 sorties against enemy ports and bases in Greece and Crete including

- (i) the Athens area (which included the port of Piraeus)
- (ii) the Corinth Canal.
- (iii) Scaramanga (naval dockyard and torpedo and mine depot)
- (iv) Heraklion (harbour, aerodrome, barracks and stores dumps)
- (v) Canea (port, barracks and M.T. repair depot)
- (vi) Suda Bay (port and sea-plane base)

They also carried out 1,1014 sorties against Benghazi, in addition to many sorties against other Cyrenaican ports.

/GIBRALTAR

GIBRALTAR

The role of the Royal Air Force at Gibraltar (under No. 200 Group) continued on much the same lines as in the preceding period. The operational effort included:-

A.H.Q., Coastal  
Command.  
S. 15,055, passim

Ibid;  
S. 15,350, Pt.I,  
29B

- (1) the escort of Naval and merchant shipping (which was largely westward from Gibraltar.) As Malta had no aircraft for long-range convoy escorts, Gibraltar provided the anti-submarine escorts for east-bound convoys to the limit of aircraft endurance. - approximately 10° east - after which Malta provided anti-aircraft escorts only.
- (2) anti-submarine patrols to both westward and eastward of Gibraltar.
- (3) long-range reconnaissances in advance of H.M. ships operating to eastward.
- (4) obtaining information of the location of French merchant shipping by reconnaissance patrols.
- (5) intelligence and photographic reconnaissances and patrols by P.R.U. aircraft including the southern coast of Spain, Spanish and French Morocco, and Algiers.

Strength of No. 200 Group

A.H.Q. Coastal  
Command,  
S. 15,055,  
passim

"Flying from the  
rock"  
(compiled by  
Flt.Lt.H.M.Elliot  
Intell: Section  
R.A.F. Gibraltar

As in the previous period, No. 200 Group comprised only No. 202 Squadron with occasional help from Fleet Air Arm aircraft. Until May (1941) No. 202 Squadron was still operating with London flying-boats, and some Swordfish float-planes, which had been transferred from No. 3 A.A.C.U., as a Float-plane Flight. Although these Swordfish were good and reliable aircraft they could not compete with the progress being made in aerial warfare. It was therefore decided to re-equip No. 202 Squadron with Catalinas, the first of which was flown from the United Kingdom in May. Nine

/days

days after the arrival of this Catalina it was attacked, while on convoy duty, by four Focke Wulke Kuriers (which at that time were a grave menace to our shipping). After half an hour's combat the Catalina succeeded in driving off the enemy aircraft two of which failed to return to their base: no damage was sustained by the convoy.

A.H.Q., Coastal  
Command  
S. 15,055,  
passim

By the beginning of June all the London aircraft of No. 202 Squadron had been replaced by Catalinas. This squadron was divided into 'A' and 'B' flights, 'A' flight consisting of an establishment of nine Catalinas (with an actual strength of six of which one was in the U.K.), and 'B' flight consisting of three Swordfish (with an actual strength - in June - of one). In

Ibid. 108A  
(4.8.41)

August, the A.O.C., No. 200 Group requested H.Q. Coastal Command to increase No. 202 Squadron to twelve Catalinas, but all that could be promised was that temporary attachments from the United Kingdom squadrons would be made if urgent commitments for No. 202 Squadron arose. A temporary attachment of this nature had already taken place in July when six Sunderlands of No. 204 Squadron were sent to Gibraltar in connection with operation "Substance".<sup>1</sup> During

Ibid. 111A  
(14.8.41)

August two Swordfish of H.M. Carrier "Ark Royal" co-operated with No. 202 Squadron's 'B' flight in several operations, and one Maryland of No. 1 P.R. Unit was attached to No. 202 Squadron for short periods to carry out photographic reconnaissances. In connection with operation "Halberd" (in September)<sup>2</sup> two Catalinas of No. 209 Squadron and three Hudsons of No. 233 Squadron were attached to No. 202 Squadron, the two Catalinas of No. 209 Squadron remaining for the months of October and November. The P.R.U. Maryland was also attached for various periods in September, October and November.

Ibid., passim

#### Patrols and Reconnaissances

From 1st June to 31st October aircraft of No. 200 Group carried out more than 300 patrols in addition to a number of special  
/sorties

Ibid.

1 See page 246 supra, footnote 1.

2 See page 261 supra, footnote 1.



sorties. June was the peak month of anti-submarine patrols and searches owing to increased submarine activity. On 7th June reconnaissance sources reported six or seven submarines operating on the North Atlantic station, two of which were in an area  $34^{\circ}$  -  $36^{\circ}$  north and  $12^{\circ}$  -  $14^{\circ}$  west. A Catalina made a search for these vessels on the following day and sighted a surfaced U-boat in the centre of that area; three 500 lb. bombs were dropped but failed to register a hit, the U-boat using high speed evasive tactics. A machine-gun duel ensued in which the Catalina sustained several hits and the U-boat then dived. On the next day (9th June) a Catalina made anti-submarine searches in approximately the same area and sighted a U-boat in position  $34^{\circ}$  north and  $14^{\circ}$  west: four 500 lb. bombs were dropped but failed to hit the target, and again a machine-gun combat took place resulting in minor damage to the aircraft. In neither case were any of our surface forces available to continue the U-boat hunt.

Ibid. and No.  
202 Sqn.  
O. R. B. June

Aircraft of No. 202 Squadron were frequently employed on escort duty to convoys: on 15th June, a homeward-bound convoy some 200 miles west of Gibraltar escorted by one Catalina was attacked by four Focke Wulke 200's. The Catalina attacked each of the Focke Wulfe's in turn with machine-gun fire as it made its approach to bomb them: it was ascertained later that two of the enemy aircraft failed to return to their base. The convoy sustained no damage.

During the succeeding weeks several Focke Wulfe 200's were sighted by our aircraft in the vicinity of our convoys to the west of Gibraltar. It appeared probable that the Focke Wulfes were shadowing our convoys for the purpose of passing on the course and speed of the convoys to U-boats patrolling in the area. On several occasions when Catalinas attempted to intercept the Focke Wulfes the latter's superior

/speed

speed made interception impossible.

#### Anti-submarine Attacks

The Catalinas usually attacked U-boats with bombs and depth-charges<sup>1</sup> but no claims of sinking U-boats were made during the period under review. Apart from the bombing, the failure to sink U-boats may have been due to faulty depth-charges: for instance, on 24th October a Catalina while on anti-submarine escort duty to a convoy attacked a U-boat (which crash-dived) with two 450 lb. depth-charges, the first of which fell approximately on the centre of the U-boat but failed to explode: the U-boat was just below periscope depth when it was attacked. Other somewhat similar instances occurred.

#### Enemy Air Activity

A.H.Q.,  
Coastal Cmd.  
S. 15,055,  
passin

The enemy made a few spasmodic air attacks on Gibraltar but little damage was sustained. On 14th July bombs from an unidentified aircraft (which was fired on by the A.A. defences) were reported to have fallen in the sea and a few on land near Campamento. Three aircraft (en route to the Middle East) which were standing on the North Front aerodrome were holed by shell splinters. There were no enemy air attacks on the Rock during August, October or November.

Ibid. 121B

During August the enemy began employing Focke Wulfe Condors for reporting British convoys to his submarines in their vicinity and 'homing' them. Attacks on the convoys were few and it appeared that the Condors were being used more in the capacity above mentioned than

Ibid., 124B

as bombers. In September this shadowing of convoys by the Focke Wulfe Condors increased, and on 21st September one of the Condors attacked a small ship and set it on fire: the Condor was, however, itself attacked and destroyed by a fighter from H.M.S. Audacity.

#### Radar Situation and Fighter Defence, Gibraltar

A.H.Q.  
Coastal Cmd.  
S. 15,350  
Pt. I 21A  
(report by  
Wg.Cdr.  
Chamberlain)

In October, Wing Commander G.P. Chamberlain (representing the C. in C., Coastal Command) visited Gibraltar to report on the available radar and other facilities. At that time there was no organised Fighter Defence for the Rock. The three existing Radar

/stations

<sup>1</sup> 250 lb. and 450 lb. depth-charges were used.  
G.199913/JL/6/1948

stations were manned by Royal Artillery personnel of the Gibraltar Anti-Aircraft Brigade and were used for early warning of the approach of aircraft and shipping and for fire control in connection with Coastal Artillery and A.A. fire. The only fighters which were, on occasion, available for defence were Fleet Air Arm aircraft from aircraft carriers, but these aircraft were seldom landed at the North Front aerodrome. The expense of taking a carrier and its escort to sea for the purpose of operational flying training within fighter range of Gibraltar made shore directed interception exercises almost impossible. It was arranged that certain R.A.F. Hurricanes from Catapult Aircraft merchant ships and others from H.M. ships carrying out a similar function should have a pool of aircraft ashore in the case of the R.A.F. and a shore-based squadron in the case of the Fleet Air Arm. This, it was considered, would provide some form of fighter defence for "the concentrated and highly tempting target" which Gibraltar offered to an enemy air striking force.

#### Gibraltar Airfield-Extension of Runway

"Flying from  
the Rock"

In April (1941), after the arrival of the first transit aircraft<sup>1</sup> from the United Kingdom, the O.C. No. 202 Group asked for assistance from the Army to improve the conditions of the landing strip so as to facilitate the landing and "take-offs" of these transit aircraft. The request was put through the Vice-Admiral, Gibraltar, at whose suggestion an Inter-Services Committee was formed to go into the matter. After consultation with the authorities in London the Committee decided inter alia to deepen the width of the runway and construct a new extension westwards at an angle to the existing strip. This necessitated the abolition of three recreation grounds but it resulted in a considerable improvement in efficiency.

/The

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<sup>1</sup> They were Wellingtons and Bombays.  
G.199913/JL/6/1948

Ibid.

The Governor, General Lord Gort, approved the scheme and took a personal interest in its development. The method employed for the construction of the runway was to use broken stone which was rolled in the then cold-sprayed with bitumen emulsion. To complete the work it was necessary to extend the strip for a short distance into the sea just above the high water mark, but nothing on a large scale was contemplated. However, on 27th October, the Inter-Services Committee received instructions from the War Office that the runway was to be extended to a length of 1,550 yards with a width of 150 yards. Lord Gort cabled the War Office that this "would appear to be a major engineering feat" and explained that it would entail half a million tons of filling, and building the runway for over 500 yards into the sea; and, moreover, that there was no lee to protect the work of construction. In conclusion, he stressed that "as any such project must affect essential work for the defence of the Fortress .....

I presume that whole question has been examined on the highest level" - a presumption which the War Office confirmed.

"Flying from  
the Rook"

On 3rd November, Lord Gort sent his plans and estimates for the work to the War Office: the extension into the sea would have a freeboard of 6 feet 6 inches above high water mark, and 40,000 cubic yards of filling would be required. When further details had been worked out it became apparent that the extension into the sea would be 570 yards. The work of construction was beyond the scope of any local resources, but the matter was considered by the authorities in London to be urgent, especially as the United States government had pressed for it "as a necessary insurance in the U.S. Ferry Service from West Africa to the United Kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

The implications of the new scheme were somewhat alarming to our Ambassador at Madrid. He cabled to Lord Gort that "to embark on..... so extensive a plan will raise most embarrassing questions with

/the

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1 i.e. in connection with the arrival of the first U.S. bombers to assist in R.A.F. attacks on Germany.

SECRET

the Spanish authorities", and he suggested that "a discreet and strictly limited reclamation" might improve the landing-ground without either impairing our relations with the Spanish government or taking a possibly very long period to complete. Nevertheless the work continued, the Home Government promising both labour and plant from the United Kingdom and certain additional plant from the United States. At the same time an R.A.F. Station was erected at the North Front.

Ibid;

In the meantime there was some considerable misgiving when it came to be realised that the road to Gibraltar from Spain (which passes across the neutral zone) could not be diverted and would of necessity have to cross the extended runway. This meant that some 7,000 Spaniards would traverse the centre of the runway twice daily on their way to and from their work in Gibraltar, which, it seemed, would open the way for the infiltration of enemy sympathisers and even, perhaps, of enemy agents. Although this was an extraordinary situation there was no alternative, and the only safeguard was to apply the Security Defence system in Gibraltar with rigorous intensity.

Towards the end of November the A.O.C.-in-C., Coastal Command (Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferte) inspected the work; he suggested that it might be extended half a mile to seaward so as to provide a runway with a total length of 1,800 yards. The Air Council approved this suggestion, but as being in the nature of a long-term policy, and it was decided that the immediate task was to extend the runway to 1,550 yards, and that when this was completed, the work could be further extended provided that the runway could be freely used at all times.

/on

On the arrival of the labour and plant from the United Kingdom the work began to progress with impressive rapidity, and by the end of the year the runway had been extended to over 900 yards, but it was to take several months before the immediate objective of 1,550 yards was completed.

With regard to the housing of the Catalinas of No. 202 Squadron there was only one slip-way, and a hangar was not completed until September (1941). It was hoped that a second slip-way would be constructed which would then give facilities for the Catalinas to undergo major inspections at Gibraltar instead of having to go to the United Kingdom for this purpose.

~~ADDITIONAL~~

SECTION IV(18 November 1941 - 30 June 1942)STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE PERIOD

This period opened with the British "Crusader" offensive (18 November 1941 to 20 January 1942) for which, as we have seen, preparations had been made during the preceding months.

From the aspect of air-sea warfare the period was marked by the following features:-

- (1) the capture of Benghazi and the relief of Tobruk (during the "Crusader" advance)
- (2) the loss of Benghazi (during the British retreat to Gazala, 21 January to 24 February)
- (3) Rommel's advance and re-capture of Tobruk (26 May to 20 June)
- (4) the return of the Luftwaffe to Sicily and its attempted liquidation of Malta
- (5) intensified air-sea war including
  - (i) British strikes at enemy supply lines and the bombing of his ports and bases.
  - (ii) efforts to relieve Malta by convoys from the east and the west.
  - (iii) intensified enemy activity against British convoys and H.M. ships.
  - (iv) increased enemy efforts to get his convoys to North Africa.
- (6) the weakening of the Royal Navy by calls from the Far East
- (7) the passing of naval control of the Mediterranean to air control whereby the security of the Mediterranean became the responsibility of the R.A.F.

Improvement in the General Situation

During the short period of the Eighth Army's "Crusader" advance into Cyrenaica the situation in the Mediterranean brightened considerably; first, the influence of the reconstituted No.201 Group as a Naval Co-operation unit now began to make itself felt, and secondly, the capture of the Cyrenaican airfields round the Jebel Akdar 'bulge' made the R.A.F. sea reconnaissance and attacks on enemy shipping more easy and, by providing improved facilities for fighter protection to British ships, afforded a reasonable chance of running convoys through to Malta.

Fighters on Shipping Protection

The Eighth Army's brief occupation of the Cyrenaican 'bulge' gave the British an opportunity to use Benghazi harbour, but the period was too short to assist their own critical supply position to any extent.

The supply of merchant vessels was very limited and the protection of those few that could be sent to Benghazi and Malta imposed a severe strain on the Navy and the R.A.F. Sea-borne supplies could, however, be sent into Tobruk for a much longer period (i.e. until its re-capture by Rommel on 20 June), and during that time most of the Western Desert's fighter squadrons - in addition to No.201 (N.C.) Group's Beaufighters - were employed in protecting shipping on the Tobruk run and also, for the few weeks that it was in British hands, to Benghazi. Unfortunately, only a few ships were equipped with Radio and, moreover, the Western Desert fighters had no V.H.F. This meant that no vectored interceptions could be made and the fighters had, therefore, to maintain air protection directly above the British convoys.

While the "Crusader" offensive was in progress, shipping carrying material forward was faced with the continual threat of enemy submarines, which increased as the enemy's air position grew more difficult for him during the month of December (1941).

#### The Situation after "Crusader"

The enemy's successful counter-attack in January (1942) forced back the British troops to the Gazala line where they remained (from the middle of February) until Rommel resumed his offensive towards the end of May. It was fortunate that the enemy's supplies were insufficient for him to exploit his initial success any further, for had his supplies been adequate he would in all probability have pushed beyond Gazala and re-taken Tobruk in February. The reasons for his inadequate supplies were the heavy shipping losses which he had sustained from constant attacks by the Navy and the R.A.F. during the period covered by SECTION III of this narrative, and also the great amount of material - including (according to British estimates) upwards of a thousand aircraft destroyed or abandoned - which he lost during the "Crusader" advance.

As a result of these losses of the enemy and of the British losses during the retreat to Gazala, a new race for supplies began. The geographical positions of the opposing forces were roughly the same as they had been before "Crusader", the chief difference being that the British could use Tobruk as a forward supply port while the enemy could again use Benghazi as his forward base. The problems which faced the British from February to the middle of May were, essentially,

- (a) to prevent enemy supplies from reaching Benghazi and Tripoli
- (b) to safeguard their own supplies from Alexandria to Tobruk.

But in the meantime Malta had been strengthened by convoys in December and January and its striking power against the Axis supply lines had correspondingly increased. Knowing this, the enemy had already begun a full-scale offensive by the Luftwaffe against Malta with the object of liquidating once and for all "the fox that was gnawing the vitals of Italy". Between the middle of February and the middle of May, Malta experienced its darkest hour and its striking power was seriously curtailed early in March. During this period the enemy was able to build up sufficient material for Rommel to stage his final advance on Egypt on 26 May. Meanwhile the efforts of the Luftwaffe to destroy Malta had narrowly failed and the arrival of Spitfires from March onwards materially altered the desperate situation in which the island then lay.



Enemy Attacks Against Convoys

While the Navy and the R.A.F. were doing their utmost to damage the enemy's supplies they were also making an equal effort to safeguard British supplies to Tobruk. This effort was strongly challenged by the enemy who directed every available weapon at his disposal (e.g. submarines, torpedo and dive-bombers and minelayers) against the British convoys. To combat these attacks the Navy and the R.A.F. adopted certain counter-measures which achieved a considerable measure of success. Meanwhile the R.A.F. continued its attacks on enemy ports and bases thereby weakening the Axis supply position.

The Enemy's Advance Resumed

In spite of the attacks on the enemy's supplies, Rommel's final advance brought him to within sixty miles of Alexandria. But by that time he had outrun his strength and he was unable to penetrate into the Delta area. His advance had, however, given the enemy (on paper) a greater advantage in the Mediterranean theatre than he had ever possessed before. In addition to using Tobruk as a forward supply base he could route his ships east of Malta's aircraft range through the Corinth Canal and via Crete to Tobruk, and he could also bring up material by road, rail and small coast-wise craft. Moreover, he denied the R.A.F. the use of the landing-grounds between Tobruk and Daba as reconnaissance and forward striking bases, and by his rapid advance he forced the R.A.F. and F.A.A. ship-striking squadrons to move to bases further and further back. The advent (in June) of American Liberator heavy bombers proved a welcome reinforcement to the R.A.F.'s Wellingtons in their continual task of hammering the enemy's supply bases.

The War of the Convoys and the Passing from Naval to Air Control

The failure of the British attempts to run convoys from Alexandria to Malta in February and June showed once again that "a naval force without strong fighter protection is at the mercy of bombers and torpedo-bombers if the attacks are pressed home with determination". But in fact the time was now approaching when strong fighter protection was hardly - if indeed - sufficient for the purpose, as demonstrated by the R.A.F. torpedo air attack (in April) on an important Italian convoy escorted by five warships and a fighter screen of a hundred Me.109's. These aircraft - versus - warship battles, which reached their peak during Rommel's advance from Gazala, indicated the passing of naval control of the Mediterranean to air control and that thenceforward the security for the British of Mussolini's vaunted Mare Nostrum must depend upon the efforts of the R.A.F. Moreover, since the entry of Japan into the war (December 1941) the strength of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean had been depleted by urgent calls for aircraft-carriers and other warships to the Far Eastern theatre.

Attacks on Enemy Shipping

During the period from November 1941 to the end of June (1942) it was estimated that the R.A.F. and Naval (normally submarine) attacks on enemy shipping in the Mediterranean accounted for more than 60 merchant ships (approximating a total of 230,000 tons) and 34 naval vessels sunk. Of these sinkings, 5 merchant ships and 5 naval vessels were claimed by the R.A.F. and F.A.A., but the latter also accounted for upwards of 80 merchant ships and some 40 naval vessels damaged.<sup>1</sup>

/Naval

1 For the same period the Royal Navy's claims of merchant and naval vessels damaged was 27 and 18 respectively.

Naval Losses

In the meantime the Royal Navy had sustained severe losses in capital ships in the Mediterranean. On 13 November, the aircraft carrier Ark Royal was sunk by a German submarine off Gibraltar, and the battleship Barham shared a similar fate off the Libyan coast - with a loss of 800 men - on 25 November. Then, on 19 December, some ratings from an Italian U-boat made a daring "human torpedo" attack on Alexandria harbour. With "extraordinary courage and ingenuity" <sup>1</sup> these men fixed "limpet" bombs to the battleships Queen Elizabeth and Valiant which disabled them for several months. These losses meant that the Navy had no longer any battle squadron in the Mediterranean, its surface ships consisting of only a few cruisers and destroyers. Against these the Italians still had five or six battleships of the Littorio or modernised class, several 8-inch and 6-inch cruisers and fresh destroyer flotillas.

Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval Ops.,  
Apr. 1941 to  
Jan. 1943.

THE CENTRAL

1. Statement by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons.

THE CENTRAL BASIN

D/AOC/1 Pt.III  
(C.O.S.Papers),  
50A (Chiefs  
of Staff to  
Genl. Auchin-  
leck,  
3.3.42)

During the period under review an integral part of the enemy's strategy was to gain control of the Mediterranean. This involved the liquidation of Malta which, if successful, would mean that "the Axis would be able to reinforce Libya almost without hindrance..... and (our) supplies of aircraft to the Middle East would also be seriously affected". The enemy's main supply lines from Naples to Tripoli, and Brindisi and Piraeus to Benghazi, and his subsidiary supply lines from Palermo to Bizerta all lay within reach of the striking power of the Malta-based Naval units (cruisers, destroyers and submarines) and the R.A.F. and Fleet Air Arm squadrons. The destruction of Malta was therefore a vital necessity for the enemy and to this end he made determined and sustained air attacks which, up to that time, constituted the most concentrated air bombardment of the war.

R.A.F. Ops.  
in West: ...  
Desert and  
East: Med.  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May '42  
(A.H.B. IIJL/  
12)

Malta's gravest crisis occurred in April (1942) when it seemed that the Axis Powers might achieve their object and destroy the island's defences by overwhelming numbers. During this period 400 enemy sorties were made in one day, 1,638 sorties in one week and 5,715 in one month. In April, 6,728 tons of bombs were dropped on the island, forty-one R.A.F. fighters were destroyed and eighty-seven damaged, and our A.A. gunners were compelled to limit their weapons to firing 15 rounds per day. Nevertheless, Malta survived the ordeal (assisted to a considerable degree by the arrival of the Spitfires), and the enemy's losses of some 200 aircraft destroyed or probably destroyed and nearly 180 damaged during April proved to be the turning point of the defence and demonstrated that Malta could not be subdued by air attack alone.

Ibid:

The strength of the enemy's onslaughts greatly affected Malta's striking power which could only be maintained on a limited scale after the beginning of March. Apart from a few periods when special strategic bombing operations were carried out, the majority of Malta's air attacks were confined to shipping strikes. At the same time a successful effort to keep up the supply of delivery aircraft to the Middle East via Malta was maintained and during the critical period of the enemy's attacks against the island the volume of aircraft passing through Malta in March, April and May exceeded that of the three preceding quieter months. <sup>1</sup>

Strength of the R.A.F. Malta.

At the opening of the "Crusader" offensive the air units at Malta comprised nine squadrons as follows:-

Nos. 18 (detachmt.) and 107.	Blenheims
No. 40 (detachmt.)	A.S.V. Wellingtons
No. 104	Wellingtons (transferred to No. 205 Group, Egypt, in January).
No. 69	Marylands/Hurricanes
No. 126, 185 249	Hurricanes
No. 828 (F.A.A.)	Swordfish/Albacores
No. 830 (F.A.A.)	Swordfish

/OF

1. The total number of reinforcing aircraft which passed through Malta during the period under review was 529.

Of these, the Blenheims, Swordfish and Albacores were mainly employed on shipping strikes (the Swordfish and Albacores also being used for the mining of enemy harbours), assisted on occasion by the Wellingtons in addition to the latter's bombing operations of enemy ports and bases. <sup>1</sup>

#### Malta's Shipping Strikes

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summa-  
ries; R.A.F.  
Anti-ship-  
ping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vols. 2 & 3

While the "Crusader" offensive was in progress, Malta-based aircraft continued their strikes against enemy shipping in transit and in harbours. On 19 November, five Blenheims attacked a convoy east of Homs comprising one 5,000 and one 2,000 ton merchant ships and one schooner, escorted by one large destroyer. The attack was made at mast height in the face of heavy A.A. fire and a hit was obtained on the large merchantman which immediately listed to starboard. The schooner was dismasted and left apparently sinking, and the smaller merchant ship was damaged by a near miss. <sup>2</sup> Three Blenheims were shot down by A.A. fire.

On the night of 21/22 November, thirteen Wellingtons and four Swordfish attacked a convoy of one cruiser, five destroyers and five merchant ships which had been reported by air reconnaissance some 12 miles off Cape Spartivento. The Swordfish opened the attack with four torpedoes, one of which hit the cruiser causing a large flash and a pall of smoke: one 7,000 ton vessel was probably hit. <sup>3</sup> The Wellingtons then attacked in the face of well-directed A.A. fire, dropping over 20 tons of S.A.P. bombs from low and medium heights, the target being illuminated by flares from one Wellington detailed for that duty. No hits were observed, the enemy emitting a thick smoke-screen, but sticks of bombs straddled the ships. One of the Swordfish failed to return.

Ibid: and  
A.H.B.1,  
S.13(Extract  
fromCiano's  
diary)

On 1 December, the 10,000 ton tanker Iridio Mantovani was bombed successfully by four Blenheims, 65 miles off Melita, and was finally sunk by H.M. ships following upon signals from our aircraft: 7,000 tons of fuel were lost with this vessel. "It cannot be denied", wrote Count Ciano "that the blow was a hard one".

Several other attacks were carried out, and during the week 9-16 December a special effort was made against enemy shipping in harbour. Reconnaissance aircraft had reported concentrations of shipping at Patras (Corinth Canal), Argostoli (Cephalonia), and Catania and Trapani (Sicily), and some units of the Italian fleet were sighted at Taranto. It was thought that the latter were about to sail in an attempt to get supplies to Benghazi or Tripoli, and it was decided to attack these units in harbour and not to wait until they had put to sea. Accordingly, on the night of 15/16 December, twenty Wellingtons attacked these units at Taranto, dropping 30 tons of H.E. bombs (including three 4,000 pounders) from heights of 14,000 to 8,000 feet, but an effective smoke screen obscured results: 32,000 pamphlets were also dropped on the town. Meanwhile, Blenheims had attacked enemy shipping in Argostoli harbour on the 11, 13, and again on 16 December, with 500 lb. bombs. All these attacks were pressed home in the face of intense A.A. fire and enemy fighter opposition.

/The .

1. At the end of November some Beaufighters were sent from the U.K. to Malta for 'ground-strafting' enemy formations in the Sirte area and on the Tripoli-Benghazi road. In December they were transferred to Egypt for operations against ground targets in Cyrenaica.
2. The 5,000 ton ship was officially assessed as 'damaged', the schooner as 'severely damaged' and the 2,000 ton ship was assessed under Category IV.
3. The cruiser was officially assessed as 'damaged' and the merchant ship was assessed under Category IV.

Ibid: and  
No.107  
Sqn.  
O.R.B.Dec.

The first of these attacks was made by six Blenheims on a 5,000 ton merchant vessel, a possible hit being scored; 1 one Blenheim was shot down. On 13 December, six Blenheims (of No.107 squadron) attacked one 8,000 ton merchant ship, one 4,000 ton merchant ship, and two destroyers which were bombed and machine-gunned, but no hits were observed. Enemy fighters on patrol intercepted our aircraft and from the ensuing combats two Blenheims were missing; one enemy fighter was damaged. About an hour and a half later, five other Blenheims renewed the attack but results were unobserved: enemy fighters again intercepted and one ME. 109 and one Macchi were damaged. The final attack (on 16 December) was made by four Blenheims on one 4,000 ton merchant ship, one 3,000 ton tanker,<sup>2</sup> one destroyer and a schooner but no results were observed.

The attack on enemy shipping at Patras was made by nineteen Wellingtons on the night of 11/12 December, the target being three large merchant ships and a number of small ships, presumably with reinforcements and supplies for the ground forces in Libya. In spite of bad visibility from low clouds and rain, the largest ship was thought to have been hit as smoke was seen coming from the stern: other bombs fell among the shipping and buildings on the quay side, several of which were demolished. Meanwhile, on the same day (11 December), two Blenheims (of Nos.107 and 18 squadrons, detachment) operating separately, had attacked shipping in Catania harbour from mast height, the first Blenheim scoring two hits on a 2,000 ton vessel which burst into flames, and the second Blenheim making a probable hit on a 2,500 ton vessel.<sup>3</sup>

A.S.V. Wellingtons and Torpedo-carrying Aircraft of the F.A.A.

Air H.Q.  
Med: S.  
151/9Air,  
22A (Report  
by F/O  
Glazer,  
Sigs.O.)

In the meantime the three long range Wellingtons fitted with A.S.V., which had been sent to Malta towards the end of September 1941,<sup>4</sup> and formed into a Special Duties Flight - had been employed as follows:

- (1) Co-operating with Royal Naval forces based at Malta
- (2) Co-operating with the Fleet Air Arm Albacores and Squadrons (of Nos. 828 and 830 squadrons)
- (3) Night bombing attacks on, and night shadowing of, enemy shipping
- (4) Sweeps along the enemy's known shipping lanes.

It was also envisaged that the A.S.V. Wellingtons might be employed against enemy submarines should these become a menace in the Central Basin.

With regard to (1); the method employed was for the leading ship to be fitted with a "Rooster" (a modification of I.F.F. Mark II - receiver 3078) so that the A.S.V. Wellington could, by a series of signals, lead the Naval force into the desired action.

/The

No.107sqdn.  
O.R.B.Dec.

1. This was officially assessed under Category IV.
2. The tanker was hit amid ships with one bomb by a Blenheim captained by Sergt. Kidly. Sergt. Thompson (who captained another of the Blenheims) undershot the tanker by 10 yards, but he saw one bomb from another aircraft hit the tanker on the water line just below the funnel.

No.107  
Sqn.  
O.R.B.Dec.

3. The 2,000 ton ship was officially assessed as 'sunk' (but it is not mentioned in the List from enemy sources of Italian ships sunk). It was hit with 2x500 lb. bombs: the Capt: of the Blenheim concerned was Sgt. Thompson.
4. See Section III page 255.

The aircraft then set out to locate both the enemy (generally a convoy) and the British surface forces and consequently bring the two together whilst maintaining as great a degree of W/T. silence as possible. A Fleet Air Arm Observer usually accompanied the leading ship to assist with the sending of W/T. reports and to act generally as a Naval liaison Officer.

Air H.Q. Med:  
S. 161/Air, 893B  
(Appx. B to Report  
No.R.14-Op.  
Research Section,  
M.E. - Account of  
Anti-shipping Ops.  
in Central & East:  
Med: April '42)

With regard to (2); the tactics employed were as follows:- enemy convoys, which were normally located by reconnaissance Marylands (of No.69 squadron) on the day preceding the strike, were re-located on the same night by an A.S.V. Wellington. This aircraft was followed 30 minutes later by a torpedo striking force of Swordfish or Albacores, the leader being equipped with A.S.V. instead of carrying a torpedo. The striking force was led to the target

- (a) by a preliminary sighting report from the Wellington
- (b) by 'homing' the A.S.V. on to a 'Rooster' fitted to the Wellington
- (c) in the final stages by flares dropped by the Wellington

The attack was then made by the striking force: on the completion of the attack the striking force formed up whenever possible round a flame float dropped by the leader, and returned in company to its base. In some cases the A.S.V. Wellington was dispensed with, the A.S.V. leader of the striking force using his A.S.V. to locate and 'home' on the convoy, A.S.V. ranges of 20-30 miles being normal (at a flying height of 800 feet): the range of 'pick-up' of the 'Rooster' was normally 70 to 80 miles. In practice, it was found that the number of hits obtained by the torpedo aircraft remained consistently at a high level.

During the seven week period 1 January - 24 February, 32 torpedoes were launched and approximately 23 hits were scored; moreover, out of 59 sorties (including A.S.V. leaders but excluding aircraft which turned back owing to mechanical or other failure) only seven aircraft failed to reach their targets.

R.A.F.Ops. in  
the West: Desert  
& East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42

An increasing use was made of the Special Duties Flight of A.S.V. Wellingtons consequent upon the experience gained in the above mentioned employments, and it was hoped that A.S.V. searches both east and west of Malta would be maintained every night. This proved to be impossible owing to the shortage of trained A.S.V. crews, completed searches being, on the average, one every two days. Shipping strikes frequently followed A.S.V. sightings, and out of ten sightings made in the first fortnight of the "Crusader" offensive period, five were followed by strikes. In the succeeding fortnight shipping strikes made by Malta aircraft were the result of six A.S.V. contacts. On the night of 7/8 February an A.S.V. sighting was followed by submarine action instead of by bomber or torpedo-carrying aircraft.

/Further

Further Shipping Strikes from Malta

In the new year (1942) shipping strikes from Malta showed a marked decrease owing to bad weather and increasing attacks by enemy aircraft on the island. Adverse weather conditions prevailed until the end of February, and although this may have curtailed enemy attacks it seriously affected Malta's striking power. As there were no alternative landing grounds on the island, any sudden change in weather conditions necessitated recalling all aircraft to their bases, and as it was difficult to obtain weather forecasts of more than six hours, sorties were consequently restricted to that period. Towards the end of December (1941) the weather had deteriorated with gales, severe rain and thunder storms and much low cloud. In January, the fighter aerodromes of Hal Far and Takali became waterlogged and operations had to be suspended for several days, the fighter aircraft being transferred to the bomber aerodrome at Luqa which was less affected by the weather. But the resulting overcrowding of Luqa caused some disorganisation among the bombers, and strong cross-winds at this time of the year precluded operations by the Wellingtons on several occasions. The rains - which were abnormal in intensity - also affected the aircraft dispersal areas which did not stand up to the bad weather as well as had been expected. In this emergency Army personnel rendered great assistance, more than 2,500 men being provided to work on repairs to the aerodromes which, apart from the damage caused by the weather, were also subjected to heavy air attacks. The existing dispersal areas were improved and additional ones, together with new taxiing strips, were constructed, and work was begun on building aircraft pens.<sup>1</sup>

Air H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. January.

H.Q. M.E. Op.  
Summaries and  
R.A.F. Anti-  
Shipping Ops.  
(Merchant), Vol. 3 and  
List from Enemy  
sources of Italian  
merchant ships sunk.

In spite of the foregoing difficulties, strikes were carried out against enemy shipping in transit whenever possible. On the night of 6/7 January, four Swordfish severely damaged a 4,000 ton merchant vessel west of Kuriat Island, and on the same night a single Albacore scored a torpedo hit on the 5,700 ton merchant ship Perla which was last seen stationary (by the A.S.V. Wellington shadowing it) some 45 miles north-west of Kuriat, with its escorting destroyer alongside engaged in taking off its crew. (This vessel was later confirmed as sunk).

No. 107 sqdn.  
O.R.B. January.

Meanwhile, some heavy attacks were made on enemy airfields and bases by Malta-based aircraft. On 4 January, ten Blenheims (of Nos. 18 squadron detachment and 107 squadron) attacked the Sicilian airfield of Castel Vetrano where seventy-five transport aircraft -- mostly JU. 52's and SM. 82's -- were parked close together. The attack was made in three waves, the Blenheims bombing from between twenty and a hundred feet, and destroying over thirty aircraft and seriously damaging many others without any loss to themselves. On the following night nine Wellingtons repeated this attack, setting a further fourteen aircraft on fire and blowing up a petrol dump.

/In

Official Account  
of the R.A.F. in  
Malta, June '40  
to Nov. '42.

- 1 Within three months the Army laid 27 miles of dispersal runways and built 14 large bomber pens, 170 fighter pens, 70 reconnaissance pens and 31 Naval aircraft pens.

A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. Feb:

In February, the Blenheims of No. 21 squadron (which had been sent to Malta from the U.K.) made six sorties against enemy shipping but no definite results were observed. They also carried out three 'ground -strafing' attacks which caused damage to military buildings and M.T. on the North African coastal road. During these operations eight of the Blenheims were lost. During the same month the Albacores of No. 828 squadron F.A.A., carried out ten operations against enemy naval forces and shipping in which two cruisers and one destroyer were hit, one 4,000 ton merchant ship was sunk and two 6,000 ton merchantmen and a tanker were damaged. Meanwhile the Swordfish of No. 830 squadron, F.A.A., made four shipping strikes - during which a 6,000 ton merchant ship was set on fire - and one mine-laying operation in Tripoli harbour: two aircraft failed to return from these operations.

Ibid: and  
R.A.F. Anti-  
Shipping Ops.  
(Merchant) Vol. 3.

A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. March.

In March, the increasing enemy air attacks on Malta caused considerable losses to the island's aircraft, and the striking power of the two F.A.A. squadrons - already depleted during their operations in February, and further hampered by a shortage of necessary spares - was considerably reduced. Nevertheless, the Swordfish sank a merchant vessel of 2,000 tons and severely damaged a 6,000 ton ship on the night of 17/18 March, and the Albacores made several shipping sweeps during that month.

#### Enemy Convoy Tactics

R.A.F. Ops. in  
the West: Desert  
& East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42.

From the end of March the enemy largely reverted to the tactics which he had formerly employed with considerable success of running single ships, heavily armed with A.A. guns, instead of exposing his convoys to the risk of attack.

Previously the chief Italian port of embarkation was Naples, but the Italians now begun to use Genoa. The normal route was between Corsica and the Balearic Islands to the North African coast off Cape Bon. From there the ships kept close inshore to Tripoli.

Supplies bound for Benghazi were generally carried from Argostoli, Navarino and other ports in or near Greece, or from Crete, in schooners or other small vessels. Supply ships sailing to Crete and the Dodecanese Islands continued to use Patras Roads (at the entrance to the Gulf of Corinth) as their main concentration point.

A.H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B. April  
and  
H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

In April, the A.S.V. Wellingtons made a few attacks on small enemy convoys and single ships but with some disappointing results. A Swordfish which had been fitted with A.S.V. led the Albacores in four shipping sweeps, and also in two attacks on enemy convoys on the nights of 26/27 and 27/28 April. In the first of these two attacks a torpedo hit was claimed on a merchantman of 5,000 tons, and in the second a 4,000 ton ship - escorted by three destroyers - received a torpedo hit which resulted in thick columns of smoke.

After the arrival of strong reinforcements of Spitfires in May, <sup>1</sup> Malta's striking power improved considerably as the fighter squadrons began to gain local air superiority.

/During

1. See page 356 infra.



During the latter part of that month the A.S.V. Wellingtons made five attacks on enemy convoys, and the Swordfish and Albacores carried out several sorties and shipping sweeps, including attacks on two convoys by the Albacores.

#### Advance and Retreat of British Forces in Cyrenaica

In the meantime the British "Crusader" offensive had pushed forward into Cyrenaica. On 9 December, Tobruk was relieved, and Benghazi was captured on 24 December. On 28/29 December, the enemy withdrew to Jedabaya, and on 2 January the Eighth Army captured Bardia. Four days later (6 January) the enemy withdrew to Agheila. British forces captured Sollum on 12 January and Halfaya on 17 January, the enemy withdrawing behind the Agheila line to build up his strength. On 21 January the enemy began a reconnaissance in strength which developed into a full-scale counter-attack. He re-captured Benghazi on 28 January, and by the middle of February the Eighth Army had retreated to the Gazala line.

#### Malta's Air Reinforcement and the Luftwaffe 'Blitz'

AOC/47, Pt. II,  
245A  
(AOC. Med: to  
AOC-in-C.)

Meanwhile the enemy's increasing air attacks against Malta necessitated the strengthening of the island's fighter force. During the first week of February, ME. 109's "came out like Summer flies" and flew round the island at various heights; the Malta Hurricanes were outnumbered and outclassed by these aircraft of superior performance. The Luftwaffe laid on constant patrols of ME. 109's during the day-time and they also employed them as fighter-bombers against our aerodromes. The A.O.C. at Malta (A-V-M. Lloyd) considered that the protection of incoming convoys would be rendered very difficult as the Malta fighters would be engaged by superior enemy fighters while the JU.88's would be able to bomb wherever they liked.<sup>1</sup>

/The

1. According to an enemy source, the following units were available for the attacks on Malta:-

G.A.F.  
Activities in the  
Med. 1941-43  
(AHB.6.  
Translation  
No.VII/II)

	<u>Estimated No. of aircraft</u> (as per sub-joined Note)
3 bomber <u>Geschwader</u> (altogether 8 <u>Gruppen</u> )	260
2 Stuka <u>Gruppen</u>	65
2 torpedo-carrying <u>Staffeln</u>	18
2 fighter <u>Geschwader</u> (altogether 5 <u>Gruppen</u> )	160
1 night fighter <u>Gruppe</u>	35
1 T.E. fighter <u>Gruppe</u>	35
1 long range Recce. <u>Staffel</u>	9
Total	582

(Note. A Staffel was at this period probably 9 aircraft  
A Gruppe comprised 3 Staffeln (later in the war it was often increased to 4). It also had a Gruppen Stab - a kind of H.Q. flight of 3 or 4 aircraft.)  
A Geschwader comprised 3 or 4 Gruppen, plus a Geschwader Stab of 3 or 4 aircraft).

The same enemy source states that on days of major operations more than 500 aircraft were in action against Malta (C.f. the estimated total number of available aircraft above). The number of bombers appears to have been increased as it is further stated that between January and the end of April, 462 aircraft with a bomb load of 8,400 tons were in operation against the island.

Ibid: 247A

The Air Ministry had already arranged to send an initial reinforcement of fifteen Spitfires to Malta, but A-V-M. Lloyd was convinced that double that number was necessary and also some Kittyhawks in addition to the Spitfires. The whole question of the defence of Malta was under review by the Air Ministry who considered that the "ideal" would be five squadrons of Spitfires for day and one squadron of Hurricane IIC's for night work.

A.M. CS.10581,  
47A et seq;

In the meantime such Blenheims as still survived of Nos. 18 and 107 squadrons had been transferred to Egypt for absorption into that Command: they were temporarily replaced by No. 21 squadron (Blenheims) but this squadron left Malta on 22 February on transfer to Egypt. On 15 February, No. 40 squadron detachment (Wellingtons) was transferred to No. 205 Group, Shallufa, and was relieved for a short period by No. 37 squadron (Wellingtons) from No. 205 Group which arrived at Malta on 22 February.

A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. Feb:

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:

18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May '42

and A.H.Q.  
Med:

O.R.B. Jan/Feb.

Meanwhile, the Malta Night Fighter Unit (Hurricanes) had received official recognition (in December) and became known as No. 1435 Flight. In January and February it carried out some 'intruder' sorties over Sicilian aerodromes, but the great pressure on Malta's fighter strength during the latter part of February and the earlier part of March necessitated the temporary cessation of its activities. At the end of March, No. 1435 Flight was re-formed and some Beaufighters were added to its strength.

AOC/47,  
Pt. II,  
264A (Dy.  
AOC-in-C. to  
Air Min:)

The attacks by the Luftwaffe continued to increase in severity, and by the end of February, Malta could "no longer be counted upon as a practicable base for operations of an air striking force of any size", and Admiral Cunningham was considering abandoning the island as a base for Naval operations.

Air H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. March.

During March the most critical period of the Battle of Malta began and the Luftwaffe was rapidly gaining local air superiority. Nevertheless, on the night of 2/3 March, a force of sixteen Wellingtons successfully attacked an enemy convoy in Palermo harbour. Over 25 tons of bombs were dropped and two merchant ships of 6,000 tons and one of 1,000 were sunk while a larger ship of 8/9,000 tons was probably damaged.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these blows the warehouses on the mole were gutted, a large building beside the dry dock was set on fire, and blast damage was done to the Seaplane hangar. But in view of the weight of enemy bombing attacks on Malta it was found impossible to keep the serviceability of the Wellingtons up to an economical number, and No. 37 squadron was therefore returned to No. 205 Group until the situation should improve. By that time the striking force had virtually ceased to exist although the Albacores and Swordfish (of Nos. 828 and 830 squadrons, F.A.A.) carried out several offensive sweeps and attacks on enemy shipping.

/Meanwhile

1. These sinkings were confirmed by photographs, and by the Assessment Committee. The 8/9,000 ton ship was assessed as 'damaged'. (R.A.F. Anti-shipping Ops. (Merchant), Vol. 3. The 2,000 ton ship was, probably, the S.S. Le Tre Marie (1,086 tons) stated to have been sunk "by bombing" at Palermo on 6 March: the loss of the 6,000 ton ship is not mentioned. (List from enemy sources of Italian merchant ships sunk).

A.O.C./47  
Malta, Pt. II  
270A  
(A-V-M. Lloyd  
to H.Q. R.A.F.  
M.E.)

Official Account  
of the R.A.F. in  
Malta, June '40  
to Nov. '42.

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative -  
"The War at Sea",  
Vol. III.  
A.O.C./47 Pt. II,  
273A  
(A.O.C. Med.  
to H.Q. R.A.F.,  
M.E.)  
A.H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B. March

O.R.B.  
H.Q. M.E./Staff  
Branch, Apl.,  
Appx. 13.

Official Account  
of the R.A.F. in  
Malta, June '40  
to Nov. '42;  
Air H.Q. Med;  
O.R.B. Apl.;  
(See also H.Q.  
M.E. AOC/47,  
Pt. II, Malta,  
283A et seq.)

Meanwhile the daylight attacks on Malta's aerodromes were becoming very serious and in addition to the damage to Malta-based aircraft a number of reinforcing Wellingtons for the Middle East were being rendered unserviceable. The problem of safeguarding these Wellingtons was solved by passing them on with relief crews to the Middle East on the same night that they arrived at Malta.

On 7 March the first fifteen Spitfires and seven Blenheims reached Malta via Gibraltar in the aircraft-carrier Eagle (Operation "Spotter"). Their flight off the carrier was covered by the Malta Hurricanes and they landed at Takali without loss. During this operation a number of ME. 109's made 'intruder' patrols and that same evening waves of JU. 88's attacked the Spitfires at Takali airfield. However, within a few days No. 249 squadron had been re-armed with the Spitfires in place of its Hurricanes. By the end of the month a further seven Spitfires together with three Blenheims and two Beauforts had arrived at Malta from the Eagle (Operation "Picket") and early in April No. 229 squadron (Hurricane IIC's) had also arrived on transfer from the Western Desert Command. The transfer of this squadron implemented the Air Ministry's intention to provide a Hurricane II C. unit for fighter night work at Malta. <sup>1</sup> The newly-arrived Spitfires were used to re-arm No. 126 squadron (Hurricanes), but by the middle of April most of the Spitfires had been destroyed and for some days the Hurricanes of Nos. 185 and 229 squadrons bore the brunt of the fighting.

Meanwhile a strong detachment of No. 221 squadron (Wellington VIII's - A.S.V./T.B. - of No. 201 (N.C.) Group) had been moved from Amrya to Malta.

On 20 April a further reinforcement of two squadrons (Nos. 601 and 603 of Fighter Command) with forty-six Spitfires from the U.K. arrived at Malta in the American aircraft-carrier Wasp. The Spitfires were flown off the carrier but as soon as they had landed heavy air attacks were made on them while they were being re-fuelled and serviced. These attacks were repeated, some 300 bombers being sent in one day to destroy them, and within three days several of them had been destroyed and many damaged. Malta was now at its last gasp but, Providentially, towards the end of the month the Luftwaffe attacks slackened off, while Italian aircraft, bombing from great heights, began to make their re-appearance. It appears that the Luftwaffe had decided to transfer some of its strength to other fronts, and by this time its personnel and aircraft needed time for rest and reservicing as during the preceding weeks the Malta squadrons and the A.A. artillery had taken a heavy toll of the attackers. <sup>2</sup>

/This

A.H.Q. Med.;  
O.R.B. Apl.

1. See page 353 supra.

2. During April the enemy's air-craft losses were estimated as follows:-

	Destroyed	Probably destroyed	Damaged
(a) through R.A.F. fighters	52	31	117
(b) through A.A. artillery	101	13	66
Totals	153	44	183

During the same month the R.A.F.'s losses in combat were:  
11 Spitfires, 8 Hurricanes, 1 Beaufighter - a total  
of 20 aircraft.

This relative lull in the Malta 'blitz' was one of several instances in the War where the enemy seems to have made an inexcusable blunder, for had he continued the tempo of his attacks - at whatever cost to himself - Malta would in all probability have been compelled to succumb. 1

#### Malta's Further Reinforcement

Before the end of April the Air Ministry had arranged to send a further reinforcement of Spitfires to Malta, and on 7 May, Air H.Q., Malta received information that these aircraft were due to fly into the island on 9 May. It was realised that the enemy would make every effort to destroy them before they could become operationally effective, and the R.A.F. and Army personnel made detailed plans for their reception. These arrangements included the dispersal of the Spitfires among three aerodromes, with experienced pilots and ground crews standing by at the pens to receive the allotted aircraft. In all, sixty<sup>2</sup> (out of sixty-four) Spitfires arrived (in batches) on 9 May having flown off the carriers from a position some 20 miles north of Algiers. Owing to the excellent arrangements for their reception and re-fuelling the Spitfires were, in some cases, able to take off within six minutes after landing, and as soon as the enemy came to bomb them on the ground he was met and attacked by them in the air. The Spitfires made seventy-four sorties during this day, destroying seven enemy aircraft, probably destroying eight others and damaging thirteen, for the loss of three Spitfires shot down and three damaged.

On the following day (10 May) the mine-laying cruiser Welshman, with a cargo of over 80,000 rounds of much-needed Bofors ammunition, berthed in the Grand Harbour. She was unloaded within five hours under the protection of the Spitfires and a heavy barrage and smoke-screen. During this day the Spitfires made a hundred and ten sorties and the Hurricanes made fourteen sorties; they destroyed nine JU. 88's, two JU. 87's, two ME. 109's, one Cant. 1007 and one Macchi 202, for the loss of three Spitfires, while the A.A. artillery accounted for seven JU's and one ME. 109. The R.A.F. fighters also claimed nineteen other aircraft probably destroyed and twenty-four damaged.

/According

R.A.F. Ops. in  
the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May  
'42 and  
A.H.Q., Med:  
O.R.B. April

1. The increasing volume of air attacks on Malta can be gauged by the tonnage of bombs dropped. In February the estimated tonnage was 993 tons, in March, 2,174 tons and in April 6,728 tons. The bombs dropped during April were distributed thus:-
 

Dockyard area	3,156 tons
Takali airfield	841 tons
Luqa airfield	805 tons
Halfar airfield	750 tons
Kalafrana seaplane base	196 tons
Elsewhere	980 tons
	<u>6,728 tons</u>

During the three days 20/22 April, 104 tons of bombs were dropped on Luqa and 337 tons on Takali airfields alone. (On 15 April - during the worst period of Malta's siege - the Governor and C-in-C (Genl. Sir William Dobbie) received official intimation that H.M. The King had awarded the George Cross to "the Island Fortress of Malta".)

2. Two aircraft turned back; one ran out of petrol just before reaching Malta, and one was missing from an unknown cause.

A.H.Q. Med:  
489/675/DO  
(letter,  
A-V-M. Lloyd  
to Dy. C.A.S.  
13.5.42)

According to A-V-M. Lloyd "the Spitfires saved the Welshman which succeeded in leaving Malta in safety that same night.

The efforts of 10 May, together with the arrival of a further reinforcement of Spitfires a week later, assured local air superiority to Malta. During the remainder of the month the enemy's air activity was reduced to daily attacks by small numbers of German aircraft and Italian bombers, combined with fighter sweeps, and increasing attacks by night raiders. The latter's bombing was inaccurate, and twelve of them were shot down by the Beaufighters of No. 1435 flight in a period of under three weeks. Thenceforward Malta began to regain her position as an offensive base in the air-sea warfare.

#### Air Reconnaissance from Malta

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May '42  
Air H.Q. Malta  
O.R.B.'s;  
No. 69 sqdn.  
O.R.B.'s

During the "Crusader" advance (18 November 1941 to 20 January 1942) Malta's chief reconnaissance activity comprised:-

- (a) daily searches by Marylands and Hurricanes of No. 69 squadron west and east from Malta to the Ionian Sea, and south to the Gulf of Sirte so as to join up with the Crete-Libyan patrols of No. 201 (N.C.) Group, crossing Taranto, Corfu, Cephalonia, Zante, the Kerkenna Islands, Pantellaria and Sicily.
- (b) Night searches by A.S.V. Wellingtons, of the enemy's sea routes leading to Tripoli.

During the final period of the "Crusader" advance an intensified effort was made to locate enemy ships sailing for Tripolitania, and to check threats from surface vessels against British convoys running to Malta and Benghazi.

In February, in spite of bad weather conditions, sea and harbour reconnaissances were maintained at a weekly average of thirteen to eighteen sorties. The majority of sea reconnaissance aircraft operated in the area west of Malta (except when our convoys were passing to or from the island), their role being to watch the Cape Bon-Kerkennah-Tripoli route which the enemy was normally using. Photographic reconnaissances (which suffered considerably from the weather) covered Sicily and Tripolitania regularly, and visual reconnaissances were carried out over Taranto, Augusta, Palermo, Messina, and the North African ports of Homs, Zuara and Sfax.

With the increase of enemy air attacks on Malta the reconnaissance effort was consequently adversely affected. Nevertheless, aircraft of No. 69 squadron (which was re-armed during April and May with Spitfires) continued to cover Sicilian ports and air-bases; the Ionian Sea and the more westerly Mediterranean areas, and carried out searches for enemy convoys en route to Tripoli. The harbours and aerodromes under photographic and visual reconnaissance included Catania, Gerbini, Taranto, Brindisi, Comiso, Messina, Palermo, Trapani, Valentia, Naples, Navarino, Argostoli and Tripoli. On 2 March, a photographic reconnaissance by a Beaufighter (attached to No. 69 squadron) discovered the presence of an enemy convoy in Palermo harbour which was successfully attacked on the same night by sixteen Malta Wellingtons.<sup>1</sup> The same Beaufighter revisited Palermo on 4 March and photographed the three enemy merchant ships which had been sunk by the Wellingtons.

/The

1. See page 354 supra.

The value of Malta's air reconnaissance is further illustrated by a series of events which occurred during the latter part of June (while the Eighth Army was retreating to Alamein during Rommel's final attempt on Egypt). At 13.25 hours on 20 June, a reconnaissance Baltimore on patrol over the Ionian Sea sighted an enemy convoy of two large merchant ships escorted by three destroyers, emerging from the Gulf of Taranto (25 miles east of Colonne) and heading for Messina. A striking force of eleven Beauforts was sent out to attack this convoy, escorted by eight Beaufighters. The striking force failed to locate the convoy, and a P.R.U. Spitfire sent to re-locate it made a sighting at 18.50 hours off Cape Spartivento. Meanwhile a watch was organised down the enemy's western convoy route and on the night of 20/21 June a Wellington VIII and a striking force of three Albacores made an unsuccessful search of the area between Pantellaria Island, Cape Bon and Marettime. At about 07.00 hours next morning a Baltimore searching between Cape Bon and the Kerkennah Islands sighted what appeared to be three large liners with no escort, some 60 miles south of Cape Bon. A strike of five Beauforts (of No. 217 squadron) escorted by six Beaufighters (of No. 235 squadron) was sent to attack these ships and found two 7/8,000 ton merchant vessels escorted by a 'flak' ship, two JU. 88's and one S. 79. The Beauforts torpedoed both the merchantmen setting one on fire<sup>2</sup>, and the Beaufighters destroyed the three enemy aircraft: two of the Beauforts were shot down by A.A. fire. A Baltimore (which followed the striking force) re-located this convoy at 18.40 hours - with a destroyer steaming to its assistance - about 50 miles north-west of Tripoli: the Baltimore's photographs showed no sign of one of the merchant ships which was therefore presumed to have sunk.

In the meantime the two merchant ships of the first convoy (sailing for Messina) had been photographed by another Malta reconnaissance aircraft in Palermo harbour on the same day (22 June). A force of Wellington VIII's (of No. 221 squadron detachment) was sent to patrol between Naples and Marettime to bomb these merchant ships if they tried to leave Palermo, and also to watch for other enemy ships. Torpedo Wellingtons were also sent to the vicinity so as to be on call if required. At 01.00 hours (on 23 June) a Wellington VIII found two large merchant ships and two destroyers 35 miles east of Palermo, sailing in an easterly direction. Two of the other Wellington VIII's were recalled onto the target which they attacked; one aircraft claimed a near miss on a destroyer but the other could not bomb owing to 10/10 cloud over the target when it reached it. Meanwhile a fourth Wellington VIII had found two large merchant vessels and two destroyers coming from Naples, 30 miles east of Ustica Island. The Wellington attacked this convoy with four 500 lb. bombs from a height of 1,200 feet and scored a hit on the stern of one of the ships, causing a red glow and much smoke.<sup>3</sup>

/On

1. See page 397 infra.

2. This was the German ship Reichenfels: both it and the other ship were officially assessed under Category IV.

3. This was officially assessed as 'damaged'

~~3. This was officially assessed as 'damaged'~~

R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
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SECRET

On the same morning (23 June) the two merchant ships and escorting destroyers (which had been seen going from Palermo to Messina) were sighted passing through the Straits of Messina and rounding Cape Armi at 08.00 hours. Ten Beauforts escorted by Beaufighters were sent to attack this convoy and found it at 13.28 hours some 30 miles from Cape Spartivento. Three hits were obtained on one merchant ship<sup>1</sup> and one of the destroyers was hit: two of the Beauforts were shot down and three others were damaged by A.A. fire. At 14.30 hours a P.R.U. Spitfire photographed this convoy: one merchant ship was stationary and down by the stern while three destroyers were circling round it; the other merchant vessel was sailing northwards accompanied by one destroyer. Next morning (24 June) a P.R.U. Spitfire photographed the crippled merchantman which the destroyers were trying to tow. During that night a Wellington VIII searched the Gulf of Taranto and found two large merchantmen 50 miles south of Taranto steaming slowly at 5 knots. The Wellington attacked with bombs but a smoke-screen obscured results: it was thought that one of the vessels was the one which had been damaged and taken in tow.

On 30 June a P.R.U. Spitfire took photographs of Taranto harbour which showed the damaged merchant vessel with its deck cargo removed, and several other merchant ships berthed in the outer harbour, apparently ready to sail. In consequence, two Wellington VIII's made a search that night (30 June/1 July) in the Gulf of Taranto so as to locate and bomb the enemy and "home" on a striking force of torpedo Wellingtons, should the enemy ships leave the harbour. At 01.35 hours three merchant ships and four destroyers were located near Gallipoli (in the "heel" of Italy). The Wellington VIII's went in to bomb this convoy and the torpedo strike developed simultaneously. Two torpedo hits were scored on one ship<sup>2</sup> and there were several near misses from bombs. The convoy immediately turned and sailed back to Taranto, and its much-needed supplies for Rommel's "Afrika Korps" were thus delayed by the vigilance of Malta's aircraft.

#### Projected Invasion of Malta

Fuhrer  
Conferences  
on Naval  
Affairs,  
1942

Meanwhile, the question of the invasion of Malta had been occupying the attention of the German Naval Staff. The attacks by the Luftwaffe on Malta could not be maintained indefinitely, and Grand Admiral Raeder realised that if for any reason the Luftwaffe should reduce its attacks the island would be soon restored to its former strength. In March he submitted a memorandum to Hitler (at a conference held on the 14th of that month) in which he represented that nothing less than the capture and occupation of Malta would suffice, which "alone would prevent the enemy from re-building Malta's offensive and defensive capacities." Hitler, however, was doubtful about the necessity of such an operation as he did not want to spare men from either the Eastern front or Cyrenaica, but he agreed to the extent of ordering increased activity against the island by the Luftwaffe which (as already narrated)<sup>3</sup> took place in April and May.

/Meanwhile

1. This was officially assessed under Category IV (although a photo, showed this ship as being down at the stern)
2. This was officially assessed as 'severely damaged'.
3. See pages 354 and 355 supra.

Meanwhile, Raeder's arguments for the occupation of Malta had been supported by Field-Marshal Kesselring in Italy and by the Italians themselves following upon a report to Hitler and Mussolini and the Italian C.-in-C., General Cavallero, after a visit to Cyrenaica which Kesselring made in April. As a result of this report General Cavallero decided that preparations should be made for a surprise attack on Malta at the end of May. At a conference with Mussolini on 1 May, Hitler agreed to participate in this attack which was to be known as Operation "Herkules". He was prepared to send a German parachute division with three reinforced parachute regiments and assault pioneers and armoured units composed of captured Russian tanks. It was also contemplated that the strongest possible concentration of ferry boats should be made for the assault. It was, however, decided that the assault should not be made until the middle of July, after the projected attack on Egypt by Rommel which was to take place at the end of May and the beginning of June.

Plan for  
Invasion of  
Malta (A  
study by the  
Italian Air  
Min.)  
(Translation  
No. VII/47  
AHE. 6.)

The plan for the invasion of Malta as formulated by the Italians (and known by them as Operation "C.3") was in the nature of a coup de main. It envisaged surprise landings (by night) from naval units of ground forces and of paratroops who were to establish a bridgehead on the south-eastern coast of the island.<sup>1</sup> As soon as the airfields had been captured further units were to be transported to Malta by air. At a favourable opportunity other units would be landed by sea at the same places as the troops making the surprise landings, and feint landings were to be made by means of motor torpedo boats at as many coastal points as possible.

As a preliminary to the operation it was considered essential that

- (a) there should be Axis air and sea supremacy in the Central Mediterranean<sup>2</sup>
- (b) there should be a preliminary continuous blockade of the Malta Archipelago, and
- (c) continuous heavy bombing attacks aimed at the British defences as much as possible, to be carried out without indicating in which area the landings were to be attempted.

In the view of the Italian Air Staff the capture of Malta was primarily an air operation, the ground and naval operations being of a supporting nature. Owing to "the great importance" of the operation, the Italian Air Force postulated that it was necessary to use all available air reserves. It was decided that a total of

8 bomber gruppi<sup>3</sup>  
2 torpedo-bomber gruppi  
1 dive-bomber gruppo  
2 assault gruppi  
5 fighter gruppi

were to be employed for the actual invasion of Malta (Operation "C.3"), their main functions being the execution of offensive operations during and after the coup de main (including those of co-operation with the naval landings), co-operation with the landed troops, and emergency operations which might become necessary during the course of the operation.

/For

Statement by  
Genl. Student  
(Head of  
German Para-  
chute Divs.)  
(Enemy docs:  
AHE. 6.)

1. The selection of this position was due to the nature of the terrain which appeared to be the most unlikely place for an invading force to land.
2. The hypothesis laid down in (a) would appear to "beg the question" for if the Axis had achieved air and sea supremacy in the Central Mediterranean it would seem that an invasion of Malta would have been unnecessary! - Narrator.
3. A fighter gruppo (normally) = 3 squadrillia of 9 a/c each  
A bomber gruppo (normally) = 2 squadrillia of 6 a/c each



In order to combat a possible intervention by British Naval forces from Alexandria and/or Gibraltar, it was arranged that all the bomber and torpedo-bomber air units (together with fighter and assault aircraft, if necessary) which were based in Sardinia, Libya and the Aegean, <sup>1</sup> as well as the torpedo-bomber units based on Sicily, should be available to attack such Naval forces. For these duties there were

Sicily      2 torpedo-bomber gruppi (at Pantellaria)

The ground forces for the operation were to consist of two Army Corps (comprising three and two Infantry Divisions respectively), special landing troops (comprising one regiment and a detachment of the Black-shirt battalion), reinforcements, and an airborne army - commanded by General Student (Head of the German Parachute Divisions) - and comprising one German and one Italian Airborne Infantry Division. <sup>3</sup> The whole expeditionary corps was to be commanded by General Vecchiarelli, Vice-Chief of the Italian Army Staff.

Operation "Herkules" was further debated at a conference between Admiral Raeder and Hitler on 15 June. At this conference Hitler declared that he did not believe that Malta could be captured while the Russian offensive was in progress, and especially not with Italian troops.

/But

- G. 199914/TC/7/48

But in his opinion, the British efforts to get convoys through to Malta both from the east and the west testified to the dire straits through which the island was passing; moreover, he felt that these convoys afforded the Axis a good opportunity to inflict much damage on the British. He considered that he could risk an attack on Malta as soon as the island had been "bled white" by the continuous Luftwaffe attacks and the effects of the total blockade.

For the next two and a half months Hitler held no further conferences on naval matters. Meanwhile the war in the Mediterranean theatre was progressing favourably for the Axis. By the end of June, Rommel had pushed the Eighth Army back to Alamein, heavy units of the Royal Navy had been withdrawn from Alexandria to Suez, and the situation seemed ripe for the capture of Malta. But at this point the Axis plans were changed, with results which altered the whole course of the war in the Mediterranean sphere of operations. Without reference to either his own naval command or to the Italians, Hitler postponed the projected invasion of Malta until such time as Rommel should have completed the conquest of Egypt. In taking this decision, Hitler was swayed by Rommel's confidence of victory over the Eighth Army at Alamein. Although Rommel realised that by the postponement of the attack on Malta his communications would still be exposed to attack, he believed that the "Afrika Korps" would be able to live off the country as soon as it got into the Nile Delta and would also be able to use the equipment which he hoped to capture from the Eighth Army. Raeder and Kesselring deplored the decision to postpone the invasion of Malta, realising the odds against which Rommel was gambling. But in spite of their arguments, Operation "Herkules" never materialised. <sup>1</sup>

#### Renewed Air Attacks on Malta

Meanwhile, towards the end of June, the Luftwaffe was making a further effort to neutralise Malta's air attacks on the Axis shipping routes. On the night of 21 June, twenty-eight JU. 88's and 87's bombed Halfar and Luqa aerodromes, and on the following night twenty-nine enemy aircraft attacked Luqa. Several casualties occurred among R.A.F. and Army personnel; no aircraft were damaged in these raids <sup>2</sup> but the runways of the aerodromes were badly cratered. These attacks persisted until 12 July by which time the enemy realised that dive-bombing attacks were no longer feasible owing to the strong defence put up by Malta's Spitfires.

/The

1. Evidence of Genl. Von Pohl, commanding the Luftwaffe in Italy (which corresponds in essentials with Genl. Student's account of the plan) and of Reich-Marshal Goering, is given in Appendix "M". Vice-Adml. Weichold refers to the Russian campaign in connection with the change in the Axis plans - See extracts from Weichold's Essay in Appendix "M".
2. The R.A.F. aircraft losses on the ground from enemy raids during May and June were 6 destroyed and 15 damaged, and 7 destroyed and 12 damaged respectively.

A-M. Lloyd's  
Account of  
Malta

A.H.Q. Memo;  
O.R.B.'s

G.A.F. Activities in the Med: 1941-43 (Translation No. VII/II-AHB. 6)

The German air forces employed in these attacks comprised two bomber and four fighter gruppen and one fighter-bomber staffel; <sup>1</sup> these units were given the task of "holding Malta down", while one bomber geschwader, one T.E. fighter gruppe and one night-fighter gruppe <sup>2</sup> were assigned for the protection of Axis convoys to the enemy's North African ports.

#### THE EASTERN BASIN

R.A.F. Ops. in the West: Desert & East: Med: 18 Nov. '41 to 19 May '42

As far as the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean was concerned the period of the "Crusader" offensive presented no outstanding features.

The following squadrons were employed in attacks on enemy shipping and reconnaissance:-

Nos. 11, 55 and 203 squadrons	Blenheims
No. 39 squadron	Beauforts/Marylands
No. 230 squadron	Sunderlands
No. 1 G.R. Unit	Wellingtons
No. 2 (Yugo-Slav) squadron	Dorniers
No. 13 (Hellenic) squadron	Ansons
No. 700 squadron, F.A.A.	Walrus/Swordfish
Nos. 815 and 826 squadrons, F.A.A.	Albacores/Swordfish

In addition to the above, other bomber squadrons were employed in shipping strikes from Egypt, and other fighter squadrons - both R.A.F. and F.A.A. - were employed in the protection of convoys, while Nos. 73 and 213 squadrons (Hurricanes) were responsible for standing patrols over Alexandria and Suez.

#### Air Reconnaissance - General

The vital task of reconnaissance was maintained at a high level, the major part of this work being devoted to routine searches with the following objects:-

- (1) checking dispositions of the Italian fleet
- (2) discovering movements and locations of enemy shipping and thus providing targets for the bombers
- (3) ensuring that British shipping routes were free from enemy submarines and surface warships.

Special searches and patrols were carried out when convoys were being run, and the chief enemy harbours were covered regularly by photographic reconnaissance aircraft.

#### Attacks on Enemy Shipping

Ibid:

Sinkings of enemy merchant shipping during the "Crusader" period were disappointing: one small ship of 1,000 tons was claimed as sunk at sea <sup>3</sup> and three other vessels were damaged in Benghazi harbour.

/During

R.A.F. Anti-shipping Ops. (Merchant) Vol. 3.

1. Approximating 60 + bombers, 220 + fighters and 9 + fighter-bombers.
2. Approximating 95/125 bombers (according as to whether this geschwader comprised 3 or 4 gruppen - which is not stated) 30+ T.E. fighters and 30+ night-fighters.
3. This was officially assessed as sunk. (The attack was made by Blenheims north of Derna on 4 December).

H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

During the period 21 January to 28 February results were again disappointing: although several sightings were made no claims were entered for the sinking of merchant vessels in transit. From 1 March to 30 June several attacks were made on merchant ships in transit, two ships being claimed as probably sunk and a few others damaged by our bombers. Beaufighters (of Nos. 252 and 272 squadrons) made two attacks on a tanker and a medium sized merchantman respectively, both of which were damaged. They also set two barges on fire in an attack off Derna on 17 March. On the night of 8/9 May, Wellingtons bombed four ships some 8 miles off Benghazi and obtained a hit on a 5,000 ton vessel.<sup>1</sup> During this period several attacks were made on enemy submarines and some successes were obtained.<sup>2</sup>

#### Increased Enemy Submarine Activity

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May '42  
Admiralty  
Monthly Anti-  
Sub: Report  
CB.04050/43(8)

About the middle of December enemy submarine activity increased along the Libyan coast, and it was estimated that some 70 Italian and 20 German U-boats were operating in the Eastern Basin. Aircraft from Egypt sighted seventeen submarines between 20 December and 20 January, and twelve attacks were made in which one U-boat was officially assessed as "probably sunk", one "probably damaged (A)", and two others "probably slightly damaged".<sup>3</sup>

#### Relief of Tobruk and Capture of Benghazi ("Crusader" Offensive)

Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval Ops.  
Apl. '41 to  
Jan. '43

On 21 November the Tobruk garrison made a sortie and an advance of seven miles. They reached half-way to El Duda where they had hoped to effect a junction with the Eighth Army, but this was impossible as the troops advancing from Gambut had been held up. Owing to the fierce fighting round Tobruk after this sortie the garrison's ammunition became dangerously short, and the S.S. Hanne was sent with further supplies from Alexandria. She was escorted by the Parramatta, the destroyer Avon Vale, and three armed whalers of the South African Seaward Defence Force, and a cover of two aircraft of the R.N. Fulmar Flight. At dusk, six Heinkel III's approached the convoy, one being at 7,000 feet and the others low on the water. One Fulmar climbed and attacked the high-flying Heinkel while the other attacked the remaining five. Both combats were indecisive but the Heinkels jettisoned their bombs and made off. When the convoy was within some 30 miles of Tobruk the Parramatta was torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat.

Two days later (23 November) the Glenroy store and troop carrier sailed for Tobruk under escort with a cargo of much needed lighters. Two Fulmars afforded her fighter protection from 06.00 to 10.40 hours.

/In

- 1 This was officially assessed as 'damaged'
- 2 See pages 26, 27 infra
- 3 These attacks were as follows:-

- (i) On 25 December by a Blenheim of No. 203 sqdn. on an Italian U-boat 130 miles west of Crete - "probably slightly damaged".
- (ii) On 2 January by a Blenheim of No. 203 sqdn. on a U-boat (German or Italian), 220 miles east of Malta - "probably damaged (A)". (This category assessed the damage to be sufficiently serious as might - on further evidence - raise the assessment to "probably sunk").
- (iii) On 9 January by a Sunderland of No. 230 sqn. on a German U-boat, 8 miles north of Sidi Barrani - "probably sunk".
- (iv) On 11 January by a Swordfish of No. 815 sqdn. F.A.A., on a German U-boat, 50 miles north of Tobruk - "probably slightly damaged".

H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries and  
Admiralty  
Monthly Anti-  
Sub: Report  
CB.04050/43(8)

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In the afternoon she was attacked by enemy torpedo aircraft and in response to a "help" signal three Fulmars were sent to her assistance. She was hit by a torpedo, and was then beached off Mersa Matruh and later towed to Alexandria for repair.

On 26 November the Tobruk garrison made contact with the Eighth Army but five days later the corridor was broken. The garrison still continued to hold a large salient to the south of the perimeter, and by 7 December the enemy had withdrawn from the area east of Tobruk. Next day the garrison advanced south of El Adem and joined the British main forces in the evening, and on 9 December Tobruk was relieved after a land and air siege lasting seven months.

During the period of the siege of Tobruk the Royal Navy and merchant vessels - assisted by the R.A.F. - had carried out the entire maintenance of the garrison: the Navy had lost a total of 27 ships of all classes and seven merchant ships had also been lost, while the R.A.F. had sustained considerable losses in combat while giving protection to British ships.

On 24 December the Eighth Army captured Benghazi. Owing to the damage which had been done to the harbour and to the fact that bad weather had prevented full use being made of the western Cyrenaican aerodromes to provide adequate fighter protection, the first British convoy did not reach Benghazi until 7 January.

#### Japan Enters the War.

In the meantime, on 7 December, the Japanese had attacked and crippled the United States Fleet at Pearl Harbour, and had sunk H.M. battleships Prince of Wales and Repulse three days later. These disasters (which occurred so soon after the sinking of the battleship Barham on 25 November) were followed by the disablement of the Queen Elizabeth and Valiant by "limpet" bombs at Alexandria on 19 December.

Information  
supplied by  
the Admiralty  
Hist: Section

The entry of Japan into the War necessitated the strengthening of the British Eastern Fleet, and the minelayer Abdiel, the destroyer Encounter and the submarine Trusty were transferred thither from the Mediterranean. In January and February two more submarines<sup>1</sup> and five destroyers<sup>2</sup> were also transferred from the Mediterranean and one further destroyer in March.<sup>3</sup> These withdrawals - following upon the disasters to the capital ships above mentioned - left the Mediterranean with only a small force of cruisers, destroyers and submarines, and necessitated the reinforcement of the R.A.F. which was now becoming the chief factor in the control of the Mediterranean.

/Indeed

Information  
from  
Admiralty Hist.  
Section

- (1 viz. H.M.S. Truant and Rover  
(2 viz. Arrow, Decoy, Fortune, Griffin and Hotspur  
(3 viz. H.M.S. Porhound. It had been intended to send the aircraft-carriers Indomitable and Illustrious to the Med: Fleet, but these were diverted to the Eastern Fleet in January and June respectively. (The Illustrious left the U.K. on 21 March and after various deflections took part in the Madagascar operations on 9 May before joining the Eastern Fleet).

H.Q. M.E.  
AOC/206, 64A  
(CAS. to  
AOC.-in-C.  
20.1.42)

Ibid: 69a,  
70A

A.M. CS.13308,  
5A  
(COS.45th  
Meeting (0))

Indeed, in the opinion of the Chief of the Air Staff, "Naval control of the Eastern Mediterranean had virtually ceased to exist and would have to be replaced by air control". An immediate result of the Naval reinforcement of the Eastern Fleet from the Mediterranean was the disbandment by Admiral Cunningham of the R.N. Fighter Squadron consequent upon the Admiralty's intention to transfer the majority of the R.N. Fulmar and fighter crews to Ceylon.

Meanwhile the question of reinforcing the R.A.F. in the Middle East had been discussed at a Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on 9 December, and the Chief of the Air Staff was then invited to give an appreciation as to what forces and bases would be required by the R.A.F. to compensate for the projected removal of two capital ships from the Eastern Mediterranean for temporary employment elsewhere. <sup>1</sup> The views of the Chief of the Air Staff were, briefly, that

- (1) the land forces must hold Tripoli before the R.A.F. could safely take over responsibility for the Eastern Mediterranean
- (2) the R.A.F. should not assume responsibility until the Middle East Command was increased by three torpedo-bomber squadrons, half of a G.R. squadron, three medium and two heavy bomber squadrons and one long-range fighter squadron - but this increase could not be completed within three months.
- (3) an earlier withdrawal of the capital ships would only be acceptable to the Air Ministry if it was considered safe "to gamble on a continuance of the existing low morale of the Italian Navy".

C.O.S. (41)  
429th Meeting

A.M. CS.  
13308, 8A

These suggested reinforcements were approved by the Chiefs of Staff at a Meeting on 20 December, and the Air Ministry then decided that the following squadrons should be sent:-

- 2 Beaufort squadrons
- 1 G.R. Hudson squadron
- 1 additional Wellington squadron
- 2 U.S. Liberator (heavy bomber) squadrons
- 1 Beaufighter squadron

Of these, the following reached Egypt before the end of February:-

- No. 89 squadron (Beaufighters)
- No. 459 (R.A.A.F.) squadron (Hudsons) 2
- Nos. 159 and 160 squadrons (Liberators)
- No. 220 squadron (Fortresses)

In addition, No. 47 squadron was moved from the Sudan to Alexandria and re-armed with Beauforts.

/In

- 1 The disablement of these two ships (on 19 December) changed a projected removal into an accomplished fact.
- 2 These two Liberator squadrons, comprised the newly-formed No. 242 Wing based at Fayid.

SECRET

367.

Ibid: 10A

In connection with the above, the Chiefs of the Air Staff pointed out to the A.O.C.-in-C. that these reinforcements were to enable him to take over the security of the Eastern Mediterranean (in relief of capital ships) "which will eventually become an R.A.F. responsibility and not a Naval one".

Expansion of No. 201 (N.C.) Group

H.Q. M.E.  
AOC/206, 72A.

In February, it was decided to expand the composition of No. 201 (N.C.) Group, with the proviso that no squadrons other than those specifically intended for Naval co-operation should be included in the Group. In addition to its ordinary functions the Group was to operate medium heavy and light bomber squadrons, when such were allocated, for attacks on enemy shipping: furthermore, a new Wing, No. 235, was formed - under the Group - at Fuka satellite to control operations of units located in forward areas. <sup>1</sup>

Air Reconnaissance from Egypt (and Libya)

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42

The chief routine searches carried out from Egyptian bases were as follows:-

- (1) The Crete-Libyan patrol which was carried out daily by three Blenheims (of No. 203 squadron) over the shipping routes between Crete, South-west Greece and the coast of Libya. (The western limits of this patrol touched the eastern limits of reconnaissance from Malta on a line running approximately from Cephalonia to Benghazi).

/(2)

- 1 The composition of No. 201 (N.C.) Grp., as at 24 February, was as follows:-

	<u>Unit</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>
R.A.F. Ops.	No.2 (Yugo-Slav) sqn.	Aboukir	Dornier
in the West:	No.13 (Hellenic) sqn.	Mariut, L.G. 86	Blenheim/Anson
Desert &	No.39 sqn.	L.G. 86	Beaufort
East: Med:	No.47 sqn.	L.G. 87	Beaufort
18 Nov. '41 to	No.55/18 sqn.	Fuka	Blenheim
19 May '42	No.203 sqn.	Burg-el-Arab	Blenheim/Hudson
<u>and</u>	No.220 sqn.	Fuka	Fortress
No. 201 Grp.	No.221 sqn.	S. Amrya, L.G.87	Wellington (A.S.V.)
File S. 2,500,	No.230 sqn.	Aboukir	Sunderland
Pt. II,	No.252 sqn.	Edku	Beaufighter
139B	No.272 sqn.	Edku	Beaufighter
	No.459 (R.A.F.) sqn.	L.G. 39	Hudson
	(No.700 (Walrus) sqn.	Aboukir	Walrus
	(No.700 (Swordfish) sqn.	Alexandria	Swordfish
	No.815 F.A.A. sqn.	Dekheila	Swordfish
	No.815 " sqn. detachmt.	Sidi Barrani	Swordfish
	No.826 " sqn.	Maaten Bagush	Swordfish/Albacore
	Sea Rescue Flight	L.G. 16	Wellington
	(No.235 Wing	Fuka satellite	
	(Advanced L.G.	Bu Amud	
	£		
	No.39 sqn. detachmt.	Sidi Barrani,	Beaufort
		L.G. 05	
	No.203 sqn. detachmt.	Sidi Barrani,	Blenheim/Hudson
		L.G. 05	

Units under Limited Control Operated by and through No.235 Wing

No.805 F.A.A. sqn.	Maaten Bagush	Martlets
R.N. Fulmar Flight	Fuka satellite	Fulmars

- (2) Daily dusk patrols of the western approaches to Alexandria which were carried out by Dorniers of No. 2 Yugo-Slav squadron.
- (3) Reconnaissance of the northern approaches to Alexandria carried out by Ansons of No. 13 Hellenic squadron.<sup>1</sup>
- (4) Anti-submarine patrols by Swordfish and Walrus aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm, Sinderlands of No. 230 squadron, the Dorniers and Ansons above mentioned, and, on occasion, Blenheims of No. 203 squadron.
- (5) Sweeps for mines in the Suez Canal by D.W.I. Wellingtons of No. 1 G.R. Unit.

Towards the end of the "Crusader" offensive, Marylands of the S.R. Unit made reconnaissances in the Gulf of Sirte including the harbours of Buerat El Hsun, Ras El Muli and Mersa Brega.

With the British occupation of former enemy airfields in Libya consequent upon the "Crusader" advance, aircraft on routine shipping patrols generally took off from either Derna or Berka and operated as far as the south-west of Greece. After the capture of Benghazi and the establishment of No. 235 Wing in that area, air reconnaissance was more thorough than formerly during the brief period that Benghazi remained in British occupation. Towards the end of January, when the Eighth Army had begun its retreat in the face of the German counter-attack, tracks were flown from the Tobruk area. With the enemy's occupation of the Timimi, Martuba and Derna landing-grounds, the protection for British shipping again became difficult. About this time the area of anti-submarine searches was changed: patrols on the coastal shipping route to Tobruk (where most of the submarines had been sighted in the past) were nearly doubled; at the same time the Alexandria approach patrols were reduced, as only occasional sightings were made in that area.

After the middle of February (when the Eighth Army had been pushed back to the Gazala line) continuous air reconnaissance was still maintained from Egypt by units of No. 201 (N.C.) Group. Sea, harbour and anti-submarine patrols were intensified considerably between the end of February and the third week of May prior to Rommel's final preparations for his advance on Egypt on the 26th of that month.<sup>2</sup>

#### Attacks on Enemy Submarines

As the British convoys to Tobruk became more frequent the anti-submarine patrols increased in numbers. In February and March the daily average of these patrols was five or six, but during April and May it had risen to ten or eleven. Between the end of February and the end of May several air attacks were made on submarines of which two were claimed as destroyed and others damaged. The area which gave the best results was close inshore between Derna and Tobruk.

/These

- 1 This sqn. was re-armed with Blenheims early in April.
- 2 A comparison of the reconnaissance operations of 25 February and 19 May - given in Appendix "N" - show the extent to which reconnaissance and patrols had increased.



SECRET

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These attacks included the following by Sunderlands of No. 230 Squadron: on 27 March two Sunderlands on anti-submarine patrol attacked separately a submarine north of Bardia. The first Sunderland dropped two 250 lb. bombs and two depth charges but results were not observed. The other Sunderland later dropped eight 250 lb. bombs scoring six hits, and claimed the submarine as destroyed. <sup>1</sup> On 19 April, a Sunderland on patrol between Port Said and Jaffa attacked and damaged a submarine with depth charges approximately 60 miles east-north-east of Port Said. The Sunderland was itself slightly damaged by depth charge splinters. <sup>2</sup> While on convoy protection on 28 April a Sunderland attacked and damaged a submarine in the Gulf of Sollum with four anti-submarine bombs and four depth charges. <sup>3</sup> Three days later (1 May) a Sunderland sighted a submarine north-east of Tobruk, which it attacked twice with bombs, depth charges and machine-gun fire. In the first attack two bombs fell 5 to 10 yards from the vessel's bow; in the second attack four more depth charges and two more bombs (dropped from 900 feet) fell alongside the submarine which was seen to sink slowly. <sup>4</sup>

On 26 May a Sunderland attacked a submarine some 40 miles north-west of Bardia with four 250 lb. bombs and four depth charges, scoring four hits on and close to the conning tower. The submarine immediately disappeared and a large patch of oil was seen. <sup>5</sup>

During the same period Swordfish of No. 815 squadron, F.A.A., also obtained some successes against submarines. On 11 March a Swordfish attacked a submarine about 20 miles west-north-west of Mersa Matruh with depth charges which detonated on the starboard side about 30 feet from the conning tower. The submarine stopped and submerged slowly. <sup>6</sup> On 1 April a Swordfish attacked a submarine 40 miles north of Sollum with two depth charges which exploded round the vessel's bow. The submarine made two attempts to dive but only succeeded in getting her bows awash. The Swordfish then machine-gunned it and the submarine opened fire on the aircraft with its forward gun. By this time the aircraft's front gun had jammed and it broke off the engagement. <sup>7</sup>

/Change

Admiralty	(1	This was officially assessed as "probably damaged (B)"
Monthly Anti-	2	" " " " " " "probably damaged (B)"
Sub: Report	3	" " " " " " "probably slightly damaged"
CB. 04050/43		

(8)

All these submarines (and the others mentioned below) were Italian.

Admiralty	(4	This was officially assessed as "probably slightly damaged"
Monthly Anti-	5	" " " " " " "probably damaged (B)"
Sub: Report	6	" " " " " " "probably slightly damaged"
CB. 04050/43	7	" " " " " " "probably damaged (B)".

(8)

### Change in Anti-U-boat Policy

Op. Research (M.E.) Report No. R.15 (H.Q. Med: S/161/Air, 89C)

At the beginning of April the anti-U-boat policy was modified. Prior to this, the tactics employed were always offensive, anti-U-boat sorties being of the "sweep" type and the protection of individual convoys being largely secured by routing. The new policy - which was essentially defensive - was to use the available aircraft resources mainly in close convoy escorts with a view to obtaining greater security, although this probably resulted in fewer U-boats being sighted and attacked. Under the old policy, British convoys were routed anywhere along a fairly extensive belt of sea, the whole of which was swept by U-boats, whereas under the new policy the convoys were concentrated along a narrow channel which was continually swept by all available aircraft (including those on passage between the Delta and forward landing-grounds, such aircraft always flying armed). This modification in tactics was not immediately appreciated by the U-boats which continued to operate for some time in their former areas, and as a result only a small number of sightings were made for the first few weeks after the new policy had been adopted.

### R.A.F.'s New Weapon - Long-Range Torpedo-Bomber

R.A.F. Ops. in the West: Desert & East: Med: 18 Nov. '41 to 19 May '42 and A.M. CS.13308, 28, 30

Meanwhile the need of a long-range torpedo-bomber aircraft for use in enemy shipping strikes had become increasingly apparent. The only long-range bomber aircraft available in the Middle East at the beginning of 1942 was the Wellington, and early in the year a detachment of No. 38 squadron<sup>1</sup> was given the experiment of fitting torpedoes to its Wellingtons instead of bombs. An airfield in the Suez Canal zone was made over to this detachment and satisfactory experiments were there carried out which resulted in the Wellingtons (after certain necessary modifications) being fitted to carry two torpedoes apiece. Thereafter, in collaboration with the Royal Navy and the Fleet Air Arm, the Wellington crews underwent special training courses of torpedo-dropping, flare-dropping, night formation flying and tactics of attack and evasion, which were carried out in Suez Bay. In April, a Torpedo Training School was established for relief crews sent out from the U.K. who had not received torpedo training prior to their departure. This training was also extended to the crews of the Beauforts (torpedo-carriers) on the arrival of these aircraft in the Middle East.

By the middle of May eleven modified Wellingtons and fourteen trained crews were ready, and operations against enemy shipping began soon afterwards.

### Attacks on Enemy Convoys

R.A.F. Ops. in the West: Desert & East: Med: 18 Nov. '41 to 19 May '42 and No. 201 Grp. O.R.B. Jan:

### 22 - 24 January

On the afternoon of 22 January one of H.M. submarines sighted an enemy convoy of a 13,000 ton troopship<sup>2</sup> and four merchantmen, with a strong naval escort, leaving Taranto Bay on a course some 240 miles east of Malta. Another (or possibly two) enemy force was operating further east to screen the convoy from any possible attack by Royal Naval units.

No. 201 (N.C.) Group received news of this convoy at 21.00 hours. During the same night a Malta A.S.V. Wellington made a search of the Ionian Sea and reported a southbound enemy convoy of at least three ships with naval escort some 175 miles north-east of Syracuse.

/No. 201

<sup>1</sup> This sqn. formed part of No. 238 Wing (Western Desert) based at Shallufa.

<sup>2</sup> This was the Italian troopship Victoria.

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No. 201 (N.C.) Group therefore organised reconnaissance and striking forces for an attack on the next day. These forces were assembled in Egypt and Cyrenaica as follows:-

Reconnaissance

Nine Blenheims (No. 203 squadron), two A.S.V. Wellingtons, and one Maryland (No. 39 squadron), all based at Berka.

Striking Forces

Two Fortresses (No. 220 squadron) at Fuka, eighteen Wellingtons (Nos. 38, 48 and 108 squadrons) at El Adem, nine Blenheims (No. 55 squadron), eight torpedo-Albacores (No. 826 F.A.A. squadron), three torpedo-Beauforts (No. 39 squadron) all at Berka, and thirteen Blenheims (Nos. 11 and 14 squadrons) at Beneina. Five Beaufighters (No. 272 squadron) were laid on as fighter cover for the striking forces.

There were also further reconnaissance and striking forces available at Malta, but these might be tied down by enemy bombing attacks on Malta aerodromes.

At about 09.40 hours on 23 January, a reconnaissance Blenheim reported one enemy battleship, four destroyers and one merchant ship on a northerly course about 185 miles north of Benghazi. This report was received by No. 201 (N.C.) Group, but not by No. 235 Wing until the Blenheim landed two hours later. Meanwhile, at 10.25 hours, No. 201 (N.C.) Group had received a further report from the same Blenheim that three enemy cruisers and four destroyers were on a southerly course a few miles west of the first enemy force. A striking force of the two Fortresses took off at about noon with the battleship as their primary target. In the meantime another Blenheim had sighted an enemy battleship on a southerly course at 09.30 hours, approximately 50 miles north of the sighting made by the first Blenheim ten minutes earlier. It appeared, therefore, that there were either two battleships sailing in opposite directions, or that one of the reports was incorrect. The report of the second Blenheim was not received until it landed at 12.50 hours. Meanwhile, a striking force of six Blenheims, preceded by two 'shadower' aircraft, had left to attack the battleship (reported by the first Blenheim as being on a northerly course) at 12.15 hours: this striking force failed to locate the battleship. When it was known at Benghazi (soon after 12.50 hours) that an enemy battleship was on a southerly course, six other Blenheims and one Maryland were sent to locate and shadow it until dusk, but no other sightings were received at Benghazi until 16.50 hours.

In view of the lack of sighting reports, Blenheims and Beaufighters were sent on an offensive reconnaissance to locate the formation containing the merchant ships, followed by five Albacores which were to attack at dusk. Unfortunately, this plan was partially negated by the fact that a Malta aircraft reported the enemy force as being 50 miles too far to the west.

/In all,

In all, four attacks were made during daylight on 23 January, as follows:-

- (1) between 16.15 and 16.25 hours one Fortress obtained near misses on the battleship and one other large vessel; the other Fortress did not locate the target.
- (2) at 16.38 hours three Blenheims bombed the convoys but results were not observed.
- (3) at 17.30 hours three Beauforts made a torpedo attack on the convoy but without observing results.
- (4) at 18.38 hours three Albacores <sup>1</sup> torpedoed the 13,000 ton troopship Victoria <sup>2</sup> which stopped. They also claimed a hit on a destroyer with another torpedo.

At 16.00 hours an A.S.V. Wellington took off from Berka to search an area based on the inaccurate Malta sightings, but it did not locate the convoy until four hours later. Meanwhile fourteen Wellingtons from El Adem had been sent out to attack, but owing to various causes only seven of them found the convoy which was by that time some 160 miles west of Tripoli. Between 21.30 and 23.40 hours these Wellingtons dropped 35 x 500 lb. S.A.P. bombs and 2 x 250 lb. bombs on the convoy, claiming two near misses on large ships. In the meantime nine Albacores and Swordfish from Malta had also been sent to the attack but all these aircraft failed to locate the convoy; one Albacore was missing.

At 20.46 hours a Malta A.S.V. Wellington contacted the convoy and shadowed it until after midnight. Between 21.20 and 23.00 hours seven Malta Wellingtons attacked the convoy, dropping 21 x 500 lb. G.P. bombs which resulted in two explosions in the largest vessel. Possible hits were scored on two other merchant ships and on a destroyer. At 01.35 hours (24 January), Swordfish aircraft from Malta attacked the convoy, one of the Swordfish (piloted by Lieut.-Commander F.H.E. Hopkins) scored two hits on the troopship Victoria and sank it.

During the morning of 24 January, both Malta and No. 235 Wing reconnaissance aircraft made unsuccessful searches for the convoy and the naval units. At 08.00 hours an S.R.U. aircraft sighted seven destroyers north of Misurata, and a Malta photo: reconnaissance aircraft sighted four merchant ships 20 miles east of Tripoli. A Fortress searched the area of the previous night's operations with the object of sinking any disabled ship found, but without success. At 09.02 hours H.M. submarine P.36 contacted the convoy west of Misurata and scored one torpedo hit on one of the merchant ships, but failed to sink it.

/21-23 February

- 1 i.e. of the five sent to attack at dusk, as stated above. The fourth Albacore returned to base with engine trouble and the fifth was missing.
- 2 According to enemy sources this ship was torpedoed by a submarine and later by aircraft. The torpedoing by a submarine was perhaps confused with that of another merchant ship torpedoed (but not sunk) by H.M. Submarine P.36 as mentioned hereafter.

List from  
enemy sources  
of Italian  
ships sunk.

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21 - 23 February

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42

On 20 February, Intelligence reports confirmed that a large enemy convoy was about to sail for Tripoli, and No. 201 (N.C.) Group co-ordinated arrangements with Malta for its interception. Operational control was exercised by No. 235 Wing and the following aircraft were assembled for the operations:-

12 Blenheims (No. 18/55 squadron)		at Bu Amud
7 Blenheims (No. 14 squadron)	}	at Gambut
3 Torpedo-Wellingtons (No. 38 squadron)		
1 A.S.V. Wellington (No. 221 squadron)		
6 Beauforts (No. 39 squadron)	}	at L.G. 05, Sidi Barrani
2 Fortresses (No. 221 squadron)		
4 Marylands (No. 203 squadron)	}	at L.G. 09
and 1 Blenheim		
25 Wellingtons (No. 205 Group)		
1 Liberator (No. 108 squadron)		

and 6 Wellingtons (No. 37 squadron) were sent to operate from Malta.

The enemy force, in two groups about 85 miles apart, was sighted by a Malta A.S.V. Wellington on the night of 21/22 February. The positions of the groups were respectively some 175 and 250 nautical miles from Malta and more than 350 miles from Bu Amud. The Liberator, which had been detailed to shadow the enemy, crashed on taking off and was destroyed.

At 07.25 hours on the morning of 22 February a reconnaissance Maryland contacted the enemy forces (which had now joined up); they comprised eight merchant ships, two battleships, five cruisers and fifteen destroyers with a fighter escort of ME. 109's. A Blenheim and two Marylands shadowed the convoy for most of the day: the persistence and accuracy of their reports, in the face of the strong enemy fighter escort, was an outstanding feature of the operation.

Meanwhile, a striking force of five Malta Albacores had taken off on receipt of the A.S.V. Wellington's first report, but owing to an error of 100 miles in the Wellington's reckoning they were recalled. At 07.00 hours the two Fortresses were sent from L.G. 05 to attack and shadow the convoy, but due to a navigational error one of these aircraft failed to locate it. The other Fortresses reported the enemy as being in four formations, totalling six merchant ships (8/12,000 tons), one Littorio-class battleship, two 8-inch cruisers, four 6-inch cruisers and eighteen destroyers. The Fortress attacked with 7 x 500 S.A.P. bombs but did not observe the results owing to intense A.A. fire and an attack on itself by ME. 109's, which prevented the Fortress carrying out further shadowing, and it returned to base. In the meantime a striking force of five Beauforts had left L.G. 05 soon after the Fortresses, intending to attack the convoy simultaneously; unfortunately they reached the limit of their range without locating the enemy, having failed to re-fuel at Bu Amud as intended. Two formations of Blenheims (No. 18/55 squadron) were then sent from Bu Amud to attack the convoy.

/One

One Blenheim of the first formation returned with engine trouble and the others failed to locate the convoy: one Blenheim forced-landed in the sea. The second formation of (six) Blenheims fared no better, the leader returning with engine trouble and the deputy leader's W/T. failing which resulted in his leading the formation back to base. At 14.20 hours seven more Blenheims (No. 14 squadron) left Gambut but four returned with engine trouble and the others failed to sight the convoy. These misfortunes had thus resulted in only one aircraft - the Fortress - making an attack out of a total of twenty-nine aircraft despatched.

At 22.00 hours a striking force of twenty Wellingtons (No. 205 Group) took off to make a night attack on the convoy. It was arranged that a Malta A.S.V. Wellington should act as guide to this force (the single A.S.V. Wellington at Gambut having become unserviceable shortly before the operation was due to begin) but only one of the three Malta A.S.V. Wellingtons had survived bombing attacks on the island during that day. This aircraft took off to rendezvous with the Wellingtons but had to return to base owing to engine trouble. In consequence, without guidance or illumination, the whole of the Wellington striking force (except one aircraft which found and bombed the convoy but did not observe results) failed to locate the convoy. At 22.35 hours, the single Malta A.S.V. Wellington was again serviceable and took off to search for the convoy which it located three hours later some 77 miles east of Homs. But owing to the wind and the distance from Malta and the time of sighting, a projected attack by a striking force of Albacores and Swordfish was cancelled.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
AOC-in-C  
Personal File,  
Pt. III,  
332A  
(Corresp. with  
the P.M., Sec.  
of State &  
C.A.S.)

In a signal to the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Tedder attributed the failure of the R.A.F. endeavours to attack the convoy to the fact that "by one means or another Malta's striking force was effectively neutralised and the convoy was routed just outside the effective range of our day air striking force from Cyrenaica ....."

Thus, through a series of unfortunate circumstances, the opportunity of strong attacks upon - and perhaps annihilation of - an important enemy convoy and its escort of powerful naval units was virtually lost; the results (if any) of the only attacks made (by the single Fortress and the single Wellington) were not ascertained.

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May '42

#### Operation "Onset"

While the operations against the Italian convoy (above described) were in progress, a British convoy of three merchant ships escorted by three destroyers (operation "Onset") was sailing to Tobruk from Alexandria. It was arranged that No. 234 Wing<sup>1</sup> should provide fighter protection, but it was not until 20.00 hours (on 21 February) that No. 234 Wing received information that the convoy had sailed eleven hours late.

/The

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1 No. 234 Wing, exercising control of the R.N. Fulmar Flight and No. 805 sqn. of the F.A.A., was under Air H.Q. Western Desert.

SECRET

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The convoy's position was, therefore, estimated to be somewhere between Mersa Matruh and Sidi Barrani, but during the night the convoy increased its speed and made up the lost time to schedule. Early on 22 February the first fighter covering patrol (consisting of two Fulmars) located and covered the convoy from 05.00 to 06.00 hours. A W/T. silence had been imposed on the Fulmars and they were therefore prevented from reporting the difference in the convoy's position until they landed at their base. The second patrol - two Beaufighters - should have relieved the Fulmars at 06.30 hours, but failed to locate them and after an unsuccessful search they returned to base. As W/T. silence was still being observed No. 234 Wing was not aware that the convoy was left unprotected. About 07.30 hours a reconnaissance Ju. 88 attacked and bombed the convoy and the merchant ship Bintang was sunk. No. 234 Wing did not receive information of the enemy aircraft's proximity to the convoy until nearly an hour after the Bintang had been sunk.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile a third patrol, acting on the sighting of the first patrol on its return to base, found the convoy at 08.45 hours. Thereafter the convoy was protected throughout the day by patrols of two fighters.

At about noon, when a Fulmar patrol was being relieved by Hurricanes, six JU. 88's attacked the convoy. The Hurricanes engaged the enemy aircraft; one Hurricane damaged one JU. and all the enemy bombs missed the convoy. A further formation of JU. 88's attacked the convoy; the same Hurricane accounted for one enemy aircraft and probably destroyed a second, while the other Hurricane and two Fulmars drove off the rest of the JU's. but during the enemy's attack the merchant ship Hanne was sunk. The third merchantman and the escorting destroyers reached Tobruk safely.

#### Enemy Attacks on Shipping - Tobruk

Ibid:

During March and April several other attacks by enemy aircraft and submarines were made on convoys proceeding to the forward supply base at Tobruk and on shipping in Tobruk harbour, but considering the volume of traffic which sailed to Tobruk the British losses were comparatively light. This was largely due to the Royal Navy's and R.A.F.'s anti-submarine operations and to the effectiveness of the R.A.F.'s fighter protection.

The following losses and damage were caused by enemy action (1) to shipping in transit to and from Tobruk and (2) to shipping in Tobruk harbour:-

Ibid:

#### (1) In Transit

On 17 March the S.S. Krista in convoy was torpedoed and set on fire. A convoy was twice bombed off Tobruk on 2 April and the destroyers Beaufort and Fareham were damaged by near misses; R.A.F. fighters intercepted the enemy and destroyed three JU. 87's and one ME. 109. On 23 April the S.S. Kirkland was torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat north-east of Sidi Barrani. Nine days later (2 May) enemy aircraft bombed a convoy north of Daba and the S.S. Calderon was sunk.

/The

H.Q. M.E.  
D/AOC/21,  
10B

- 1 The information reached No. 234 Wing via No. 252 Wing which had received a "Y" intercept of the enemy sighting from No. 2 Field Unit.

The enemy attacks included two attacks on hospital ships. On 7 April the hospital ship Somersetshire was hit by a submarine's torpedo but managed to reach Alexandria under her own steam. The S.S. Ramb IV, conveying wounded from Tobruk, was bombed by a single enemy aircraft near Alexandria on 10 May: a direct hit caused heavy casualties among the wounded and set the ship on fire. After the survivors had been taken off, the ship had to be sunk as all efforts to tow her into Alexandria were unavailing.

(2) In Harbour

On 27 February enemy aircraft bombed the S.S. Southern Sea and Henboe Jensen in Tobruk harbour; both these ships were severely damaged. On 7 March the S.S. Cerion was dive-bombed and set on fire, and on 25 April three JU. 87's attacked the S.S. Eocene which was damaged by near misses.

Special Operations

During March and April there were four special operations comprising

- (1) a combined Naval and R.A.F. attack on Rhodes (Operation "MF.8")
- (2) & (3) combined Naval and R.A.F. operations for transferring personnel between Cyprus and Egypt (Operations "Installation" and "Scalford")
- (4) a landing by Royal Marines on the island of Kupho Nisi, off Crete, to destroy the W/T. station there (Operation "Lighter")

(1) Operation "MF.8"

A combined Naval and R.A.F. operation was carried out on the night of 14/15 March against the island of Rhodes with the object of reducing the increasingly heavy air attacks on Malta by drawing away the Luftwaffe's strength from Sicily. The plan was for a Naval bombardment combined with air attacks on the Rhodes aerodromes which it was hoped would cause the enemy to keep stronger air forces in Crete for fear of further attacks.

The Naval striking force comprised the cruisers Dido and Eurayalus and the six destroyers of the 22nd Destroyer Flotilla. The R.A.F. units were provided by No. 201 (N.C.) Group, No. 205 Group and Air Headquarters, Western Desert. No. 201 (N.C.) Group was responsible for

- (a) providing protection for H.M. ships during their daylight movements
- (b) the illumination of targets for the Naval bombardment, while No. 205 Group and Air H.Q., Western Desert were to carry out diversionary bombing.

/The following



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The following aircraft were employed:-

- (1) Fighter protection Ten Beaufighters of No. 252 squadron operating from Edku and a detachment of this squadron from Nicosia
- (2) Illumination Four long-range Albacores of No. 821 F.A.A. squadron
- (3) Bombing Wellingtons of Nos. 37, 40, 70 and 148 squadrons (No. 205 Group) and Blenheims of No. 14 squadron (Air H.), Western Desert).

At 02.30 hours on 15 March the warships opened fire on shipping, sea-plane and harbour installations and the large Allioti flour mills. The latter received direct hits and several fires were started. The Albacores dropped their flares but illumination was difficult owing to low clouds, and for the same reason 'spotting' the fall of shells was almost impossible. Meanwhile, before and during the Naval bombardment, the Wellingtons made diversionary attacks on Cretan aerodromes, causing fires and explosions at Calato; the Blenheims attacked Candia but results were only partially observed owing to poor visibility. The operation was uneventful for the R.A.F. fighters, the only enemy aircraft sighted on the outward and return journeys being intercepted and driven off.

The main object of the operation - viz. the reduction of the Luftwaffe's attacks on Malta from Sicily - failed, and the attacks against the island continued to increase in number and severity.

During the R.A.F. attacks in this operation some bombs fell on Milas on the Turkish mainland near Rhodes, and several persons were killed and property was damaged. It was considered that the bombs were probably dropped by Beaufighters which lost their direction while returning to Nicosia and flew over Turkish territory, and an apology and indemnity were made to the Turkish government. Later on, however, the Yugo-Slav General Mihailovitch sent information to the British government that a German aircraft had dropped bombs on Turkey during that night. If this information was correct it may well be that the enemy knew of the intended attack and that the bombing was purposely carried out by the Luftwaffe with the intention of injuring British relations with Turkey.

## (2) Operation "Installation"

This operation, which involved the movement of 2,200 personnel between Egypt and Cyprus, took place between 12 and 17 March. Two convoys carried the troops - Group "A" consisting of the S.S. Princess Marguerite and Antwerp escorted by one destroyer, and Group "B" comprising the S.S. Princess Baudouin and an escort of two destroyers. The transfer of personnel was completed in twelve sailings between Alexandria, Port Said and Haifa, and Farmagusta. No. 201 (N.C.) Group carried out intensive reconnaissance and provided three A.S.V. Wellingtons (of No. 221 squadron) for special anti-submarine patrols off the Syrian and Palestinian coast. Six Hurricanes (of No. 127 squadron) operating from Cyprus gave fighter protection from 12 March onwards. The operation was completed without any enemy interference.

/(3)

(3) Operation "Scalford"

In this operation personnel were transferred from Cyprus to Egypt between 29 March and 7 April. As in "Installation", two convoys carried the troops - Group "A" comprising the S.S. Princess Marguerite and Antwerp and one destroyer, and Group "B" comprising the S.S. Princess Kathleen and Malines and one destroyer.

Special reconnaissances were arranged by No. 201 (N.C.) Group and were provided by Sunderlands of No. 230 squadron, and fighter protection for the ships was supplied by six Hurricanes of No. 127 squadron detached from Haifa. The operation was carried out in fourteen sailings: there were no enemy attacks. On 4 April one of the Sunderlands reported an enemy light cruiser in Castelrosso harbour: three Beauforts were ordered to stand by ready to attack her, and a Maryland was despatched to make further investigation but failed to locate the cruiser.

(4) Operation "Lighter"

The object of this operation, which was carried out on the night of 15/16 April against the island of Kupho Nisi was to destroy the Wireless station there. The Naval forces consisted of the destroyer Kelvin to carry the attacking force of two platoons of the Royal Marines, and the destroyer Kipling as escort.

Air co-operation was carried out by No. 201 (N.C.) Group which arranged for six Wellingtons (of No. 37 squadron) to carry out a diversionary bombing of Heraklion aerodrome on the night of the operation, but only two of the Wellingtons dropped bombs on the target (results not observed), the other four having been forced to abandon the task owing to bad weather conditions. The Royal Marines landed and destroyed the Wireless station according to plan. Both the outward and return journeys were made without incident.

Op. Research Section (M.E.) Enemy Convoy Routes

Report No. R.44  
(H.Q. Med:  
S/161/Air  
89B)

After the enemy had re-captured Benghazi (on 29 January) he made great efforts to improve the unloading facilities in that port, and by April Benghazi had become the most important harbour for the disembarkation of the enemy's supplies as it had the advantage of short communications with the Axis forward area. The enemy's chief disembarkation ports were then (as formerly)

- (a) Tripoli (the route passing west of Sicily, thence to Pantellaria Island and thence to Tripoli, the section of the route nearest to Malta being traversed by night)
- (b) Benghazi (the route being from the Gulf of Taranto and passing about 100 miles east of Malta and thence direct to Benghazi).

Although the Benghazi route was the longer of the two, the enemy convoys could obtain fighter protection from Sicily and Cyrenaica, and arrangements were made that during the first day of their passage the convoys were within fighter range of Sicily; during the night they passed through the Central Basin and by dawn of the second day they were almost within fighter range of Benghazi. The convoys were usually escorted by a strong force of destroyers and occasionally by cruisers.

379.

Operations Against Enemy Convoy, 13-14 April

Ibid: &  
R.A.F. Ops. in  
the West Desert  
& East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42, &  
H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

On the receipt of air reconnaissance reports of the probable sailing of two enemy convoys from Italy, plans were made by No. 201 (N.C.) Group and H.Q. Mediterranean (Malta) to attack these convoys on 14 April. No. 201 (N.C.) Group had the following forces available for the operations, at an advanced landing-ground at Bu Amud:-

## (a) Reconnaissance and Shadow aircraft

3 Marylands and 6 Blenheims (No. 203 squadron)  
1 A.S.V. Wellington (No. 221 squadron)  
1 A.S.V. Beaufort (No. 221 squadron)

## (b) A Striking force of

No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Apl.

8 torpedo Beauforts (6 of No. 39 and 2 of No. 22 squadrons)  
7 Blenheims (No. 14 squadron) 1

## (c) A Fighter escort of

4 Beaufighters (No. 272 squadron)

Malta provided one A.S.V. Wellington and one Maryland for special searches on the night of 13/14 April in the area between Malta and the Straits of Messina.

No. 203 sqn.  
O.R.B. Apl.

The A.S.V. Wellington from Bu Amud and the A.S.V. Wellington from Malta began searching for the convoys at about 20.00 hours on 13 April. The Wellington from Bu Amud was forced to return, owing to electrical storms, without having made any sightings, but the Malta Wellington sighted a small convoy sailing towards Italy which was soon out of range of effective attack by the striking force. The three Marylands (of No. 203 squadron) continued the search in the early hours of the morning (14 April) and the A.S.V. Beaufort (of No. 221 squadron) took off from Bu Amud at 07.30 hours to make a special reconnaissance, and land at Malta. About two hours later two of the No. 203 squadron Blenheims joined in the search but did not make a sighting; one of these Blenheims failed to return.

Official  
Account of  
Air Ops. in  
the M.E.,  
Feb. '42 to  
Jan. '43

At 10.00 hours one of the three Marylands sighted a large enemy convoy which it subsequently reported 2 as comprising four merchant ships escorted by five destroyers in position 36° 24' north, 16° 33' east, steering a course 200° at a speed of eight knots. The Maryland shadowed the convoy for over two hours until its petrol was nearly exhausted and then made for Malta but was shot down four miles from the coast. In the meantime the eight Beauforts (of Nos 22 and 39 squadrons) escorted by the four Beaufighters (of No. 272 squadron) were sent to attack the convoy.

/All

No. 14 sqn.  
O.R.B. Apl.

- 1 These Blenheim aircraft stood by but were not called upon to take part in the operation.
- 2 The Maryland's first report gave two M.V's, one cruiser and five destroyers. (Two of the M.V's were estimated to be of 12,000 tons and two of 10,000 tons).

Ibid: .

All these aircraft were instructed to fly very low until they were past 20° east, the Beauforts to fly at 100 feet at least in the reconnaissance area. The Beaufighters were to point out the target to the Beauforts and were to leave the Beauforts at approximately 16.10 hours at the limit of their fuel range. All the crews were briefed to land at Malta.

R.A.F. Ops. in  
the West Desert  
& East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42

The striking force had been briefed to fly to position 33° 52' north, 17° 02' east, and carry out a creeping line ahead search from there. This position was reached at 15.24 hours and the search began. At 15.45 hours the Beaufighter leader sighted an ME. 110 on the same course as the Beauforts. He chased it for 15 minutes without result, and on turning to re-join the formation he saw two more ME. 110's flying at 2,000 feet. He climbed to attack them and shot them both down. He then chased and damaged a JU. 88. These combats had led him towards the convoy which he sighted only a few miles away. Meanwhile the other Beaufighters had attacked a JU. 88 which seemed to be shadowing the Beauforts, but the combat was indecisive. During this encounter the Beaufighters saw the convoy but, unfortunately, they did not ascertain if the Beauforts had also seen it before they (the Beaufighters) turned towards Malta. The Beaufighters apparently thought that the Beauforts could not have failed to have seen the convoy and were manoeuvring for position to attack, but in fact the Beauforts - flying much lower than their escort (at only about 50 feet) - had not seen the convoy owing to their small field of vision at such a low altitude, and they did not do so until 16.40 hours by which time the escorting Beaufighters had already landed at Malta. It was this mistake which affected the success of the operation.

The eight Beauforts attacked the convoy at 16.53 hours: five aircraft dropped their torpedoes, claiming hits on three of the merchant ships and on one destroyer: the other three aircraft were engaged by a strong enemy protective force of ME. 109's and 110's and also some JU. 88's<sup>2</sup>, and jettisoned their torpedoes in the direction of the target. Two of the Beauforts were shot down over the convoy, and two others were destroyed before they could reach Malta over which the enemy maintained standing fighter patrols throughout the day; one Beaufort which had been damaged was forced to alight in the sea some six miles from Malta and sank.

No. 203 sqn.  
O.R.B. Apl.

#### Features of the Operation

Apart from the unfortunate mistake of the Beaufighters in failing to ascertain if the Beauforts had seen the convoy, two noteworthy features of the operation were:-

- (a) the great distance from the point of departure of the striking force (some 500 miles) that the attack took place
- (b) the fact that the enemy single-engine fighters were protecting the convoy at a much greater distance (at least 120 nautical miles) than was thought possible.

#### Enemy

R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vol. 3. Part (C)

No. 39 sqn.  
O.R.B. Apl.

- 1 The official assessment was: one merchant ship 'severely damaged' and one merchant ship 'damaged'.
- 2 The enemy protective force over and around the convoy was estimated to be nearly 100 strong.

Enemy Air Attacks on Alexandria and the Delta Area(1) By Night

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May  
'42; and  
H.Q. M.E. Op.  
Summaries

During the Winter of 1941 there had been little enemy raiding over the Delta area, but in the Spring of 1942 the raids started again. In the meantime, early in December, No. 89 squadron <sup>1</sup> (Beaufighters) had arrived in Egypt from the United Kingdom for employment in the defence of Alexandria and the Delta area. This squadron was stationed at Abu Sueir (under No. 250 Wing): its personnel had been specially trained, and had experience in night-fighting.

Early in February, No. 89 squadron began operations against enemy reconnaissance aircraft, but no interceptions were made. On the night of 2/3 March, an enemy force of thirty-five aircraft bombed a wide area covering Alexandria, Port Said, Ismailia, Shallufa, Romani and Kabrit. Six of No. 89 squadron's Beaufighters and four of No. 213 <sup>2</sup> squadron's Hurricanes and one F.A.A. Fulmar intercepted some of the raiders. The Beaufighters shot down two HE. 111's: on returning to their base two of the Beaufighters crash-landed, one being due to damage sustained in combat.

Spasmodic raids over the Delta area, which were principally directed against Alexandria, occurred during the next few weeks. On the night of 7/8 April, some twenty-two JU. 88's and HE. 111's were plotted approaching the coast singly between 14,000 and 20,000 feet in the Alexandria area. Between 04.30 hours and 05.20 hours the enemy made a flare-illuminated level attack on Alexandria harbour. Four of the Beaufighters patrolling north of the harbour intercepted, and one of them shot down two HE. 111's: the A.A. defences also claimed to have probably destroyed one other HE.111.

The largest attack was made on the night of 28/29 April when about twenty-five JU. 88's and HE.111's bombed Alexandria from 15,000 feet. Four of the Beaufighters were sent out on patrol, one of which shot down two HE. 111's; one HE. 111 was also probably destroyed and another was damaged. The A.A. gunners also accounted for one HE. 111. These losses - amounting to 20% of the raiding force - resulted in a very marked decrease in the number of enemy attacks, thenceforward only occasional raids being made which were mostly on Alexandria.

/(2) By Day

- 1 No. 89 sqn. was commanded by Wing./Cmdr. G.H. Stainforth A.F.C., winner of the Schneider Cup. He was later killed in action.
- 2 No. 213 sqn. had two detachments (under No. 250 Wing) at Port Said and Ismailia, its H.Q. being at Edku (under No. 252 Wing). The pilots of this sqn. had also been trained in night-fighting.

(2) By Day

Enemy daylight raids were chiefly confined to frequent reconnaissances over Alexandria, Port Said and coastal waters, with occasional raids to the Canal zone and the port of Suez. The Hurricanes of No. 213 squadron were on constant patrol against these incursions; they were reinforced at different times by Tomahawks of No. 250 squadron<sup>1</sup> and Hurricanes of No. 1 squadron, S.A.A.F.<sup>2</sup> for patrols west of Alexandria, Tomahawks of No. 5 squadron, S.A.A.F.<sup>3</sup> over Port Said, and Gladiators of Nos. 2 and 5 squadrons of the Royal Egyptian Air Force for patrols near Suez. The enemy reconnaissance aircraft usually operated at 30,000 to 40,000 feet and this height made interception difficult: however, No. 213 squadron's Hurricanes destroyed three enemy aircraft, probably destroyed another, and damaged four more during the period under review.

Operations of No. 1 G.R. Unit, Ismailia

No. 1 G.R.  
Unit  
O.R.B's Dec.  
'41 to May  
'42

Meanwhile the D.W.I. Wellingtons of No. 1 G.R. Unit at Ismailia had been carrying out routine sweeps for enemy mines in the Suez Canal. For this purpose the Canal was divided at Lake Timsah into a North and a South Section, each flight of the Wellingtons being confined to one Section, North to Port Said and South to Suez. The sweeps were made by a single aircraft on alternate days, the Sections being covered twice in each direction. In February, these sweeps were reduced to one every fourth day as no mines had been encountered during the previous month.

During May, two of the Wellingtons carried out a search sweep for mines off Port Said where enemy aircraft had recently laid mines in the vicinity of the harbour resulting in the loss of two vessels; a sweep was also made over the north end of the Great Bitter Lake where it was thought that some unexploded mines were still extant, but without result.

MALTA COMVOYS

Admiralty  
Account of  
Naval Ops.,  
Apl. '41 to  
Jan. '43

Towards the end of November (1941) the 7th Cruiser Squadron,<sup>4</sup> consisting of only H.M.S. Ajax and Neptune, was sent to Malta to counter-act the increased escorts which the Italians were then employing with their convoys to North Africa. The diminishing supplies of fuel at Malta were, however, insufficient to meet the requirements of this Squadron and in consequence it became necessary to run the supply ship Breconshire from Alexandria to Malta, the enemy's control of the western approaches to Malta precluding the sailing of a convoy from the west.

/The

- 1 Stationed at Port Said (under No. 250 Wing)
- 2 Stationed at Sidi Hineish, L.G. 12 (under No. 262 Wing)
- 3 Stationed at Sidi Barrani, L.G. 05 (one of the Detached Squadrons of No. 252 Wing)
- 4 Commanded by Rear-Admiral Rawlings.

The sailing of the Breconshire<sup>1</sup> 15 - 18 December

The Naval plan for the Breconshire convoy provided three covering forces:-

- (a) The 15th Cruiser Squadron<sup>2</sup> (Force "Q") comprising three cruisers and eight destroyers to escort the Breconshire from Alexandria to approximately half-way to Malta and then to return to Alexandria.
- (b) Force "K", comprising two cruisers and two destroyers from Malta to take over the Breconshire from Force "Q" and escort her into Malta.
- (c) Force "B", consisting of one cruiser and four destroyers from Malta to cover the operation to the northward.

The operation was complicated by the fact that at the same time the Italians were running a convoy to Tripoli, escorted by powerful units of their fleet.

The Breconshire sailed from Alexandria on the night of 15 December; fighter protection during daylight on 16 December was provided by No. 201 (N.C.) Group. During the passage of the convoy (15 to 18 December) the R.A.F. co-operated by laying on special searches from both Egypt and Malta, those from Egypt beginning on 15 December and those from Malta on the following day. The searches from Egypt comprised standard patrols between Crete and Cyrenaica and patrols off Alexandria, with A.S.V. patrols (of No. 815 F.A.A. squadron's Swordfish and a Sunderland of No. 230 squadron) ahead of the Breconshire; meanwhile Hurricanes and Marylands (of No. 69 squadron, Malta) made general searches west and south of Malta and the Ionian Sea, while one aircraft shadowed the enemy's naval forces.

No. 201 Grp.  
and No. 69  
Sqn.  
O.R.Bs.

During the operation some doubt arose as to whether one or two Italian naval forces were engaged in covering their own convoy, and on 17 December C.S. 15 unexpectedly encountered an Italian force at 17.35 hours some 120 miles north of Benghazi. The circumstances which led to this encounter were as follows: an Italian force (referred to hereafter as Force "X") of ten or twelve ships was sighted at 10.25 hours by a Malta reconnaissance aircraft; it was then some 170 miles north-east of the position in which C.S. 15 was later intercepted, as stated above. Force "X" by increasing speed to 24 knots could have made this interception. At 15.25 hours a second Italian force (referred to as Force "Y") of some eighteen or nineteen ships, including merchant vessels, was sighted about 100 miles from the known position of Force "X" at 10.25 hours and about 100 miles north of the position in which C.S. 15 was intercepted some two hours later.

/Force "Y"

- 1 The main authorities for this operation are the Admiralty account of Naval Ops., Apl. '41 to Jan. '43, R.A.F. Ops. in the Western Desert and Eastern Mediterranean, 18 Nov. '41 to 19 May '42, and Appx. 'H' to H.Q. M.E. Op. Summary No. 10 (16-23 December '41) "Report on Air Action in Relation to Breconshire Sailing."
- 2 Hereafter referred to as C.S. 15: it was commanded by Rear-Admiral Vian.

Force "Y" therefore (which was unable to steam at 50 knots) could not have intercepted C.S. 15, but Force "X", by altering its course and steaming at 20 knots, could have reached the position in which C.S. 15 was intercepted at 17.35 hours.<sup>1</sup> Force "X" was not again sighted between 10.25 hours (when it was first seen) and 17.35 hours (when it met C.S. 15), but visibility was low and the probable course of Force "X" would have taken it along the extreme edge of the British patrol area. The reconnaissance effort was concentrated mainly on Force "Y" after its discovery at 15.25 hours. The enemy knew of the movements of C.S. 15 and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that Force "X" was instructed to increase speed so as to intercept C.S. 15 and also to cover Force "Y" and its convoy.

Meanwhile from 09.50 to 13.00 hours C.S. 15 and the Breconshire were shadowed by two to six enemy aircraft, and during the afternoon attacks were made on them by fifty high-level bombers and twenty-five torpedo-carrying aircraft through which the Breconshire managed to manoeuvre unharmed. C.S. 15 then came under heavy gun-fire from the Italian warships, and Admiral Vian sent the Breconshire south with the destroyers Decoy and Havock to screen her out of harm's way while C.S. 15 moved towards the enemy force (which consisted of two Cavour-class battleships, a squadron of 8-inch cruisers, and destroyers). The enemy, however, turned away and retreated and Admiral Vian, using smoke to conceal the inferiority of his force, and by making feint attacks, contrived to draw the enemy still further away from the Breconshire. When the worst of the danger was over he detached Force "K" to escort her to Malta which she reached safely on 18 December, C.S. 15 returning to Alexandria.

The air effort against the Italian forces in the above operation was relatively small. On the morning of 18 December, Air Headquarters Western Desert, and No. 201 (N.C.) Group were instructed by the A.O.C.-in-C., to make the maximum bombing attacks on the enemy, but difficulties in communicating with the Western Desert and the confusion of identity prevented action being taken. According to the Naval authorities, most of the Italian fleet turned north at about 14.00 hours on the 18th and reached Taranto on the afternoon of 19 December. The Royal Naval losses were two destroyers from a minefield on the night of 18/19 December: the enemy lost one submarine which was sunk by one of H.M. destroyers.

Apart from the R.A.F.'s reconnaissances and searches the only effective air efforts during the operation were:-

- (a) a strike on the Italian convoy by four Malta Albacores during the afternoon of 18 December in which torpedo hits were scored on two merchant ships of 8,000 and 2,000 tons respectively.<sup>2</sup>
- (b) mines laid in Tripoli harbour and off Benghazi on 18/19 December by Wellingtons from Malta and the main land.

/The

- 1 The possibility that Forces "X" and "Y" were in fact identical was made by the Naval authorities who suggested to No. 201 (N.C.) Group that the initial sighting of Force "Y" might have been 100 miles out.
- 2 Five Swordfish sent out later could not reach the convoy owing to a strong contrary wind. The 8,000 and 2,000 ton merchant ships were officially assessed as 'damaged'.



SECRET

385.

The main reasons for the smallness of the air effort were as follows:-

- (a) although all available reconnaissance aircraft from Malta were placed at the disposal of the Vice-Admiral, Malta, from the night of 16/17 December, and patrols and searches were made from Egypt (as agreed with the Naval authorities), effective reconnaissance was restricted by bad weather, by enemy air attacks on Malta, and certain commitments which reduced the serviceability of the A.S.V. Wellingtons and Marylands: moreover, the reconnaissance aircraft from Sidi Barrani were operating at the extreme limit of their range.
- (b) Swordfish, briefed to attack on 18 December, were delayed by Contrary winds and the enemy convoys reached Tripoli before they could make a strike.
- (c) a Wellington attack on 17/18 December was prevented by rain and low cloud.
- (d) The A.O.C., Malta, considered that attacks by Blenheims during 18 December were not worth the risk to the aircraft <sup>1</sup>
- (e) fourteen Wellingtons which were about to take off from Luqa on 19 December were grounded by a heavy air attack which destroyed one of them and made the runway unserviceable.
- (f) at no time was the Italian convoy within effective striking range of the available aerodromes in Cyrenaica or Egypt, and in any event aircraft of the Western Desert Command were fully occupied in the critical ground battle then taking place during the "Crusader" offensive.

The chief lessons from the air aspect of the Breconshire operation appeared to be:-

- (i) the desirability of a combined R.N. - R.A.F. Operations Room both at Alexandria and Malta. A liaison of this nature might have avoided the confusion as to the Italian Forces "X" and "Y" which resulted in the surprise interception of C.S. 15.

/(ii)

A.H.Q. M.E., 1  
Dy. A.O.C.-in-  
C. Malta, Pt.I,  
79A

The A.O.C's (A-V-M. Lloyd) reason was that experience had shown that low flying attacks by Blenheims against naval surface forces in the strength present on 18 December would have resulted in the aircraft being shot down before they could drop their bombs. He had also considered making a medium altitude attack, but owing to a cloud base of 2,500 to 3,000 feet and the fact that the Blenheim's crews were inexperienced at that height, in his opinion the risks from A.A. fire "far outweighed any very problematical hits by the Blenheims".

- (ii) An increased number of long-range reconnaissance and striking aircraft (especially torpedo-bombers) available in Malta, particularly during such times as the Royal Navy might be unable to provide Naval forces of sufficient strength to engage and sink such powerful enemy units as were encountered in the operations described above.

A.H.Q. M.E.,  
S.52660  
passim

A.H.Q. M.E.,  
A.O.C/26  
passim

The question of a combined Naval and Air Operations Room at Alexandria had been mooted in July (1941) and considerable discussions and correspondence on this matter had taken place between Admiral Cunningham's and Air Marshal Tedder's Staffs. These led to conferences being held between the two Staffs during the Spring of 1942, and in June a combined Operations Room was inaugurated at No. 201 (N.C.) Group's Headquarters. When the latter were removed temporarily to Ismailia on 1 July (consequent upon the retreat of our forces to Alamein) <sup>1</sup> the Naval and Air Staffs worked there in adjacent buildings. In August, the two Staffs began to work in adjoining buildings at Laurens (Alexandria), and in the following month the building of a special combined Operations Room was begun at this place and was completed in November.

Meanwhile, similar measures had been taken for a combined Operations Room at Malta during the Spring of 1942.

#### Convoy from Malta to Alexandria, 26-29 December

Between 26 and 29 December a convoy was run successfully from Malta to Alexandria. The convoy comprised four merchant ships, escorted by a cruiser and four destroyers and covered by special air searches. It left Malta after dusk on 26 December. A second Naval force sailed from Alexandria to rendezvous with the convoy at 07.00 hours on the morning of 28 December, about 60 miles north of Ras el Tin. During that morning four attacks were made on the convoy by enemy torpedo-bombers and JU. 88's between Ras el Tin and Tobruk. In one of these attacks a covering Martlet engaged four of the torpedo-bombers, shooting one down and causing two others to jettison their torpedoes. Later on, Fulmars of the F.A.A. drove off a large formation of JU. 88's and forced them to jettison their bombs.

During the next day R.A.F. fighters attacked and probably damaged two more torpedo-bombers which were attempting to attack one of the merchant ships and a destroyer. The convoy reached Alexandria on 29 December without loss.

#### Convoy M.W. 8B 16 - 19 January

A convoy consisting of four ships and Naval escort sailed from Alexandria for Malta on 16 January under cover of Beaufighters of Nos. 252 and 272 squadrons. During 18 January the Beaufighters intercepted several enemy torpedo-bombers which unsuccessfully attacked the convoy from time to time.

R.A.F. aircraft shot down one Ju. 88, probably destroyed two S. 79's, and damaged two other JU. 88's without loss to themselves.

/Three

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42  
and  
A.H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries

<sup>1</sup> See Section V, page 442 infra.

SECRET

Three of the convoy's vessels reached Malta safely on 19 January, but the fourth - the (Norwegian) S.S. Thermopylae - had developed engine trouble and steering defects on the morning of 18 January and could not make the scheduled speed. As the convoy was already late it was decided to detach this ship, escorted by the anti-aircraft cruiser Carlisle and two destroyers, to Benghazi. Three of the Beaufighters were ordered to provide air protection for the Thermopylae, but one aircraft failed to locate her, a second did not return (cause unknown), while the third carried out a two hours patrol. On the next day three other Beaufighters were briefed to cover the Thermopylae and her escort which, on being ordered back to Alexandria, had taken a course outside the range of single-engined fighters. The first Beaufighter arrived to find the Thermopylae, which had been gutted as a result of enemy bombing, being sunk by her escort. The Beaufighters subsequently covered the Naval units on their return to Alexandria.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
AOC/206, 67A  
(Summary of  
Op. by the  
C-in-C.Med:)

In his Report to the Admiralty on the operation, Admiral Cunningham stated that "a feature of the operation was the excellent air co-operation under No. 201 (N.C.) Group. Very full reconnaissance was flown giving good security. Fighter aircraft worked well, particularly from forward areas under difficult conditions".

#### Two-way Convoy, 24 - 27 January

R.A.F. Ops.  
in the  
West: Desert  
& East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May '42

A small two-way convoy movement was concluded successfully from 24 - 27 January. One merchant ship, with Royal Naval escort and air cover provided by Hurricanes of No. 238 squadron 1, left Alexandria on 24 January. On the following morning the convoy was attacked by four or five JU. 88's off the Libyan coast. Two of the Hurricanes engaged the JU. 88's, shot down one of them and damaged three others. A third Hurricane encountered a JU. 88 some ten miles north of the convoy and caused it to blow up in the air. The convoy reached Malta on 27 January. Meanwhile the convoy from Malta (consisting of two merchant ships and Naval escort) reached Alexandria on the same day, having survived attacks by enemy torpedo-bombers on the afternoon of 26 January.

#### Two-way Convoy, 12 - 15 February

R.A.F. Ops.  
in West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41  
to 19 May  
'42

From 12 to 15 February a further two-way convoy movement was carried out between Alexandria and Malta and vice versa: this operation met with considerable losses, two merchant vessels of the convoy to Malta being so severely damaged that they had to be sunk by their escort, and the third being badly damaged and towed back to Alexandria.

The two convoys comprised:-

#### No. 1 (Alexandria to Malta)

(First Part, Convoy M.W. 9A: two merchant vessels, the Clan Chatten and Clan Campbell, escorted by the anti-aircraft cruiser Carlisle and four destroyers  
(Second Part, Convoy M.W. 9B: the merchant vessel Rowallan Castle escorted by four destroyers

/No. 2

1 Of No. 262 Wing. This sqn. was based at L.G. 12, south of Hineish.

No. 2 (Malta to Alexandria)

Convoy ME. 10: three merchant vessels, the Clan Ferguson, the City of Calcutta and the Ajax, and the supply ship Breconshire, escorted by the cruiser Penelope and six destroyers.

It was arranged that the two convoys should meet and exchange escorts on the afternoon of 14 February.

Air Support for the Convoys

Ibid., and  
No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B.

As a counter against possible enemy air, surface or submarine attacks the R.A.F. provided the following support:-

- (a) increased anti-submarine patrols over the approaches to Alexandria and the coastal waters to Tobruk; continuous close patrols ahead of the convoys; and special anti-submarine patrols from Malta when the convoys were leaving or approaching the island
- (b) continuous fighter cover during daylight while the convoys were within range of single-engine aircraft; fighter cover for the Naval units following up No. 1 (westbound) convoy; and patrols by Beaufighters (of No. 252 squadron) from either Malta<sup>1</sup> or Gambut when single-engine fighters were out of range
- (c) special reconnaissances by Malta and Egypt-based aircraft, including A.S.V. Wellington searches (by No. 221 squadron), and photographic and visual reconnaissance of Taranto
- (d) a maximum striking force standing ready at Malta during 14 and 15 February and six Blenheims and six Beauforts standing by at El Adem; two Fortresses (of No. 220 squadron) at Fuka satellite landing-ground, and six Blenheims at Fuka main landing-ground
- (e) strategic bombing of airfields at Heraklion (Crete), Catania, Gerbini and Comiso (Sicily), and the submarine base at Salamis (Greece).

During their passage the convoys were attacked by seventy-nine bombers and torpedo-bombers flying in formations which varied from a single aircraft to fourteen JU. 88's and seven Heinkels.

The first part (M.W. 9A) of No. 1 (westbound) convoy sailed from Alexandria at 16.00 hours on 12 February, followed an hour later by the second part (M.W. 9B) on a slightly different course. At dawn next day (13 February) the 15th Cruiser Squadron with eight destroyers sailed with the intention of overtaking No. 1 convoy at a point 100 miles north of Cape Aamer, and in the afternoon of that day No. 2 (eastbound) convoy left Malta. No. 2 convoy was not attacked, but on 13 February No. 1 (westbound) convoy was attacked by enemy aircraft.

/The

1 Some Beaufighters of No. 252 squadron had been sent to operate from Malta during the passage of the convoys.

389.

The fighter escort drove off the enemy in the morning but during the afternoon the M.W. 9A section of the convoy was heavily bombed. The Clan Campbell sustained considerable damage which necessitated her being detached from the convoy and being taken to Tobruk, escorted by two destroyers. She eventually returned to Alexandria.

Early on 14 February, the M.W. 9A and M.W. 9B sections of No. 1 convoy effected a junction (according to plan) with the 15th Cruiser Squadron, north of Tobruk. Enemy aircraft sighted this movement and shadowed the convoy until the afternoon. When the convoy was about 150 miles north of Benghazi strong forces of JU. 88's and Heinkels made high level and dive-bombing attacks upon it, severely damaging the Clan Chattan which had to be sunk by her escort after her personnel had been transferred from her.

In the meantime No. 2 (eastbound) convoy (M.E.10) had been attacked by two S. 79's but had continued its course unharmed. At 14.40 hours No. 1 and No. 2 convoys (both attended by enemy aircraft) met as arranged: the change of escorts was completed successfully under cover of the fire of all the warships and assisted by the Malta Beaufighters which shot down a Cant. Z. 506. The convoys then resumed their voyages, but from 15.00 hours and onwards they were both attacked by enemy aircraft. H.M.S. Carlisle (No. 1 convoy) was stopped by damage to a steam pipe but managed to repair it and continued her course, but at 15.15 hours the Rowallan Castle - the last of the ships of No. 1 (westbound) convoy - was hit and had to be taken in tow. The consequent reduction of the convoy's speed to less than 10 knots exposed the escort to a grave risk from surface or submarine attack, and the Rowallan Castle's crew was therefore removed from her, and at 19.56 hours she was sunk by gunfire from H.M. ships. Meanwhile No. 2 (eastbound) convoy was covered by R.A.F. fighters when it came within their range north of Tobruk. Beaufighters damaged one S. 79 and forced eleven others to jettison their bombs, and two other S. 79's were later destroyed by Hurricanes.

During the night of 15/16 February, aircraft of No. 201 (N.C.) Group co-operated as follows:- a Sunderland and three Albacores<sup>1</sup> provided continuous patrols for No. 2 (eastbound) convoy, and on the 16th two Dorniers (of No. 2 Yugo-Slav squadron) made special patrols to the west, two Ansons (of No. 13 Hellenic Squadron) carried out searches from Alexandria to Ras El Kenayis, and seven Albacores covered other coastal areas. Meanwhile three routine anti-submarine patrols were made of the Alexandria approaches. As the convoy neared Alexandria fighters, flying in pairs, gave it protection until all the ships were safely in harbour.

No. 69 sqn.  
O.R.B. and  
R.A.F. Ops.  
in West:  
Desert &  
East: Med:  
18 Nov. '41 to  
19 May '42

In the meantime, in the afternoon of 15 February,<sup>2</sup> a Malta-based reconnaissance Maryland had sighted an enemy naval force of three cruisers and nine destroyers steaming on a south-westerly course 83 miles south-east of Kalafrana. Unfortunately, the Maryland failed to inform Malta by W/T, and consequently the striking force was not employed against this naval force.

/The

Ibid:

- 1 The Albacores (of No. 826 sqn. F.A.A.) were under operational control of No. 201 Grp.
- 2 The time of sighting is not recorded, but the Maryland began its patrol at 12.15 hours.

The information did not reach Malta until 16.00 hours when the crew of the Maryland had been rescued from the sea after their aircraft had been shot down by ME. 109's. By that time the striking force had been released from their stand-by and the opportunity was missed. However, at about half an hour after midnight, a Malta A.S.V. Wellington re-located the enemy force steering on a northerly course 157 miles south-east of Cape Passero. Five Albacores were sent out and they attacked the force at 03.25 hours (16 February) scoring torpedo hits on two cruisers and one destroyer, and a probable hit on another destroyer. When the Albacores left the scene four ships were on fire, one cruiser burning furiously at the stern. The aircraft did not make any further sightings, but at 13.15 hours a submarine saw two enemy cruisers and six destroyers mid-way between Catania and Cape Spartivento. The submarine obtained two hits with torpedoes on one of the cruisers.

During the above convoy operations the R.A.F. effort was hampered by enemy air attacks on Malta between 11/12 and 15/16 February in which some 400 bomber sorties were made on the dockyards and the Halfar, Takali and Luqa aerodromes: on 15 February the Luqa runways were badly cratered, two Wellingtons under repair were destroyed, two Blenheims were damaged, and three Beaufighters slightly damaged. On the same day ME. 109's bombed El Adem and Gambut aerodromes: no damage or casualties were caused but two Kittyhawks, which intercepted the raiders, were shot down.

#### Results

Although the four ships of No. 2 convoy reached Alexandria safely, the passage of No. 1 convoy (M.W. 9A and M.W. 9B) to Malta had ended in disaster, two of the three ships having been sunk and the third seriously damaged and towed back to Alexandria.

#### Malta's Serious Situation - Further Convoy Planned

As a result of the failure of the February convoy the supply situation in Malta was seriously prejudiced. In a signal to the War Office (dated 18 February) the Governor, Lieut.-General Sir William Dobbie, stated that the supply of bombs and fuel oil was running low, and that stocks of cement, timber and small arms ammunition were inadequate. He stressed that until the situation in Cyrenaica (where the British forces were still retreating before the German advance) "was radically changed" he considered that "the difficulties of getting convoys from the east will not diminish" and that it was essential to explore very urgently the possibility of using all other available means of obtaining supplies not only from the east but also from the west.

Following upon the Governor's representations the Chiefs of Staff suggested to the three C's-in-C., Middle East, that a further attempt to send a convoy to Malta should be made during the dark period in March, as Malta's situation would be "dangerous" if no convoys were to get through to the island before the early part of May. In their view, Malta was of such importance both as an air staging post and as an impediment to the enemy's reinforcement routes that "the most drastic steps were justifiable to sustain it".

/The

SECRET

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The risk to the ships sailing in the convoy was not to deter the C's-in-C. from this projected operation which, during its progress, was to be regarded as a primary commitment (unless a land battle was in progress). With regard to the convoy itself: the Chiefs of Staff considered that a convoy from the west was impracticable and that the chances of a successful convoy from the east depended upon an advance by the British forces in Cyrenaica and the consequent re-gaining of the aerodromes in that area.

Ibid: 39A

Ibid: 54A

The three C's-in-C. did not feel that the re-occupation of Cyrenaica was "a complete answer" to the problem of getting supplies to Malta: they stressed that fighter protection during the reception and unloading of convoys was needed, in addition to other aircraft to operate against enemy surface forces. In their view, the re-capture of the Benghazi area was necessary to reduce the risk of supplying Malta to reasonable proportions, as this would not only extend the fighter cover for convoys but would increase the deterrent value of the torpedo-bomber aircraft and enable them to assist more effectively in protection against enemy aircraft. The three C's-in-C. felt that the question of advancing into Cyrenaica was a matter which required much consideration in view of the tactical and other factors which affected the military situation as a whole, and in a signal dated 5 March they stressed to the Chiefs of Staff that a premature offensive to re-capture Western Cyrenaica - for the chief purpose of saving Malta - might "jeopardise our whole position in the Middle East" by resulting in the destruction of the new armoured force which was then being built up, and thereby jeopardise the security of Egypt. They therefore postulated that until Western Cyrenaica could be regained, the policy for supplying Malta should be

Ibid: 60A

- (a) to continue to run convoys under the existing conditions of risk, in the hope of getting some of the ships through to the island, and
- (b) to employ "all possible shifts and devices" to get supplies there.

On further consideration it was decided that a convoy should be sent to Malta from the east (Alexandria) without waiting for an attempt to be made by the land forces to re-capture Western Cyrenaica. This decision was justified by subsequent events, for several months were to pass before the Eighth Army re-gained Cyrenaica which did not occur until its final advance after its victory at Alamein.

Operation "Fullsize", 20 - 23 March <sup>1</sup>

The convoy which was organised as the outcome of the above considerations was known as Operation "Fullsize": it was the last operation in which Admiral Cunningham participated before handing over the command of the Mediterranean to Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell <sup>2</sup> prior to his (Cunningham's) departure for Washington on a special mission early in April.

/In

- 1 This operation was known by the Admiralty as "M.G. 1". (The main authorities for this operation are Admiralty Battle Summary No. 32 - CB. 3081 (25), the Admiralty Account of Naval Ops. Apr. '41 to Jan. '43, and R.A.F. Ops. in the Western Desert and East: Med., 18 Nov. '41 to 19 May '42.)
- 2 Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell acted as C.-in-C. until relieved by Vice-Admiral Harwood in May.

In order to safeguard the passage of the convoy to Malta, the three C's-in-C. staged a combined operation of the Services. Admiral Cunningham decided to employ his whole strength of cruisers and destroyers, under Rear-Admiral Vian. The ground forces were to make a feint attack with four armoured columns against enemy positions and landing-grounds at Timini and Martuba, in the Aggara-Aleima area and near Mechili, so as to divert the enemy's attention from the convoy by leading him to think that a full-scale ground offensive was imminent. The role of the R.A.F. was fourfold, namely,

- (a) to provide widespread reconnaissance for enemy surface and submarine forces prior to the sailing of the convoy
- (b) to carry out strategic bombing of aerodromes in Crete and Greece with the object of destroying or immobilising enemy aircraft
- (c) to give fighter protection over the convoy during its passage, as far as possible, -- "a duty nobly performed (says the Admiralty Battle Summary) until 09.00 hours on 22 March when the aircraft were over 300 miles from their base" --- and to provide anti-submarine searches ahead of the convoy
- (d) to provide support for the ground forces with reconnaissances, fighter sweeps, and the bombing of enemy landing-grounds.

The convoy comprised three merchant vessels, the Talabot, Pampas and Clan Campbell, and the supply ship Breconshire, with a Naval escort (for the major part of the voyage) known as Force "B" which consisted of two sections:

- (i) A Close Escort comprising the anti-aircraft cruiser Carlisle and the 5th Destroyer Flotilla
- (ii) A Covering Force comprising the 15th Cruiser Squadron (H.M.S. Cleopatra -- wearing the flag of Rear-Admiral Vian -- Dido and Euryalus) and the 14th and 22nd Destroyer Flotillas.

It was arranged that on Day 3 (22 March) the convoy was to rendezvous, as soon as possible after daylight, with Force "K" (consisting of the cruiser Penelope and destroyer Legion) which was to leave Malta after dark on Day 2 (21 March). The convoy was then to continue under the protection of the combined Naval escorts, steering well to the southward of the natural course for Malta, while the Covering Force returned to Alexandria.

The convoy sailed from Alexandria on Day 1 (20 March) and was south of Crete during the 21st. Its passage was uneventful until 17.02 hours when five JU. 88's were sighted although - according to "Y" intercepts - the convoy had been seen and reported earlier by an enemy submarine. From daylight on 22 March a JU. 88 shadowed the convoy, and at 09.35 hours the first attack was made by four S. 79's which came from the direction of Sicily. The S. 79's discharged torpedoes outside the convoy's destroyer screen which gave the merchant vessels ample time to take avoiding action, and no damage was caused. On the completion of this unsuccessful attack one S. 79 and a Cant. 506 continued to shadow the convoy.

/Soon



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Soon after 11.00 hours two more S. 79's made further unsuccessful torpedo attacks. At 13.30 a Ju. 88 flew over the convoy at about 4,000 feet and dropped four red flares - presumably as a signal to enemy surface ships.

At about 14.30 hours, after the convoy had been joined (according to plan) by Force "K" from Malta, four enemy cruisers approached from the north-ward. Rear-Admiral Vian led the Covering Force against them while the convoy and its Close Escort - covered by a smoke screen - were sent away south-westward. The enemy cruisers turned away from the concentrated fire of the Covering Force and at 15.08 hours the engagement ceased. Rear-Admiral Vian then steered to rejoin the convoy which he overtook an hour later.

At 16.40 hours a second, and much more powerful, enemy force comprising one Littorio-class battleship, two 8-inch cruisers and four smaller ships (probably 6-inch cruisers) came in sight from the north-east. Leaving the Carlisle and the 5th Destroyer Flotilla with the convoy, Rear-Admiral Vian led the remaining Naval forces against the enemy. Gun hits were observed on the enemy battleship and on two of the cruisers, and one torpedo hit was scored on the battleship, while H.M. destroyers laid a smoke screen east and west to bar the way to the convoy. The enemy withdrew without having inflicted any damage on the convoy.

Meanwhile enemy aircraft had co-operated in the attack: from the beginning of the naval engagements until darkness, some 150 high level bombing attacks were made on the convoy, which was now out of range of fighter protection. However, none of the ships sustained any damage. When darkness had fallen the covering units of Force "B" sailed eastwards for Alexandria and arrived there intact at mid-day on 24 March, having driven off attacks by JU. 87's and 88's on the evening of the 23rd and by S. 79's on the following morning. During its passage to Alexandria, Force "B" received protection from R.A.F. fighter aircraft at very long distances from their base.

From daylight on 23 March the convoy and its escort was under fighter cover from Malta, but nevertheless it was heavily attacked from the air. Between 05.14 and 14.25 hours sixty-two JU. 88's, twenty-five ME. 109's and a few unidentified aircraft attacked the convoy. Malta-based Spitfires and Hurricanes made 42 sorties and two JU. 88's and one HE. 111 were destroyed in combat, two JU. 88's probably destroyed and four others seriously damaged without loss to the R.A.F. fighters. Many other enemy aircraft were forced to jettison their bombs. During these enemy attacks the Clan Campbell was hit by a bomb and sunk, about eight miles west-south-west of Filfla Island, but the other two merchant vessels reached Malta. The Breconshire received serious damage to her engine-room and had to be taken in tow, but this had to be abandoned owing to rough seas and a heavy swell; the Breconshire had therefore to remain stationary while three destroyers stood by to protect her. When the weather improved she was again taken in tow and reached Marsaxlokk on 25 March.

Meanwhile, from 24 to 26 March, the enemy made repeated efforts to destroy the convoy as it lay in harbour. R.A.F. fighters made some 175 sorties on the 24th and over 300 on the following day. During the three days (24 to 26 March) twenty enemy aircraft were destroyed, five probably destroyed and twenty-five damaged: the R.A.F. losses were two Spitfires which crash-landed but the pilots were uninjured. During the attacks on 26 March the Talabot and Pampas were hit by bombs at their moorings in the Grand Harbour and set on fire: the Talabot had to be scuttled in case her cargo of ammunition exploded. The Breconshire was also hit and sunk as she lay in harbour, and three destroyers were damaged and the destroyer Legion sunk.<sup>1</sup>

The loss of the Talabot and Pampas was largely due to the lack of proper berthing precautions in the harbour. Moreover, much of their cargoes were lost owing to the very ineffective attempts made to unload these ships between the time of their arrival on the morning of 23 March and the time of their destruction by the enemy dive-bombers in the afternoon of 26 March. The vessels were not moved to the best sheltered quays although A-V-M Lloyd had stressed that this should be done. Before the convoy arrived, A-V-M Lloyd had pressed that, regardless of bombing, every soldier, airman and civilian should be forced to unload the ships "every minute of every 24 hours", but in spite of this warning very little was done and it remained to the R.A.F. personnel to unload the R.A.F. stores "with great difficulty and no assistance". Out of nearly 26,000 tons of cargo carried by the convoy only some 5,000 tons were salvaged. These included considerable R.A.F. spares and stores<sup>2</sup> from the Talabot and Pampas and some petrol which was salvaged from the Breconshire. Several months were to elapse before supplies in large quantities reached Malta.

A.H.Q. Med:  
(489/675/DO  
Lists of  
Cargo received  
from S.S.  
Talabot &  
Pampas)

#### R.A.F. Strategic Bombing During the Passage of the Convoy<sup>3</sup>

The strategic bombing carried out by the R.A.F. on the aerodromes in Crete and Greece was not conclusive. On the morning of 20 March, five Blenheims of No. 14 squadron (Western Desert Command) were briefed to attack Heraklion. Two aircraft crashed just after taking off and a third soon returned to base owing to engine trouble. The remaining two aircraft reached and bombed the target but results were not observed owing to poor visibility. On the night of 20/21 March, two Wellingtons of No. 104 squadron, five of No. 108 and seven of No. 148 squadrons (all of No. 205 Group) took off to bomb Heraklion and also Elefsis and Hassani aerodromes near Athens. The attacks were largely negated by very bad weather conditions, only five aircraft reaching the targets and only bomb bursts being observed. On the following night five Wellingtons of No. 37 squadron (of No. 205 Group), seven of No. 38 and five of No. 108 squadrons were briefed to repeat these attacks, but results were again disappointing mainly due to bad weather. A further attempt was made by Wellingtons on the night of 23/24 March but no results were observed apart from bomb bursts.

/R.A.F.

1 A further Naval loss was the destroyer Southwold sunk by a mine on 24 March while standing by the Breconshire. The submarine P.36 and the destroyer Kingston were sunk by bombs at Malta on 1 and 11 April respectively.

2 viz: ten cases of aero engines (for Hurricanes and Spitfires), 104 cases of Glyco, one large case of parachutes, one bomb trolley, and numerous cases of paint and "dopes".

3 See page 392 supra, sub-para: (b)

Ibid:

R.A.F. Support of the Ground Forces.<sup>1</sup>

In support of the feint advance by our ground forces, the R.A.F. and F.A.A. made 70+ sorties against enemy landing-grounds from 18 to 23 March, and throughout the operation fighters carried out offensive patrols. Between the same dates fighters destroyed four ME. 109's, probably destroyed two, and damaged four more. Five Kittyhawks were destroyed or missing, and one Hurricane crashed while landing.

Results of Operation "Fullsize".

Essay, "The War  
at Sea in the  
Med;" Part I  
N.I.D. 1/GP/19.  
(A.H.B.1. S.10)

Although the benefit to Malta was considerably impaired by the loss of so much cargo from the Talabot and Pampas, and of petrol from the Breconshire, the results of the convoy were nevertheless far-reaching. According to (the German) Vice-Admiral Weichold, if the convoy had been prevented from reaching Malta "this would be the best preparation for the (Axis) occupation of the island." In his opinion, the convoy's task "from the British angle was theoretically impossible ..... in view of the vast superiority of the Italian fleet and the practical mastery of the sea in the Mediterranean by the Axis." There seems no doubt that the passage of the convoy to Malta was a tactical and strategic success, to which Vice-Admiral Weichold thus pays tribute. "During the war there have been many great fights and bigger battles, but none was carried through in such a brilliantly tactical manner and with such great strategical effect."

Plans for Further Convoys to Malta

A.H.Q. M.E.  
D/AOC/1, Pt. IV  
(COS Papers)  
191  
(5.5.42)

After the "Fullsize" convoy to Malta in March, only a few special cargoes were run to the island in submarines and the minelayer Welshman, and in April it was apparent that a further attempt for a strong reinforcement for the island must be made if Malta were to be saved from surrender. Early in May, the Middle East Defence Committee signalled their views to the Chiefs of Staff with regard to plans for the next convoy: they considered that the first essential was to disperse the enemy's effort both on the surface and in the air by running convoys from the west and from the east, assisted by "every possible diversion". The Committee suggested inter alia that

- (a) for the convoy from the west, capital ships, though most desirable, were not essential and that the escort might well consist of cruisers supported by a carrier: that this convoy would have little to fear from surface or air attack until near Sardinia, and that the convoy from the east would probably have to make do with a cruiser escort only.
- (b) between Sardinia and Malta the convoy from the west would probably undergo heavy air attack but this would be no heavier nor so prolonged as that delivered against the eastern convoy: the convoy from the west should, therefore, have better chances of getting through.

/(c)

<sup>1</sup> See page 392, Sub-para: (d)

- (c) the passage of a convoy from the west would not alone reduce the risk to the eastern convoy to reasonable proportions, and it was therefore considered essential that an air striking force and long-range fighter force should be increased to cover the movement of the convoy.

Ibid.,  
208  
(15.5.42)

These suggestions were augmented by Lord Gort (who had been recently transferred from Gibraltar to Malta as Governor and C.-in-C.) who stressed that the success of the convoy would very largely depend on maintaining air superiority over Malta. To achieve this he considered that a large reinforcement of Spitfires should reach Malta at least 24 hours before the arrival of the convoy "so as to maintain fighter protection during the whole time the convoy is unloaded". Lord Gort also felt that success was bound up with heavy strikes on Sicilian aerodromes and at enemy naval forces which were likely to attack the convoy during its passage.

Ibid.  
216

On 20 May the three C's-in-C., Middle East, reviewed the question of the Malta convoys, having taken into consideration recent information which exerted a major influence on the whole problem, namely:-

- (a) the moves of German aircraft from Sicily to Crete and Libya.
- (b) the possibility of a German advance in Cyrenaica forstalling an intended advance of the British land forces.

With regard to the air aspect, the three C's-in-C. considered that short-range fighters could maintain patrols over the convoy as far west as Tobruk, after which long-range fighter cover would only be possible until within some fifty miles of Malta: that Beaufighters operating from Malta and the Western Desert could (theoretically) give cover during the entire passage of the convoy, but that there might be a gap in the Central Mediterranean which could only be covered by carrier-borne aircraft. The C.-in-C., Mediterranean, had already asked the Admiralty for additional torpedo-bomber and reconnaissance aircraft, and if these were forthcoming it was considered essential that some of these aircraft should operate from Malta, both to provide day and night reconnaissance and to operate torpedo aircraft from a base as near to the convoy as possible during Day 4 (assuming that the convoy from the west sailed from Gibraltar on Day 2): it was felt, however, that as an effective deterrent to the enemy's fleet the torpedo-bomber force would be insufficient and should be augmented by heavy bombers.

- (c) It was considered that the enemy would probably launch a land offensive, possibly before the end of May;<sup>1</sup> if this happened it would assist the convoy from the west since the main enemy forces would have to move from Sicily before they could attack it.

In conclusion, the three C's-in-C. considered that

- (a) a convoy from the east would be a hazardous undertaking, especially since the loss of Cyrenaica, but that the chances of a convoy getting through from the west had been improved
- (b) that if it was considered permissible that capital ships and aircraft-carriers from the Eastern Fleet should incur the very great risk of escorting

/a

1 This assumption proved correct, Rommel's offensive being launched on 26 May.

397.

a convoy from the east, then such convoy should be run concurrently with the convoy from the west; but if it was not considered permissible to use these capital ships and carriers, then the convoy from the east should remain ready in all respects, and that the decision as to whether it should sail as a diversion or proceed to Malta in whole or in part should be taken by the C.-in-C., Mediterranean, at the time and in the light of information then available.

Ibid:  
235

On 7 June the Chiefs of Staff signalled the three C's-in-C. that Malta could not be allowed to surrender owing to lack of supplies without an effort being made to run a convoy from the east, and that an attempt must therefore be made to run this eastern convoy even though heavy losses to H.M. ships might be incurred. It was therefore decided that convoys should sail both from the west and from the east, the two convoys to reach Malta on consecutive days thus dividing the attention of the enemy during their passage.

Progress of the Land Fighting - British Retreat to Alamein and Loss of Tobruk.

In the meantime events had moved rapidly in the land fighting, and were to have a considerable influence on the convoy operations. The land battle fell into three distinct phases: from 26 May (when Rommel began his advance) until 17 June it was fought from the static positions that had been prepared in the Cyrenaican Desert. From 18 to 30 June the Eighth Army was pushed back to the last defence line of the Delta at El Alamein (some 60 miles only from Alexandria), and from 1 to 6 July the enemy assaulted that line unsuccessfully and his further advance was stopped. Meanwhile, on 20 June, Tobruk was re-captured by the enemy.

During the first few days of Rommel's advance the whole of the British line from Gazala to Bir Hakeim remained intact except for a small gap which the enemy captured in the British minefields. By 1 June the enemy (under cover of a sandstorm) managed to widen this gap into a channel 10 miles wide: he overran Sidi Muftah ridge and fortified his bridgehead through the British minefields, and, after a determined resistance by the Free French, Bir Hakeim fell on the night of 10/11 June. This was the turning point of the battle, for the German armour had occupied the escarpment at El Adem and the Eighth Army was forced to evacuate Gazala, and for three days the road from Gazala was packed with its retreating columns. The R.A.F. squadrons were fighting furiously in the land battle all this time, and it was at the height of the conflict that the two convoys were making their passage to Malta.

Air Preparations for the Convoys (Operations "Harpoon" and "Vigorous" 12 - 18 June).

A.M. CS.14917  
30A et seq.

A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. June

As suggested by the Middle East Defence Committee<sup>1</sup> it was considered essential that the R.A.F.'s striking and long-range fighter forces should be augmented to cover the movement of the convoys, and accordingly the newly-formed No. 217 (torpedo-bomber) squadron (Beauforts) and No. 235 (fighter) squadron

/(Beaufighters)

<sup>1</sup> See page 395 supra.

(Beaufighters) were sent to Malta. Six A.S.V. Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron arrived at Malta from Egypt on 12 June and No. 69 (fighter and G.R.) squadron was reinforced from Egypt with six Baltimores. (This squadron already had three P.R.U. Spitfires). Reinforcements of 59 fighters Spitfires arrived between 3 and 9 June bringing the total number of these aircraft on the island to over 100, of which 95 were serviceable. The Night fighter Flight had five night Beaufighters and there were also four Wellington VIII's. In addition to these aircraft the Fleet Air Arm Squadron had four torpedo and three A.S.V. aircraft. In all, Malta had 155 serviceable aircraft available for the operations.<sup>1</sup>

A.M. CS.14197  
passim

The reinforcements for No. 201 (N.C.) Group included further aircraft for No. 39 squadron (torpedo Beauforts), for No. 459 squadron (Hudsons) and for No. 221 squadron (A.S.V. Wellingtons); moreover five Liberators en route to India were detained in Egypt to operate as part of a striking force against the Italian fleet and also for the neutralisation of enemy aerodromes. Meanwhile

A.M. CS.14197  
88A, and A.H.  
Q. Gib. O.R.B  
June.

three Catalina aircraft of No. 240 squadron and one Catalina of No. 413 squadron were sent from the United Kingdom to Gibraltar as reinforcements for anti-submarine patrols for the convoy from the west. In addition to the above reinforcement-

A.H.Q. R.A.F.  
M.E. A.O.C./  
47/3 (A.O.C.-  
in-C. Personal  
file).  
A.M. CS.14197,  
108A

ments the United States authorities gave permission for one of their Liberator squadrons (then at Omdurman)<sup>2</sup> to operate as a striking force against the Italian fleet - should it put to sea - during the passage of the convoys. In this connection the Air Ministry had signalled Field-Marshal Dill<sup>3</sup> to obtain the approval of the U.S. authorities for the "Halpro" force to make also a demonstration flight in the Central

Ibid; 127A

Mediterranean with a view to deterring the Italian Battle Fleet from putting to sea. But the U.S. authorities did not agree to this suggestion which they did not consider justified "in view of the great importance" of the intended attack on Ploesti by the "Halpro" squadrons.

#### Fighter Protection

Land based protection for both the convoys when within range of 100 miles of Malta had, necessarily, to be provided by Malta-based aircraft. It was therefore planned to maintain a continuous patrol of six Spitfires over each convoy when it was within 100 miles of the island. Additional aircraft were to be at immediate readiness on the ground in the event of enemy

/aircraft

A.H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B., June.

1 A detachment of 10 Wellington II's of No. 104 sqdn. had arrived at Malta on 24 May but these left on 11 June (prior to the passage of the convoys in the Mediterranean) to make room for other aircraft.

A.M. CS.14197,  
passim

2 This sqdn. belonged to the U.S. "Halpro" force which carried out a special operation against the oilfields and refinery at Ploesti (Roumania) - the chief oil supply of the German southern army - on 12 June.

3 F.M. Dill was then Chief British Military representative with the Combined Staffs at Washington.

aircraft being reported moving towards, or in the vicinity of, the convoys. Fighter cover for more than 100 miles range was to be provided by the Malta Beaufighters - Carrier-borne Fighter protection for operation "Harpoon" was to be provided by H.M. carriers Eagle and Argus (comprising 16 Hurricanes and 6 Fulmas) for the first part of the passage until the Malta Beaufighter could relieve them at a distance of some 200 miles from Malta.

No aircraft-carriers were employed in operation "Vigorous"; fighter protection was to be provided by R.A.F. aircraft based in Egypt for the initial stages of the convoy's passage and later by Malta Beaufighters.<sup>1</sup>

#### Strategic Bombing of Enemy Ports

A.H.Q. R.A.F.,  
M.E. Table of  
Ops. May/June  
and A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B's May/  
June

Before the convoys sailed it was decided to bomb the Italian ports in an attempt to disable the Italian fleet and to keep it in harbour or, alternatively, to force it to move to other ports further away from Malta and from the projected routes of the convoys. Several units of the Italian fleet were known to be at Messina and accordingly that port was bombed by Wellingtons (of No. 104 Squadron) on five nights during the last week of May, and early in June the enemy warships at Messina moved to Naples. Similar operations were carried out at Taranto, Naples and Cagliari (Sardinia) by the Wellingtons which also bombed military objectives at Syracuse and the aerodrome at Catania. Meanwhile, Liberators and Wellingtons from Egypt bombed the naval dockyard at Taranto, the aerodrome at Heraklion, and oil installations at the Piraeus. Photographic reconnaissances were made by Malta aircraft of Italian and Sicilian aerodromes and sea-plane bases.

The strategic bombing of the Italian ports, and the suggestion that the U.S. "Halpro" force should make a demonstration in the Central Mediterranean, are an interesting commentary on the weakness of the British Naval forces in the Mediterranean at that time. In the past, it had always been the strategy of British Naval warfare to do everything possible to bring an enemy fleet to battle, and in this case the sailing of the convoys would have provided an excellent lure to entice the Italian fleet to put to sea. The lack of Naval strength forced a reversal of the normal strategy to the extent of employing Allied bomber forces to keep the enemy's warships in harbour or to drive them to ports further removed from the possible scene of action.

Admiralty  
Battle Summary  
No. 32  
CB.3081(25)

The composition of the convoys was as follows:- the one from the west comprised six merchant ships from the United Kingdom via Gibraltar - Operation "Harpoon" -- and that from the east consisted of eleven merchant ships from Egypt -- Operation "Vigorous".

#### Operation "Harpoon"<sup>2</sup>

The Naval plan for Operation "Harpoon" was similar to that employed in Operation "Halberd" (September 1941). The convoy sailed from the Clyde on 5 June and entered the Mediterranean on the night of 11/12 June; it was escorted by ships of the Home Fleet (under command of Vice-Admiral Curteis) augmented by some ships of the North Atlantic Station from Gibraltar. The merchant ships comprising the convoy were the Troilus, Burdwan and Orari,

/the

1 See footnote 1 to page 405 infra.

2 For purposes of clarity the two operations are described separately.

the Dutch ship Tanimbar and the U.S. ships Chant and Kentucky. H.M. ships were the battleship Malaya, the aircraft-carriers Argus and Eagle, the cruisers Kenya, Liverpool and Charbdis, the anti-aircraft cruiser Cairo, sixteen destroyers, one minelayer,<sup>1</sup> four minesweepers, two corvettes and the Fleet oiler, Brown Ranger.

The Malaya with the two carriers, the cruisers and eight destroyers (Force 'W') turned on reaching the Skerki Channel (at the entrance of the "Narrows") while the convoy proceeded with a smaller escort (Force 'X') consisting of the A.A. cruiser Cairo, nine destroyers and the four minesweepers: the Brown Ranger (oiler) with her own escort (Force 'Y') cruised on a rendezvous to fuel the ships of the convoy during the passage. Six minesweeping motor launches also accompanied the convoy and were to join the Malta command on arrival: four submarines were stationed on a line between Sardinia and Sicily.

During the passage of the convoy, Malta provided air reconnaissance, long and short-range fighter protection and torpedo striking forces by R.A.F. and F.A.A. aircraft as far as resources allowed, but Malta's major effort was required for Operation "Vigorous" to the eastward.

Before the convoy left Gibraltar, the Malta P.R.U. Spitfires had been engaged in daily reconnaissances of the movements of the Italian fleet. On 11 June these reconnaissances established that the enemy's main force was at Taranto, that two cruisers and four destroyers were at Cagliari, and that one cruiser and five destroyers were at Naples. On the night of 13/14 June a submarine reported that the two cruisers and four destroyers from Cagliari were off the north-west coast of Sicily. A Wellington VIII was dispatched to intercept this force followed by a strike of three (torpedo) Wellington V's. The Wellington VIII located the enemy but owing to one of the Wellington V's carrying the flares having crashed while taking off, the other two aircraft had to rely on new flares provided by the Wellington VIII. By the time that these two aircraft reached the target the Wellington VIII was running short of flares and the two Wellington V's were, therefore, unable to attack and returned to base.

In the meantime, on 13 June, the convoy was being shadowed by enemy aircraft and at dawn on 14 June the shadowing aircraft again appeared. At 10.30 hours enemy dive-bombing attacks<sup>2</sup> on the convoy began: they were intercepted by the F.A.A. fighters of the two aircraft carriers, but the cruiser Liverpool was hit in the engine-room and the Dutch merchant ship Tanimbar was sunk. The Liverpool could now only steam at 3 or 4 knots and she was, therefore, sent back to Gibraltar, towed by a destroyer to screen her.<sup>4</sup>

/During

- 1 This was the Welshman which went on alone with a special cargo at a speed of 28 knots, the convoy steaming at 13 knots.
- 2 "Julius" was the Malta code-word for Ops. "Harpoon" and "Vigorous".
- 3 These attacks were made by Italian Savoias and Cants, escorted by C.R.42.
- 4 The Liverpool reached Gibraltar on 17 June.



During the evening German bombers again appeared and joined with Italian aircraft in further attacks on the convoy, but the F.A.A. carrier-borne fighters intercepted and drove them off. As the convoy entered the "Narrows" (at 21.00 hours), four Beaufighters arrived from Malta to relieve the F.A.A. fighters.<sup>1</sup> About an hour later, eight Ju.88's made a shallow dive-bombing attack which was unsuccessful, one aircraft being shot down by a Beaufighter and another by the fire from the ships. The enemy losses for the whole of that day were eleven aircraft destroyed, and several damaged, for the loss of seven fighter aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm.<sup>2</sup>

Just before dark, a Malta reconnaissance Spitfire reported two enemy cruisers and four destroyers leaving Palermo harbour, and at 06.20 hours next morning (15 June), Captain C.C. Hardy (H.M. A-A cruiser Cairo), Commanding Force "X", received a report from a Beaufighter (on its way to patrol over the convoy) that this enemy force was about 15 miles distant. The convoy was then steering south-east at 12 knots; the merchantmen were formed into two columns, with the Cairo ahead, five "Fleet" destroyers in the screen to starboard and four "Hunt" class destroyers to port, and the mine-sweepers and motor launches astern. A few minutes later the ships sighted the enemy force which was seen to be two cruisers and five (not four) destroyers. The destroyer Bedouin led out the four "Fleet" destroyers to the attack while the Cairo and the rest of the escort layed a smoke-screen to cover the convoy. In the ensuing engagement the Bedouin and Partridge were severely damaged by gun-fire and stopped. However, three of the enemy destroyers soon left the line and disappeared to the northward, but the last two were engaged by the three remaining "Fleet" destroyers which drove them off after disabling one of them. The destroyers then pressed on to engage the enemy cruisers which all this time were keeping at a respectful distance.

As soon as the convoy was well behind its smoke-screen, the Cairo and the four "Hunt" destroyers steered south after the enemy. The convoy - thus deprived of its escort's support - was attacked by eight Ju.87's which sank the Chant and disabled the Kentucky. Some long-range Spitfires

/from

A.H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B. June  
Appx. "A"  
Report on  
Op. "Julius"

- 1 Seventeen Malta Beaufighters (twelve Coastal and five Night) were available for employment in the operation on the evening of 14 June, but as Air H.Q. Malta was committed to the protection of Operation "Vigorous" from 19<sup>00</sup>.15' east (anticipated as 11.00 hours on 15 June) in addition to the protection of Operation "Harpoon" on the morning of 15 June, the employment of the Malta Beaufighters had to be considered very carefully. On the evening of 14 June a patrol of four Beaufighters was maintained over the convoy during the last two hours of daylight at distances between 200 and 220 miles from Malta. At first light on 15 June five Beaufighters were over the convoy. The convoy's passage was considerably delayed on 15 June and for that reason it became necessary to use the Night Beaufighters. These, together with the Day Beaufighters, were continually over the convoy until the long-range Spitfires relieved them which they did at a distance of 140 miles from Malta. The Spitfires began their patrol at 07.20 hours and maintained it until last light.

- 2 viz: Hurricanes and Fulmars.

from Malta arrived later and the Cairo and the four "Hunt" destroyers returned to the convoy, the enemy warships having drawn off for the time being. In the meantime Force "X" had signalled to Malta for a strike to be made on the enemy force, but the only aircraft available for that purpose were two torpedo-Beauforts and four F.A.A. Albacores, all the Wellington and other Beaufort aircraft having just landed from a strike on the Italian Battle Fleet in the Ionian Sea in connection with Operation "Vigorous".<sup>1</sup> This small striking force, escorted by sixteen Spitfires to hold off a swarm of M.E. fighters, located and attacked the enemy about 12 miles south of Pantellaria Island (at 10.30 hours), but without success unless, perhaps, they hit the destroyer which had already been disabled.<sup>2</sup> The enemy warships then withdrew to the south.

Ibid., and  
A.H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B. June,  
Appx. "A"  
Report on Op.  
"Julius"

Admiralty Battle  
Summary, No. 32  
CB.3081(25)

At 10.40 hours some German bombers appeared over the convoy but were driven off by the Spitfires before they could drop their bombs; one enemy aircraft was shot down. Unfortunately, this combat exhausted the fuel and ammunition of the Spitfires which were operating at the limit of their range, and when another attack developed at 11.20 hours the relief flight of Spitfires had not yet arrived. In this attack the merchant ship Burdwan was disabled, and as the convoy was still about 150 miles from Malta with the likelihood of further air attacks being made and with the Italian surface force in the vicinity, the damaged merchant ships Kentucky and Burdwan had to be left to their fate so that the remaining two good ships of the convoy could proceed to Malta at their best speed.

Enemy dive-bombers made a further, but unsuccessful, attack at 13.15 hours, two of their number being shot down by the Spitfires and one by our ships. This was the last air attack before the convoy reached the protection of the short-range Spitfires which arrived over it in large numbers.

Admiralty Battle  
Summary No. 32  
CB.3081(25) and  
A.H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B. June  
Appx. "A" Report  
on Op. "Julius".

At 15.00 hours the Vice-Admiral, Malta, sent three (torpedo) Albacores with fighter cover to the assistance of the disabled destroyer Bedouin and her damaged consort Partridge which were being attacked by the Italian surface ships. The aircraft failed to locate their objective on the way out from Malta but on their return flight they sighted the enemy ships about 10 miles south of Pantellaria Island. The Albacores' ensuing attack was unsuccessful, and one of them was shot down by a force of fighter

/aircraft

1 See pages 406 and 407 infra.

Admiralty Battle 2 This proved to be the Ugolino Vivaldi which was seen  
Summary No. 32 being towed into Palermo harbour on 18 June.  
(CB.3081(25))

A.H.Q. Med. 3 The Albacores claimed two hits on a cruiser and a  
O.R.B. June probable hit on a destroyer (but these were not  
Appx. "A" substantiated - Admiralty Battle Summary No. 32  
C.B.3081 (25)).

aircraft which accompanied the enemy ships. Not long after this encounter the Bedouin and the derelict merchant ships Kentucky and Burdwan were sunk by Italian torpedo aircraft.

During the afternoon, two further enemy attacks were made but were driven off by Spitfires, and a last attempt (at 20.40 hours) was foiled by the Spitfires and by gunfire from H.M. ships. In the course of this day's air combats the Spitfires destroyed thirteen enemy aircraft, probably destroyed four others and damaged a further thirteen, for the loss of five Spitfires, four of the pilots being rescued.

Admiralty  
Battle Summary  
No. 32  
CB.3081(25)

The remaining two merchant vessels of the convoy arrived safely at Malta at dawn on 16 June, but one destroyer<sup>1</sup> was mined and sunk and another was damaged by a mine a few miles short of the Grand Harbour, and three other destroyers were slightly damaged by mines just outside the breakwater.

#### Results

The results of Operation "Harpoon" were as follows:- out of six ships of the convoy only two reached Malta; two destroyers were lost, and a cruiser<sup>2</sup>, three destroyers and a minesweeper were damaged. About two hundred enemy aircraft attacked the convoy and escort during the operation, of which thirteen were shot down by the F.A.A. fighters, several others by the R.A.F. fighters from Malta and sixteen by Naval gunnery.

#### Operation "Vigorous"

Admiralty  
Battle Summary  
No. 32  
C.B.3081(25)

Meanwhile the convoy<sup>3</sup> from Egypt - Operation "Vigorous" - had sailed from Alexandria and Port Said. It comprised the merchant ships City of Edinburgh, City of Lincoln, City of Pretoria, City of Calcutta, Bhutan, Pataro, Bulkoil and Ajax, the Dutch ships Rembrandt and Aagtekirk and the Norwegian vessel Elizabeth Bakke. H.M. Ships (under command of Rear-Admiral Vian) consisted of the Mediterranean Fleet augmented by units of the Eastern Fleet and comprised seven cruisers,<sup>4</sup> one anti-aircraft cruiser, twenty-six destroyers, four corvettes, two minesweepers, two unarmed rescue ships and the former battleship Centurion (which was unarmed, except against air attack, but was masquerading as a capital ship): there were also nine submarines.

In default of battleships the convoy was to depend against its chief danger, the Italian fleet, more on the

/submarines

- 1 This was the Polish destroyer Kujawiack.
- 2 i.e. H.M.S. Cairo which was damaged by a 6 in. shell during her attack on the enemy surface ships.
- 3 Designated M.W.11.
- 4 i.e. 15th Cruiser squadron comprising H.M.S. Cleopatra, Dido, Hermione, Eurayalns, Arethusa and the A.A. cruiser Coventry, and 4th Cruiser squadron comprising H.M.S. Newcastle and Birmingham (The 4th C.S., the Centurion and the 2nd, 7th and 12th Destroyer Flotillas had been borrowed from the Eastern Fleet: the 5th, 14th and 22nd Destroyer Flotillas belonged to the Med. Fleet).

Ibid.

submarines and air striking forces than on its surface warships. The general conduct of the operation was controlled directly by the C.-in-C. (Vice-Admiral Harwood) and the A.O.C.-in-C. (Air Marshal Tedder) who worked together in a special combined operations room at the H.Q. of No.201 (N.C.) Group Alexandria.

In order to mislead the enemy, part of the convoy - M.W.11C - sailed from Port Said on 11 June, 36 hours ahead of the main body; it was to proceed nearly to Tobruk, arriving there at dusk on 12 June and then turn back to meet the rest of the convoy. By this means it was hoped to draw the Italian Fleet to sea prematurely. The remainder of the convoy assembled at Haifa and Port Said in two parts - M.W.11A and M.W.11B - and were to join at sea and rendezvous at Alexandria where M.W.11C and part of the escort were to join on 13 June. The rest of the warships were to sail from Alexandria later with Rear-Admiral Vian and to overtake the convoy a little east of Tobruk on the morning of 14 June. For the first part of the passage the route lay within the protective range of shore-based aircraft against enemy submarines and air attack.

#### Role of the R.A.F. - Air Plan

No.201 Grp.O.R.B.  
June  
Appendix "A"  
(Report on Op.  
"Vigorous").

The air plan was, briefly, as follows:-

- (i) to locate the enemy at sea in sufficient time to warn the convoy of his presence.
- (ii) to strike the enemy naval forces with Beauforts and Liberators from Egypt, and torpedo-Wellingtons and Beauforts from Malta before he could engage the light Naval units (the torpedo and bombing attacks to synchronise, if possible).
- (iii) to provide anti-submarine and fighter protection to all parts of the convoy and escort of H.M. ships whilst within range.

In implementation of the above -

(a) P.R.U. reconnaissances of Messina, Taranto, Navarino and Suda Bay were to be made on Days 2, 3 and 4.

(b) Sea reconnaissances: night searches were to be carried out by Wellingtons, and day searches by Baltimores from Malta and Marylands from Egypt, and close patrols by Hudsons to the north of the convoy on the afternoon of Day 3, and the whole of Day 4.

(c) Continuous anti-submarine patrols were to be provided for the various parts of the convoy from the time of sailing until they were clear of the submarine danger area, the day patrols being provided by Blenheims, Wellesleys and Albacores and the night patrols by Sunderlands, and Swordfish fitted with A.S.V.

(d) Fighter protection was to be provided for all groups of ships during daylight.

/The

Ibid.

The following air forces were available for searching and striking at sea targets:-

(1) Malta

6 Baltimores (No. 69 Squadron)  
 6 Special Wellingtons (No. 38 Squadron)  
 6 Torpedo Wellingtons (No. 221 Squadron)  
     detachment  
 One squadron (No. 217) Beauforts  
 One squadron (No. 830 F.A.A.) Albacores.

(2) Egypt

One squadron (No. 203) Marylands  
 One squadron (No. 221) Special Wellingtons  
 One squadron (No. 39) Beauforts  
 One squadron (No. 230) Sunderlands  
 Two squadrons (Nos. 821 and 826, F.A.A.) Albacores  
 One squadron (No. 815, F.A.A.) A.S.V. Swordfish  
 9 Blenheims (of Nos. 203, and 13 - Hellanic - squadrons)  
 2 Wellesleys (of No. 47 squadron)

One squadron (No. 459 - Hudsons) was available for carrying out a close patrol during daylight hours of Day 4, operating from Bu Amud and landing at Malta. Fighter protection was to be controlled by Air H.Q. Levant, Air H.Q. Egypt, No. 211 Group (Western Desert), No. 201 (N.C.) Group and Air H.Q. Mediterranean (Malta).<sup>1</sup>

The Passage of the Convoy

The four ships of the convoy M.W.11C, which sailed on 11 June escorted by H.M.S. Coventry and eight destroyers, were

/found

Ibid.

1 The fighter protection programme was arranged thus:-

		<u>Squadrons</u>		Controlling Authority
		<u>T.E.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>	
<u>Day 1</u>				
13.00 hrs. to 20.30 hrs.	-	2		A.H.Q. Levant
<u>Day 2</u>				
06.30 hrs. to 08.30 hrs.	-	2	}	A.H.Q. Egypt
08.30 hrs. to 16.00 hrs.	-	4		
16.00 hrs. to 21.00 hrs.	-	6		
<u>Day 3</u>				
06.00 hrs. to 10.00 hrs.	-	6	}	A.H.Q. Egypt
09.45 hrs. to 13.00 hrs.	2	4		
12.45 hrs. to 16.00 hrs.	4	2		
15.45 hrs. to 21.00 hrs.	6	-		
		No.211 Grp. (30 Beaufighters of Nos.227,252 and 272 Sqdns. being supplied by No.201 Grp.)		
<u>Day 4</u>				
07.00 hrs. to 08.30 hrs.	2	-	}	No. 211 Group
08.30 hrs. to 12.00 hrs.	4	-		
12.00 hrs. to 21.30 hrs.	arranged			
by Malta		Malta		

On Day 4 the change-over line between Malta and Egypt was to be 19° 15' east.

If the convoy was late, extra cover would be required from Egypt.

found by German bombers during the evening of the 12th. when about to turn east to rendezvous with the main convoy. Some twelve Ju. 88's attacked; one merchant ship was damaged by a near miss and sent to Tobruk escorted by two destroyers. The rest of the force turned back and met the main convoy off Alexandria on the afternoon of the 13th. On the following morning (14 June) the force was completed by the junction of the two minesweepers and of Rear-Admiral Vian's seven cruisers and fourteen further destroyers. The merchant ship Aagtekirk could not keep up with the convoy and was sent to Tobruk with the destroyer Tetcott followed by the corvette Primula a few miles astern. At 12.20 hours some forty Ju. 87's and 88's attacked and sank the Aagtekirk and damaged the Primula; three of the enemy aircraft were shot down by the two warships.

During the afternoon (14 June) when the convoy was well inside "Bomb Alley" -- between Crete and Cyrenaica -- a formation of twenty-four Ju. 87's and twelve Ju. 88's escorted by twelve Me. 109's was reported to be on its way to attack it. Although the R.A.F. Desert fighter squadrons were hotly engaged in the critical land battle, the A.O.C. Western Desert detached fifteen Tomahawks and eight Kittyhawks and scrambled them over the convoy. These aircraft intercepted the enemy bombers north-east of Tobruk and forced them to jettison their bombs into the sea. Seven other enemy attacks were made during the afternoon and evening, generally by ten or twelve aircraft at a time, one merchant ship being sunk and another damaged at a cost of six enemy bombers shot down by the escort and convoy. Between 17.30 and 18.00 hours an attack by twenty enemy aircraft resulted in the loss of the Bhutan and damage to the Potaro. Several enemy attacks were intercepted by Beaufighters and Kittyhawks, a Ju. 88 being set on fire by a Beaufighter at 21.05 hours.

No. 69 Sqn.  
O.R.B. June

Meanwhile, ships of the Italian fleet -- which had been located and watched by Malta Baltimores and Spitfires (of No. 69 squadron) during the three previous days -- were putting out into the Ionian Sea from Taranto. The Malta Baltimores made continual searches for these ships, one of these aircraft sighting two Littorio-class battleships, four cruisers and eight destroyers steering on a southerly course 70 miles south of Taranto. Just before dark a P.R.U. Spitfire flew across Taranto harbour and confirmed that part of the enemy battle fleet, comprising two Littorio-class battleships, four cruisers and eleven destroyers, had sailed. These reports resulted in the C.-in-C., Mediterranean, signalling the convoy to turn east during the early hours of the morning (on 15 June) thus leaving the sea clear for aircraft to attack the Italian fleet. In the meantime, soon after nightfall (on 14 June), three Malta Wellingtons had taken off to search for the Italian warships while four other (torpedo) Wellingtons were being prepared in the Western Desert to complete the search from the south. The Wellingtons found their target at 03.40 hours, but the Italians put up a smoke screen which was so effective that only one of the Wellingtons was able to attack and both its torpedoes missed.

Meanwhile, seven U.S. Liberators of the "Halpro" force and two R.A.F. Liberators<sup>1</sup> had been instructed to leave their base at 03.30 hours and attack the Italian fleet at approximately 9.30 hours. Some hours later, as no further sighting reports had been received at combined H.Q. Alexandria, and in view of the fact that if the Italian fleet was not checked it might overtake the convoy, it was decided to send a further striking force of

/twelve

1 One of these two Liberators (of No. 160 Sqn.) had to return owing to engine trouble.

twelve (torpedo) Beauforts (of No. 39 Squadron) together with a special Maryland to lead them to the target. This force took off at 06.20 hours from landing ground L.G.05, near Sidi Barrani, the use of Bu Amud being denied by the enemy's advance in the land battle. In consequence, the Beauforts had to fly so much further that they would be unable to return to Egypt and they were therefore instructed to land at Malta after delivering their attack. It was hoped that, by careful timing, the Beauforts would arrive over the Italian fleet at the same moment as the Liberators, and, as will be seen, this intended synchronisation -- which involved two striking forces starting from airfields hundreds of miles apart, at an interval of several hours, with part of the flight made in darkness -- was achieved.

"Ops: by Beaufort aircraft of No. 39 sqn. on 15 June, '42."

Appx. "F"; to No. 201 Grp's Report on Op. 'Vigorous'.

During their flight to the attack the Beauforts were intercepted by four or five Me.109's which shot down two of them. Five more of the Beauforts were forced to drop out of the flight after this combat owing to damage or excessive petrol consumption: four of these returned safely to Egypt, while the fifth was last seen flying towards Malta. The remaining five Beauforts, led by Wing Commander C. J. Mason, flew on and intercepted the Maryland which had been detailed to lead them to the Italian fleet.

Admiralty Battle summary No. 32 CB.3081(25)

Attack Report by Malta Beauforts: Appx. "H" to No. 201 Grp's Report on Op. 'Vigorous'

Meanwhile a striking force of nine (torpedo) Beauforts<sup>1</sup> (of No. 217 squadron) from Malta was already attacking the Italian fleet which was steering in two groups disposed, apparently, as follows; two battleships and two cruisers screened by five or six destroyers, with two cruisers and five or six destroyers some miles to the westward.<sup>2</sup> The Beauforts flew in low in spite of a heavy barrage from the enemy ships and, (according to the Italian report) they first attacked the cruiser group to the westward, disabling the cruiser Trento which turned away and steamed slowly westward with two destroyers.<sup>3</sup> The Beauforts then attacked the battleships, claiming hits on the latter but without sinking them.<sup>4</sup> They then returned to Malta.

Attack Report of Liberators: Appx. "E" to No. 201 Grp's Report on Op. 'Vigorous'

While these operations were in progress the Beauforts -- and later the Liberators -- from Egypt were speeding towards the Italian fleet. The U.S. Liberators, armed with 500 lb. bombs, were flying at a good height, while the Beauforts were close down to the water. The two forces approached the target soon after 09.00 hours, the Liberators each dropping six bombs from an average height of 14,000 feet. They claimed several hits on the battleship Littorio and five hits on a cruiser,<sup>5</sup> the single R.A.F. Liberator registering a near miss on the latter.<sup>6</sup>

/Just

N.I.D.  
06183/43

A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. June

- 1 The Beauforts took off from Malta at 03.11 hours.
- 2 The following ships are mentioned in the Italian Report of the Allied air attacks:-
 

Battleships	<u>Littorio</u> (flag), <u>Vittorio Veneto</u>
8-in. Cruisers	<u>Gorizia</u> , <u>Trento</u>
6-in. "	<u>Giuseppe Garibaldi</u>
Destroyers	seven (named)
- 3 The Beauforts claimed this as a destroyer which they reported as left "listing to port".
- 4 These claims were not substantiated.
- 5 The Italians only admitted one hit on the Littorio.
- 6 The single R.A.F. Liberator carried two 1,000 lb. bombs and ten 500 pounders.

Just as the Liberators were finishing their attack their crews saw far below them the five remaining Beauforts flying in to release their torpedoes through a heavy barrage from the enemy ships. The Beauforts claimed one certain hit on a cruiser and a probable hit on one of the battleships;<sup>1</sup> on the completion of their attack they flew to Malta which they reached safely although two of them crash-landed there owing to damage from the enemy's barrage. In spite of the attacks by the Liberators and Beauforts the Italian battle fleet kept on its course towards the convoy.

In the meantime, during the night (14-15 June), the cruiser Newcastle had been torpedoed and damaged by an E-boat and the destroyer Hasty was disabled by a torpedo and had to be sunk by a consort. In the early hours of the morning (15 June) the route of the Italian fleet crossed the western line of four of H.M. submarines, and at 06.46 hours the P. 35 (10th. Flotilla) fired at one of the Italian battleships from a range of 5/6,000 yards but without success. Three submarines of the (faster) 1st. Flotilla also tried unsuccessfully to intercept the enemy, but at 10.06 hours the P. 35 torpedoed and sank the cruiser Trento already damaged by the Malta Beauforts four hours earlier.

No. 203 Sqdn. Italian fleet; from 09.44 hours there was a gap until 13.30  
O.R.B. June hours when a No. 203 squadron Maryland on a special search re-located the enemy in position 34° 45' north, 20° 55' east, steering 120° at 25 knots. During the whole of the morning the C.-in-C, Mediterranean, was greatly hampered in making a decision as to whether to turn the convoy towards Malta as no results of the air attacks on the enemy had been received. From 13.30 hours until 16.55 hours the Italian fleet was shadowed by the R.A.F. aircraft. At 15.15 hours - when some 100 miles astern of the convoy - it turned to the north-west and at 16.05 hours our shadowing aircraft reported it well away on the course for Taranto.

The C.-in-C., Mediterranean then signalled Rear-Admiral Vian that this was the "golden opportunity" to get the convoy to Malta and asked if his ships had sufficient ammunition for the trip. After waiting two hours without receiving any reply the C.-in-C. modified his plan, intending to send to Malta only the four fastest merchant ships, adding the cruiser Arethusa and two large destroyers to their escort. But the first signal reached Rear-Admiral Vian during the worst air attack of that day, under conditions which precluded him from altering the convoy's course. This attack - which began at 17.20 hours - was made by German dive-bombers for nearly two hours followed by Italian torpedo-carrying Savoia 79's. Two Beaufighters on patrol with the convoy had intercepted four Sarvoias half-an-hour earlier and destroyed one of them; the ships' guns brought down three Savoias and two of the bombers.

Rear-Admiral Vian answered the C.-in-C.'s first signal at 18.42 hours during the dive-bombing attack; his ammunition was being used very fast and he considered it insufficient for the passage to Malta. This signal crossed the C.-in-C.'s second signal (ordering the four best convoy ships with a strengthened escort to turn for Malta) and when it reached him he decided to abandon the attempt, and signalled Rear-Admiral Vian to return to Alexandria with his whole force. The enterprise was thus terminated, but during the convoy's passage to Alexandria

the

1 The Beauforts' attack was made easier by the enemy ships suddenly altering course 90° to starboard, thereby presenting their broadsides to our aircraft; their claims were not substantiated.



SECRET

409.

the cruiser Hermione was torpedoed and sunk and the destroyer Nestor - which had been disabled by dive-bombing and taken in tow - had to be sunk by her consorts.

A.H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B. June

No. 38 sqdn.  
O.R.B. June

Meanwhile, a strike of nine Beauforts had been sent from Malta to attack the retiring Italian fleet at dusk, but owing to mistakes in navigation, an adverse head-wind and inexperience of the pilots in night flying, the Beauforts failed to locate the enemy and returned to Malta. There still remained a chance of striking the enemy from the air and Malta sent out five (torpedo) Wellingtons (of No. 38 squadron) led by a Wellington VIII. This aircraft located the Italian fleet at 22.55 hours - six and a half hours after the last sighting report - and the (torpedo) Wellingtons sighted the battleship division an hour later, but were baffled by the enemy's smoke screen. However, one Wellington (captained by P/O. Hawes) persisted and at 00.40 hours (on 16 June) it scored a hit on the already damaged battleship Littorio.<sup>1</sup>

#### Results

The results of the battle are difficult to assess; the convoy part of it was a failure, the convoy having had to put back to Alexandria with the loss of two merchant ships,<sup>2</sup> while one cruiser and three destroyers were lost, and three cruisers, the special service ship Centurion, and one corvette were damaged.<sup>3</sup> The losses of the Italian fleet were the cruiser Trento sunk, and the battleship Littorio twice hit and put out of action for several months.

Air H.Q. R.A.F.  
M.E. A.O.C. 47/3  
(A.O.C.-in-C.  
Personal File).

From the air aspect the results were somewhat disappointing: the strength of the striking forces was insufficient for the attacks on the Italian fleet and the 500 lb. bombs of the U.S. Liberators were too small for effective use against capital ships. With regard to the fighter operations, approximately 350 sorties were made by enemy aircraft and the success achieved by these attacks was much less than anticipated. The R.A.F. fighter losses, particularly the Beaufighters,<sup>4</sup> were heavy but the enemy also suffered

/heavily

- 1 The Littorio had previously been hit by the U.S. Liberators (see page 407 supra).
- 2 i.e. the Aagtekirk and Bhutan
- 3 i.e. the cruiser Hermione and the destroyers Airedale, Hasty and Nestor; the cruisers Birmingham and Arethusa, and the Centurion had been damaged by dive-bombing attacks, and the cruiser Newcastle damaged by a torpedo from an E-boat.

A.M.  
CS. 14917,  
155A  
(AOC-in-C to  
CAS)

- 4 According to A-M. Tedder, the "Naval A.A. repeatedly and accurately fired at our own fighters, a number of our Beaufighter losses (being) undoubtedly due to our own A.A". Prior to the operation, this problem had been discussed with the Naval gunnery controllers, and "arrangements (were) made to identify the fighters with black and white wings, to limit their height and method of approach, to insure I.F.F. identification, and to provide an experienced R.A.F. fighter controller to assist the Naval controller in each of the two control ships. C-in-C. Med: agrees with me we must find an answer....." It appears that the Beaufighters were frequently mistaken for JU.88's.

A.M.  
C.S.15767, 20A.

No. 201 Grp's  
Report on Op.  
"Vigorous".

heavily from fighter interceptions. A point of interest was that a JU.86 shadowed the convoy on 16 June from over 40,000 feet - a height to which none of the R.A.F. fighters was capable of climbing to intercept.

From a strategical aspect the chief significance of Operation "Vigorous" was not so much the passage of the convoy but that it resulted in the battle between the Italian fleet and the R.A.F. squadrons of the Middle East. Although the losses of the Italian fleet were less than had been hoped for, Allied air power (combined with a submarine attack which sank a damaged enemy cruiser) had forced a powerful surface fleet to put back into harbour without achieving its object of annihilating the convoy. Moreover, the Allied Air power employed was not strong, since a considerable portion of it had had to be diverted from the critical period of the battle then raging in the Western Desert. The frustration of the convoy by enemy air action and the repulse of the Italian fleet by the R.A.F. and U.S. air detachment both re-asserted that the control of the Mediterranean Sea lay in the power of aircraft based on its shores. This was, no doubt, fully appreciated by the Italians, for this was the last occasion on which their fleet put to sea in any strength.

#### PORT BOMBING

##### A. FROM MALTA

R.A.F. Ops. in the  
West: Desert & East;  
Med. 18 November  
1941 to 19 May  
1942 and H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries.

In continuation of the R.A.F.'s policy of harassing the enemy and destroying his supply facilities by bombing his ports and bases, the Malta bombers made 390 sorties during the two months (18 November 1941 to 20 January 1942) that the "Crusader" offensive was in progress. The majority of these attacks were directed against Naples and Tripoli during the first half of that period, and almost exclusively against Tripoli during the latter half. Other ports and bases attacked included Brindisi, Taranto, Messina, Trapani and Augusta, the Grecian ports of Patras and Argostoli and the Cyrenaican ports of Benghazi and Zuara.

On the nights of 18/19, 19/20 and 20/21 November, Wellingtons (of No. 40 Squadron) bombed Naples and Brindisi, the heaviest of these three attacks being made by seventeen Wellingtons on Naples on the night of 19/20. During the same night three Wellingtons bombed Benghazi, and fourteen Wellingtons repeated this attack on the night of 24/25 November, dropping 22 tons of bombs (including three 4,000 pounders) which did considerable damage to the docks, harbour installations, railways sidings and stores dumps.

Naples was again attacked on the night of 27/28 November when twenty-one Wellingtons dropped over 20 tons of H.E. and incendiary bombs, securing hits on the arsenal,

/torpedo

- 1 A further 109 sorties were made against enemy aerodromes and landing-grounds during the same period.

torpedo factory and railway area, and setting oil storage tanks on fire. This attack was repeated on the nights of 5/6 and 6/7 December by twenty and ten Wellingtons respectively which dropped a total weight of 38 tons of bombs setting the torpedo factory on fire and causing damage to the airframe works and the railway marshalling yards.

Malta's bombing effort was next switched to Tripoli, and on the night of 7/8 December two Wellingtons each dropped a 4,000 lb. bomb on that port, but poor visibility obscured results. In the meantime further attacks had been made on Benghazi on the nights of 10/11, 13/14 and 14/15 December, by forces of eight, eight and ten Wellingtons respectively; in the first of these attacks over 13 tons of bombs were dropped (including two 4,000 pounders) on the harbour installations and the Cathedral Mole which caused a series of explosions. One C.R.42 attacked the Wellingtons but was driven off. In the second attack four Wellingtons laid mines in and around the harbour while four others bombed the shipping and harbour as a diversion; in the third attack 15 tons of bombs were dropped on the wharfs and the outer Mole. Nine days later (24 December) the Eighth Army captured Benghazi. The port had been devastated as a result of the R.A.F. bombing; the North Mole was blocked in several places and the Cathedral Mole was blocked with sunken ships.

The loss of Benghazi resulted in the enemy concentrating his efforts to send reinforcements and supplies through Tripoli, and also in developing the harbour facilities at Zuara. Consequently, Malta's bombing efforts were thenceforward concentrated on Tripolitania and its sea and air approaches. Between 22 December and 20 January, fifty-two sorties were made against Tripoli varying from "nuisance" raids by a single aircraft to attacks by fourteen or fifteen Wellingtons in co-operation with mine-laying Albacores and Swordfish of the F.A.A. Meanwhile, Blenheims and Albacores attacked Zuara on 24, 26/27 and 29/30 December and, finally, on 20 January. During these attacks the Mole and ships alongside it were damaged and mines were laid outside the harbour.

The increasing enemy air attacks on Malta (which coincided with the retreat of the Eighth Army to Gazala when the enemy staged his successful counter attack towards the end of January 1942) had a marked effect on Malta's striking power, the island's bombing effort declining very considerably. Moreover, the exceptionally heavy rains and gales proved to be a serious handicap to bomber operations. Between 20 January and 24 February, Malta bombers made only 79 sorties against enemy ports and bases,<sup>1</sup> of which Tripoli continued to be the chief target.<sup>2</sup> The first attack occurred on the night of 20/21 January when three Wellingtons bombed the seaplane base and the town, starting large fires near Mellaha aerodrome. Most of the attacks were on a small scale, the largest number of aircraft operating in any one attack being eight Wellingtons on the nights of 22/23 and 24/25 January and 5/6 February. During this period only one attack (on 2/3 February) was made on Naples when five Wellingtons dropped two 1,000 lb., fourteen 500 lb. and twenty-two 250 lb. bombs on the harbour, railway marshalling yards and repair base. On the following day a disaster occurred when six Blenheims, briefed to attack Palermo, arrived off the north coast of Sicily owing to an error

/in

1 Plus 30 sorties against enemy aerodromes and landing grounds.

2 60 of the 79 sorties were made against Tripoli.

in landfall. The leading aircraft, while making a sharp turn, put a wing into the sea and sank. The formation then went on to bomb a goods train and railway bridge near Carini, but on the return flight three of the Blenheims (through an error in navigation) crashed into a hill and were destroyed.

During the static period (25 February to 19 May) - while the Eighth Army was holding the Gazala line and Rommel was preparing for his final attempt on Egypt -- Malta bombers made 101 sorties of which 59 were against enemy ports and bases. The majority of these sorties were made before 8 March after which, owing to the ever increasing enemy air attacks on the island, the bomber effort was practically suspended. As formerly, Tripoli came in for the major share of the bombing attacks, the ratio being 42 sorties against the port, 16 against Palermo,<sup>1</sup> and one against Augusta. Beginning on the night of 24/25 February, Tripoli was attacked on three consecutive nights. On the first night three Wellingtons bombed the Spanish Quay and the Karamanti Mole; on the second night six Wellingtons dropped 8 tons of bombs on the Maramanti Mole and the seaplane base; and on the third night seven Wellingtons dropped 9 tons of bombs on shipping and the harbour area. Further attacks were made on Tripoli on the nights of 1/2, 4/5 and 5/6 February and 7/8 March, during which bombs were dropped on shipping and the harbour area and mines were laid in and around the harbour.

H.Q. M.E.  
Tables of Ops.

After the arrival in May of the strong reinforcements of Spitfires (which resulted in Malta gaining local air superiority) Malta's bombing effort against enemy ports and bases were renewed. From the last week of May until 11 June<sup>2</sup> (while the land forces were retreating to Alamein) the Malta bombers made 66 sorties of this category against Naples, Taranto, Messina, Gagliari and Augusta in preparation for Operations "Harpoon" and "Vigorous".<sup>3</sup> Five attacks were made on Messina between 25 May and 1 June and a further attack on 6/7 June, by Wellingtons varying from two to six in numbers. During these raids considerable damage was caused in the dock and railway areas. On the night of 31 May/1 June, two 4,000 lb. bombs, one 1,000 lb. bomb, twenty-five 500 pounders and 1,440 lbs. of incendiaries were dropped from 9,500 feet; one 4,000 lb. bomb burst on the jetty, and oil tanks appeared to have been hit as there were repeated explosions following large fires, and black smoke which was visible for 40 miles. During this operation one Wellington crashed into the sea (due to engine failure) but the crew was rescued. Naples was attacked on the night of 5/6 June by six Wellingtons which dropped 9 tons of H.E. bombs and 3,120 lbs. of incendiaries from 9,000 feet. These bombs included one 4,000 pounder which fell in the centre of the city and west of the railway station. Attacks were made on Taranto on the nights of 8/9, 9/10 and 10/11 June by eight, eight and six Wellingtons respectively; several fires and explosions occurred in the dock area, one fire being visible for 70 miles.

/B. FROM EGYPT

- 1 These sorties were made in the attack on Palermo by 16 Wellingtons on 2/3 March (see page 354 supra.)
- 2 No further bombing attacks on ports and bases were made in June after this date.
- 3 See page 398 supra.

SECRET

B. FROM EGYPT AND THE WESTERN DESERT

R.A.F. Ops. in West: Desert, East: Med: 18 Nov. '41 to 19 May, '42 and H.Q. M.E. Op. Summaries

While the "Crusader" offensive was in progress the R.A.F. Squadrons in Egypt and the Western Desert were carrying out bombing attacks against Benghazi and other Cyrenaican ports with the intention of weakening the enemy's supply position and to keep him on the defensive. During the week 25 November - 1 December, 91 sorties were made against Benghazi, Bardia and Derna. On the night of 28/29 November twenty-six Wellingtons (of Nos. 108 and 148 squadrons) bombed Benghazi, and on the two following nights formations of fifteen and fourteen Wellingtons respectively repeated this attack. Numerous fires were started in the harbour and in the town and among the railway sidings: 4,000 lb. bombs were used effectively, one making a hit on or near a ship.<sup>1</sup> On 1 December, nine Blenheims (of No. 11 squadron) bombed supply dumps at Bardia causing three violent explosions and starting four fires. The final bombing attacks on Benghazi were made on the nights of 18/19 and 19/20 December: six Wellingtons (of Nos. 38 and 148 squadrons) dropped nearly 10 tons of bombs on the first night and on the second night two Wellingtons (of No. 148 squadron) each dropped a 4,000 lb. bomb, (from 10,000 feet). Four days later (24 December) British troops occupied the town. After the capture of Benghazi the Wellingtons were employed in attacks on ports and bases in Greece and Crete.

In theory, the capture of Benghazi should have eased the supply situation, but time was needed to bring the place into full use, and the time-factor was adverse. The first supply ship reached the harbour on 7 January but the amount of material that could be brought to Benghazi during the month that it was in British occupation was insufficient for their purposes.

Meanwhile, between 27 and 30 December, Bardia was subjected to British bombing and artillery attack. The bombers made 257 sorties and obtained good results, very little A.A. and no air opposition being encountered. This virtual freedom from enemy interference enabled directing aircraft to "spot" for the artillery. On 31 December, 83 light bomber sorties by Blenheims were combined with a Naval bombardment, and at daylight on 2 January the garrison surrendered.

The enemy began his withdrawal to his prepared positions at Agheila on 6 January; meanwhile the R.A.F. bombing effort was switched to Tripoli and off-loading ports between Tripoli and Agheila. On the night of 11/12 January, the first Liberator sortie in the Middle East was made when an aircraft of No. 108 squadron dropped 4,500 lbs. of H.E. bombs in a high level attack on Tripoli harbour; the results were, however, obscured by a smoke-screen.

The enemy's reconnaissance in strength - which began on 21 January and developed into a general advance - enabled him to recapture Benghazi on 28 January. Within a few days he had contrived to get part of the port back into working condition and once again Benghazi became the chief target for the R.A.F. medium bombers. Mines were also dropped at the

/entrance

R.A.F. Anti- 1 This was officially assessed under Category IV.  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant) Vol.2.

entrance of the harbour during spells of diversionary bombing by other aircraft. During February, the bombing effort against Benghazi was increased. On the night of 14/15 February thirteen Wellingtons bombed the moles and harbour installations while eleven other aircraft laid mines in the harbour. This attack was repeated on the night of 16/17 February, six Wellingtons bombing the harbour while four other aircraft laid mines.

During the static period (25 February to 19 May), 762 medium and light bomber sorties were made against enemy ports and bases in Cyrenaica. Of these, 695 (including 67 mine-laying) were against Benghazi which the enemy used as his principal port in preference to Tripoli owing to the shorter distance for transport between Benghazi and his forward area. Three sunken ships in the harbour (familiarily known as "Harry", "George" and "Johnny") which had been converted by the enemy into landing stages for off-loading, remained in use. During this period the R.A.F. bombers made 68 raids in 91 nights which resulted in successful interference to the enemy's programme and caused him considerable loss. In an endeavour to counter the effects of the R.A.F.'s attacks, enemy supply ships adopted the ruse of lying outside the harbour during darkness and then slipping in to unload at dawn; for this reason part of the R.A.F. striking force was employed in laying mines outside the harbour, while the other aircraft attacked the ships.

A.H.Q. M.E. Tables of Ops. These attacks on Benghazi increased in weight and volume during the succeeding weeks. On the night of 4/5 April, three Wellingtons bombed the harbour while eleven other Wellingtons bombed the M.T. park lying to the south of the harbour. The harbour results were unobserved but large fires were seen among the M.T. vehicles following several violent explosions. At the same time as this attack was in progress eleven medium bombers attacked Berka aerodrome causing a large explosion and a fire. Meanwhile, two Wellingtons -- escorted by five Beaufighters -- carried out an offensive reconnaissance for shipping outside Benghazi harbour, but no sightings were made.

On the night of 8/9 May, twenty-eight Wellingtons bombed the Juliana, Cathedral, Italian, the Central and Outer moles at Benghazi causing a series of explosions between the bases of the latter. At the same time one other Wellington bombed four ships about 8 miles from the harbour obtaining a direct hit on a 5,000 ton vessel.<sup>1</sup> One of the most effective attacks took place on the night of 20/21 May when sixteen Wellingtons bombed the Benghazi railway yards and stores dumps area. Several fires and explosions were caused among the railway sidings; other explosions and fires were observed at the base of the Cathedral mole, and a large fire was started in the M.T. park.

Benghazi was again bombed on the night of 7/8 June by ten Wellingtons, bombs bursting on the Juliana, Cathedral and Central moles. On the night of 12/13 June, six Wellingtons laid mines off Benghazi while seventeen other Wellingtons carried out diversionary bombing of the harbour, starting a fire south of the base of the Juliana mole. Further attacks were made on Benghazi and notably on the night of 24/25 June when a force of sixty Wellingtons and seventeen Liberators (of No. 159 squadron and the

/U.S.

U.S. "Halverson" detachment) bombed shipping and harbour installations, starting several fires and causing a number of explosions.

Meanwhile, in preparation for Operations "Harpoon" and "Vigorous" (13-16 June),<sup>1</sup> it was decided to attack Italian naval units in Taranto harbour and to bomb enemy aerodromes in Crete. Accordingly, on the night of 9/10 June, two Liberators (of No. 108 Squadron) were sent to Taranto, but their intended attack on the Italian warships being negated by a smoke screen they bombed the naval dock area; results could not be observed owing to the smoke. On the same night Wellingtons bombed Heraklion aerodrome in Crete starting many large fires on and near the runways. On the following night Wellingtons bombed Kastelli-Pediada aerodrome in Crete starting several fires and causing explosions. On the night of 11/12 June three Liberators again attacked Taranto, their bombs bursting in the naval dock area, while Wellingtons bombed the harbour at Piraeus. These attacks were continued during the passage of the convoys: on the night of 13/14 June a single Liberator bombed Taranto harbour and Blenheims (of No. 14 Squadron) bombed the aerodrome at Heraklion. Meanwhile the Wellingtons - assisted by flare-carrying Albacores - were engaged in bombing the enemy landing ground at Derna. The Blenheim attacks on Heraklion were repeated on the nights of 14/15 and 15/16 June while the Wellingtons attacked Benghazi harbour and Berka main aerodrome.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Tables of Ops.

The loss of Tobruk on 20 June<sup>2</sup> meant that the Cyrenaican frontier could no longer be held, and the Eighth Army chose the line south of Mersa Matruh for a stand before falling back to Alamein. Meanwhile, it was apparent that Benghazi would soon be out of range of the Wellingtons (as the retreat progressed) and it was therefore decided to make an 'all-out' bombing effort against Benghazi while the opportunity still remained. This attack took place on the night of 24/25 June when sixty-three Wellingtons (of Nos. 37, 40, 70, 104, 108 and 148 squadrons) dropped 45 tons of bombs and nearly 14 tons of incendiaries from heights varying from 15,500 to 8,000 feet on the moles and harbour area, starting numerous fires. Meanwhile, on the nights of 21/22 and 22/23 June, mines were laid in Tobruk harbour by Albacores (of Nos. 821 and 826 squadrons F.A.A.). On the nights of 25/26, 26/27, 28/29 and 29/30 June, U.S. "Halverson" Liberators and R.A.F. Liberators of No. 159 squadron attacked Tobruk by bombing the dock area and jetties and what appeared to be ships lying alongside, from heights of 11,000 to 20,000 feet. Several hits were made in the target area and some large fires were started.

/GIBRALTAR

1 see pages 398 and 399 supra.

2 see page 397 supra.

GIBRALTARAnti-Submarine Measures (November 1941)

Coastal Command  
S.15350,  
50A

Towards the end of November (1941) it was expected that a number of German U-Boats would endeavour to enter the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar with a view to hampering shipping engaged in assisting the "Crusader" offensive off the Libyan coast. Accordingly, on 29 November, a joint meeting of the Royal Navy and the R.A.F. was held at the Naval base, Gibraltar, at which the following measures were decided upon as a means of thwarting the U-Boats' activities:-

- (a) the maximum surface anti-submarine effort was to be made by day and night - between Tarifa and the African coast, (approx. between longitudes 5° 35' west and 5° 40' west)
- (b) To the westward of this zone there were to be three sectors extending approximately to the line Cape Spartel to Point Carmarinal, in which H.M. destroyers were to operate.
- (c) Two/three Catalinas were to patrol the western part of these sectors by day, maintaining frequent visual touch with the destroyer groups.
- (d) Should aircraft strength permit, a night patrol could be carried out approximately on a line Cape Spartel to Cape Trafalgar, the aircraft flying down the moonpath.

No. 200 Grp.  
O.R.B.'s  
Nov. & Dec.

These suggestions were acted upon, Swordfish aircraft of No. 812 Squadron F.A.A. carrying out the night patrols envisaged in (d). These Swordfish did good work, their first success being in 30 November (the day after the meeting) when one of them contacted a German U-Boat by A.S.V. off Cape Spartel at 21.30 hours. The Swordfish attacked with two depth charges, the U-Boat heeling over to port and a large patch of oil being seen.<sup>1</sup> Other Swordfish successes against German U-Boats were obtained off Cape Spartel on 16 and 19 December respectively, the U-Boat in each case being severely damaged.<sup>2</sup>

Formation of Air H.Q. Gibraltar

In December, the R.A.F. at Gibraltar was made into a separate Command under an A.O.C. (Air Commodore S.P. Simpson, M.C.) who was to be directly responsible to Headquarters, Coastal Command. An Area Combined Headquarters was formed with the Royal Navy in the former H.Q. of the Vice-Admiral Commanding North Atlantic Station at the building known as the Tower. Meanwhile, on 21 December, No. 200 Group was disbanded.

/The

Admiralty  
Monthly Anti-  
Sub: Report  
CB.04050/43(8)

- 1 This was officially assessed as "probably damaged (B)"
- 2 Both these attacks were officially assessed as "probably damaged (B)"



SECRET

Coastal Command  
S.15350,  
63A

The new R.A.F. Command comprised No. 202 Group Squadron (Catalinas), No. 233 Squadron (Hudsons - transferred from Coastal Command) and detachments of No. 10 R.A.A.F. Squadron (Sunderlands), Nos. 807 (Fulmars), 812 and 813 Squadrons, F.A.A. (Swordfish), and (later) No. 824 Squadron F.A.A. (Swordfish) which was formed specially for anti-submarine service. On occasions of particular pressure the R.A.F. was able to call on the Walrus aircraft of H.M.S. Malaya for escorts to convoys and for small anti-submarine sweeps. The F.A.A. Swordfish were successfully employed as escorts to vessels which were dealing with the Focke-Wulfe Kuriers operating from Vichy French airfields (taken over by the Germans) against British shipping. The Hudsons were thus freed for distant operations requiring faster aircraft, and they were also given the responsibility of the defence of Gibraltar in cases of grave emergency. The Fulmars were employed on reconnaissance duties, anti-submarine patrols and special meteorological flights.

#### Increasing Enemy Submarine Activity

Early in 1942, enemy U-Boat attacks on shipping became more frequent in the Western Mediterranean, the Straits of Gibraltar and the Western approaches. The enemy was making use of submarine bases in France - having been driven steadily further away from Britain - and, as the attitude of Spain to the Axis Powers was uncertain, it seemed quite probable that the enemy might also begin to use submarine bases on the Spanish coast.

These submarine attacks threw a greater weight of responsibility on the R.A.F. and F.A.A. at Gibraltar, and almost continuous anti-U-Boat patrols, sweeps and searches were carried out by their aircraft.

#### Photographic Reconnaissance

"Flying from  
the Rock"

One of the chief problems at Gibraltar was photographic reconnaissance. The only aircraft which could be used for this purpose were the F.A.A. Fulmars and Marylands, but these were handicapped by their lack of the necessary speed and also of ostentation. However, in January, two P.R.U. Spitfires were sent to Gibraltar and the work of photographic reconnaissance was then able to be carried out efficiently. The work undertaken by the Spitfires included reconnaissances in North Africa, and also in Spain where new fortifications were being erected opposite Gibraltar which might well have been preparatory for an attack upon the Rock if Spain were to throw in her lot with Germany.

With the arrival of a ground staff, including some interpreters, (soon after the advent of the Spitfires) the Axis and Spanish activities on both sides of the Mediterranean and of the Straits of Gibraltar were kept under close observation.

The employment of the Spitfires as photographic reconnaissance aircraft was kept secret as far as possible, and accordingly the P.R.U. flight of Spitfires was never referred to as such but was known by the letters "R.T.F." which was generally believed to mean "Reconnaissance Training Flight." The success of this subterfuge was such that most of the personnel engaged on the extension of the runway were unaware of the Spitfires' real activities, and it was learnt afterwards that whenever the Spitfires took off to photograph

Spain or North Africa the German observer at La Linea entered them in his records as fighter aircraft.

### Fighter Defence

Ibid:

A.H.Q. Gib.  
O.R.B. Apl.

At this time -- and, indeed, for several months to come -- there was no fighter defence for Gibraltar, the air defence of the Rock being left to anti-aircraft gun batteries which were then in progress of expansion. These batteries acquitted themselves successfully before dawn on the morning of 1 April when several aircraft (believed to be Italian) endeavoured to raid the North Front aerodrome. The raiders separated into three waves and approached at heights between 10,000 and 13,000 feet. The anti-aircraft guns fired 491 heavy rounds, which forced the raiders to drop most of their bombs in Gibraltar Bay and on the eastern side of the Rock; with the exception of a broken water-main near the North Front aerodrome no damage (or casualties) occurred. During the attack Spanish anti-aircraft batteries opened fire on the raiders -- a proceeding which caused considerable surprise to the Gibraltar garrison and, no doubt, to the raiders themselves. Axis news reports admitted losses to the raiders varying from one to three aircraft.

### R.A.F. Re-organisation

A.H.Q. Gib:  
O.R.B. May  
and  
"Flying From  
the Rock"

On 1 May the Royal Air Force at Gibraltar was re-organised as follows:-

The new airfield ceased to be an F.A.A. establishment and became R.A.F. Station North Front, while the former Flying-boat Station became R.A.F. Station, New Camp. The North Front Station took over control of all R.A.F. land aircraft, the New Camp Station being concerned only with the control of operational and transit flying-boats, with the F.A.A. aircraft attached to it. The Air Headquarters functioned administratively from premises in the Cathedral Square, and operationally from the Tower. Meanwhile, a new Area Combined Royal Naval and R.A.F. Headquarters was under construction in a new tunnel which had been excavated inside the Rock.

### Gibraltar's Assistance to Malta

A.H.Q. Gib:  
O.R.B. May

Gibraltar aircraft gave considerable assistance to Malta whenever possible; during the Spitfire reinforcement of the island early in May, Gibraltar Hudsons provided anti-submarine patrols for the carriers Eagle and Wasp and their surface escorts, and also for H.M.S. Welshman on her passage to Malta with ammunition.<sup>1</sup> These operations were repeated on a further reinforcement of Spitfires to Malta some days later.

Ibid:, June  
and  
"Flying From  
the Rock"

During the passage of the June convoy from the United Kingdom to Malta (Operation "Harpoon"), the R.A.F. Gibraltar<sup>2</sup> was given the task of providing air escort and anti-submarine patrols west of and through the Straits of Gibraltar and as far into the Mediterranean as longitude 4° east. To assist in these operations the R.A.F. Gibraltar was reinforced with Catalina aircraft from Nos. 209, 240 and 413 squadrons from the United Kingdom. Early in June, in anticipation of the arrival of the convoy, intensive sweeps and searches were

/carried

1 See page 356 supra.

2 See page 398 supra.

A.H.Q. Gib.  
O.R.B. June  
and  
A.H.B.1. S.13.

carried out from Gibraltar to the east, west and north so as to locate any enemy submarines which might be in the vicinity. Several attacks were made during that period, the most successful being on 9 June when Catalina "J" of No. 240 Squadron sank the Italian U-Boat Veneiro, about 35 miles south-east of Ibiza, Balearic Islands. Two days previously (7 June) a Sunderland of No. 202 Squadron attacked an Italian U-Boat 90 miles north-east of Algiers, and on 13 June another Sunderland of the same squadron attacked an Italian U-boat 90 miles east south-east of Minorca.<sup>1</sup>

In connection with operation "Harpoon", Gibraltar aircraft made 105 sorties totalling 848 flying hours, before and during the operation. Thirty-eight enemy aircraft were sighted and there were three combats, two of which were with JU.88's: hits were claimed on both these aircraft. The third combat occurred between four C.R. 42's (escorting three enemy bombers) and a Catalina (of No. 240 Squadron) which was acting as escort to the damaged cruiser Liverpool on her return to Gibraltar in tow on 14 June.<sup>2</sup> The Catalina fought and drove off the C.R. 42's but during the combat it was holed below the water-line and the wireless operator was wounded. However, the holes were plugged and the Catalina continued to escort the Liverpool for a further two hours.

#### Gibraltar Airfield - Extension of Runway

"Flying From  
the Rock"

During the winter of 1941 the work on the extension of the runway<sup>3</sup> progressed satisfactorily and by 12 January (1942) the runway had been extended to 985 yards. It was expected that the runway would reach 1,150 yards by the end of April, but on 24 March a signal from the Air Ministry asked that the work should be still further speeded up, if possible, in view of the increasing scale of air attacks on Malta which was causing heavy casualties to aircraft landing on the island en route to the Middle East and India. Moreover, the Air Ministry was arranging to strip Wellington aircraft in transit so that they could fly from the United Kingdom to Gibraltar and thence direct to Egypt; this entailed the Wellingtons taking-off from the North Front at Gibraltar with a heavy load of petrol which necessitated a run of at least 1,150 yards. Strenuous exertions were therefore made to finish work which was completed on 3 April - nearly a month earlier than the original estimate.<sup>4</sup>

Admiralty Monthly 1 As a result of these attacks the two U-Boats were officially  
Anti-Sub Report assessed as "probably slightly damaged."  
CB.04054/43(8)

2 See page 400 supra.

3 See SECTION III, pp 339 to 342.

4 The completion of the extension to 1,550 yards was not completed until November. Thereafter the runway was further extended to 1,800 yards and was ready for use to its full length in July 1943.

## SECTION V

SECRET

(1 July to 3 November 1942)

STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE PERIOD

The months of July and August -- although critical as regards the situation on land -- were the turning point in the air/sea war in the Mediterranean. As soon as the Eighth Army had stabilised its position at Alamein in July, the war of supplies began again as strongly as before. From the point of view of the Allies it was essential to cripple the enemy's supplies before he could build up his strength to continue his offensive, while the Allies were preparing for a counter-offensive which, it was hoped, would eventually drive Rommel and his "Afrika Korps" from North Africa.

Features of the Air/Sea Warfare

From the aspect of air/sea warfare the period was marked by the following features:-

1. The final Luftwaffe attacks on Malta (July and October)
2. The successful convoy to Malta in August<sup>(1)</sup> and the subsequent build-up of Malta's air power
3. Efforts to smash the enemy's supply position for his push against the Eighth Army at Alamein
4. The consequent shipping losses to the enemy and his attempts at building up his supplies by air ferry
5. The control of the Mediterranean passing into Allied hands.

The War of Supplies -- Attacks on Enemy Shipping

While the Eighth Army was holding the Alamein line in July, there were indications that the enemy's supply position was causing him some anxiety and that he was living to a considerable extent on the material which he had captured from the Eighth Army during its retreat. None-the-less, it was incumbent upon the Allies' air and submarine forces to make every effort to prevent the enemy bringing up further supplies of food, equipment, ammunition and, more especially, fuel. This effort was made, and although the enemy had the advantage of being able to use the short sea routes in the Mediterranean, the increase over the preceding period in the number of sinkings of enemy ships was very marked. Between the opening of Rommel's advance (towards the end of May) and the retreat of the Eighth Army to Alamein at the end of June, aircraft from Malta and Egypt claimed only one ship sunk, while in July and August they claimed sixteen ships sunk and damage to fifteen others.

The enemy's shipping losses from Naval and air attacks during August, September and October represented a heavy reduction in his supplies to North Africa. In August the estimated tonnage of Italian merchant shipping sunk amounted to nearly 52,000 tons out of an estimated total of 114,000 tons sent to North Africa over

/the

(1) Operation "Pedestal"

the Italian supply routes -- a loss of 45%. The tonnage sunk in September is estimated at nearly 34,000 tons out of 108,000 tons sent, which equals a loss of 31%. In October, the losses were considerably higher, over 49,000 tons being estimated as sunk out of a total of 96,000 tons sent, equalling 54% of the tonnage employed<sup>(1)</sup>. For the same month the German losses of vehicles for Rommel's "Afrika Korps" were estimated at 350 out of 940 vehicles sent, while the loss of petrol was even greater, only some 3,000 tons out of nearly 10,000 tons sent (representing a loss of 66%) reaching Cyrenaica.

Vice-Adml.  
Weichold: Essay  
"The War in the  
Mediterranean",  
Part II.  
(N.I.D. 1/CP.21)  
(A.H.B.1. S.10)

Meanwhile, Malta had been subjected in July to further heavy air attacks but these failed in their object of subduing the island.

#### Final Attempt to Capture Egypt -- Last "Blitz" on Malta

At the end of August, Rommel made a final effort to capture Egypt. His attempt failed, the ultimate reason being his inability to build up his supplies and replacements with sufficient rapidity owing to the attacks by the R.A.F. (and F.A.A.) and submarines on the Axis shipping in transit and the bombing of the Axis ports of disembarkation in Cyrenaica. Following upon the failure of Rommel's attack there was a period of relative calm in the forward battle area, during which Allied supplies and reinforcements were being brought into Egypt at an ever increasing tempo. By the middle of October the Eighth Army's preparations for a general advance were nearing completion, and it was at this time that the enemy made a last attempt to get supplies across the Mediterranean to the battle area. Meanwhile, Malta was again subjected to a Luftwaffe "blitz" which was intended to neutralise the island's offensive capacity while enemy convoys were sent across to North Africa to increase Rommel's supplies for the Alamein front. At the same time the enemy made increasing use of transport aircraft to carry personnel and supplies from Greece via Crete to Cyrenaica, but these efforts were met by intensified Allied air attacks on his shipping and on his transport aircraft at their bases.

"Air & Naval  
Bases on Malta"  
Report by  
Italian Air  
Staff, 31 Oct.  
1942) (Trans-  
lation  
No. VII/43,  
A.H.B. 6)

After the abortive attempt by the Luftwaffe to liquidate Malta in October, the Malta squadrons resumed their offensive -- in collaboration with the Desert Air Force -- against Axis shipping and supplies. This offensive increased in volume until, in the Summer of 1943, Malta became the "jumping-off" place for the successful Allied invasion of Sicily. In the meantime, the Eighth Army had won the victory of Alamein (23 October - 3 November) and had begun its triumphant advance into Libya co-incident with the Allied landings in French North Africa on 8 November.

#### Attacks on Benghazi and Tobruk

In the meantime, Benghazi and Tobruk had been attacked by the Allied Air Forces, the latter almost continuously. Benghazi had passed out of range of the R.A.F. medium bombers at the end of June, but the heavy bombers of the U.S. Air Force

/were

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(1) The figures of sinkings are taken from statistics compiled at A.H.B.1. from (a) P1/4203 (a secret enemy source) and (b) Enemy Shipping Losses Assessment Committee's list of identified ships sunk. The figures of tonnage sent to North Africa were estimated by Vice-Adml. Weichold: Essay: "The War in the Mediterranean", Part II).

were able to reach it and they made some 200 sorties against it. Tobruk was bombed almost non-stop from the time of its capture by Rommel in June until its re-capture on 13 November. In that period more than 3,500 sorties were made against it during which 4,250 tons of bombs were dropped. After the re-capture of Tobruk the Allied aircraft forced enemy convoys bound for Benghazi and Tripoli westwards into Malta's range, and when Benghazi fell on 19 November the enemy endeavoured to supply Tripoli by sending his ships from the west along the coast of Tunisia. These tactics were, however, largely negated by the R.A.F., and the U.S. Air Force bombers which concentrated their attacks on Tripoli, while the R.A.F. also carried out extensive minelaying operations in the enemy's smaller North African ports and anchorages.

#### THE CENTRAL BASIN

At the beginning of the period under review Malta's air units comprised the following squadrons:-

A.H.Q. M.E. Tables of Ops.; (A.H.B.II J1/31/1) A.H.Q. M.E. AOC/47/4, Pt.IV, 533A	No. 69 (F. & G.R.) squadron	Beaufighters/Baltimores/ Spitfires
	No. 89 (F) squadron detachment (Night)	Beaufighters
	No. 126 (F) squadron	Spitfires
	No. 185 (F) squadron	Spitfires/Hurricane II's
	No. 229 (F) squadron	Hurricane IIC's
	No. 249 (F) squadron	Spitfires
	No. 603 (F) squadron detachment	Spitfires
	No. 221 (A.S.V/T.B.) squadron	Wellington VIII's detachment
	No. 38 (T.B) squadron detachment	Wellington IC's
	No. 39 (T.B) squadron detachment	Beauforts
	No. 217 (T.B) squadron detachment	Beauforts
	No. 1435 (Night fighter) flight	Beaufighters
	No. 828 (F.A.A) squadron	Swordfish
	No. 830 (F.A.A) squadron	Albacores

A.M. S.8768,  
passim

Ibid:  
(Sig. AX 199  
of 16.7.42;  
to AHQ. Malta  
& AHQ. M.E.)

These units were augmented during July and August by No. 86 squadron from Coastal Command armed with (torpedo) Beauforts which had been fitted with long-range tanks. This reinforcement was designed primarily for striking at Rommel's sea communications and secondly to assist in the arrival and unloading of a convoy to Malta (Operation "Pedestal", which was scheduled to take place in August) by threatening the Italian fleet. The Air Ministry considered that, for the time being, these two duties should take precedence over all other offensive operations from Malta.

#### Malta's Shipping Strikes.

AHQ. Med:  
O.R.B./July

Meanwhile the attacks from Malta on enemy shipping had perforce to be curtailed in number owing to the limited supplies of aviation fuel in the island, and operations were therefore confined to what was considered to be the most important targets. During July, Wellington VIII's made several shipping searches, on three occasions in co-operation with Wellington IC's.

AHQ. M.E.  
Tables of Ops.  
(A.H.B.II J1/31/1):  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol.3.

Attacks on enemy shipping were also made by the Beauforts escorted by Beaufighters. On 3 July, six Beauforts (of No. 217 squadron) escorted by five Beaufighters (of No. 235 squadron) attacked a convoy of three 7,000-ton merchant ships escorted by eight destroyers, off Sapienza, scoring a hit on one of the

/merchantmen

merchantmen and a possible hit on another<sup>(1)</sup>. On 21 July, nine Beauforts (of Nos. 39 and 86 squadrons) with an escort of six Beaufighters (of No. 235 squadron) attacked a 7,000-ton merchant ship (escorted by two destroyers), off Cape Geroghambo (Cephalonia). Three torpedoes hit the merchant ship causing a column of smoke, and one of the destroyers was also hit<sup>(2)</sup>, and a Dornier 18 accompanying the convoy was damaged by the Beauforts.

Ibid

One of the most successful strikes occurred on 24 July when five Beauforts<sup>(3)</sup> (escorted by nine Beaufighters of No. 235 squadron) attacked another convoy of one 6,000 ton merchantman (laden with deck cargo) escorted by two destroyers, some ten miles off Cape Geroghambo, obtaining a direct hit on the merchant ship which resulted in much smoke and flame. Photographs taken on the same day showed this ship down by the bows and well on fire. It was taken in tow to Argostoli where further photographs showed it completely burnt out<sup>(4)</sup>.

Ibid

An interesting feature of this month's work was the capture of an Italian Cant. 506B. by the crew of a Beaufort which had force-landed after an attack on enemy shipping. The Beaufort's crew had been made prisoners and were being flown by the Cant. to Italy, but during the flight they overpowered the Cant's crew and brought the aircraft to Malta. The Cant. was converted for air/sea rescue work: one of the Italian pilots gave valuable instruction on the flying characteristics of the Cant. and the use of its controls, without which it is doubtful if our pilots could have flown it successfully.

#### Malta's Dwindling Fuel Supplies

As already stated, the stocks of aviation fuel at Malta were running low, and by the end of June the position was causing grave concern. On 25 June, the Governor (Lord Gort) had signalled to the Air Ministry (for the Chiefs of Staff) that he estimated if fuel were used at the then rate of expenditure, the stocks would only last for a further six and a half weeks, and that Malta would be unable to operate any aircraft after the first week of August. The A.O.C., Malta (A.V.M. Lloyd)<sup>(5)</sup> however, calculated that the stocks should last until the first week of October, provided that limited deliveries of fuel were obtained and that the expenditure was allocated only for fighter operations, no offensive operations being undertaken.

On receipt of these estimates the Air Ministry decided that aviation fuel must be made to last as long as the food and other supplies in the island: that the first priority in its expenditure should be fighter defence and cover for the next convoy, the second priority being shared between transit aircraft to Egypt and offensive operations. The decision as

/to

HQ. M.E.  
A.O.C.  
47/3, 510A

Ibid: 512B

AHQ. M.E.  
A.O.C.  
513A

- (1) This was officially assessed as "damaged".
- (2) This was officially assessed under Category IV.
- (3) Of Nos. 86 and/or 217 sqns. (see A.H.Q.M.E. Tables of Ops: 14/15 - 28 July '42, Table E. -- The O.R.B's of these two sqns. are incomplete).
- (4) This was the M.V. Vettor Pisani, confirmed as set on fire and sunk.
- (5) A.V.M. Park succeeded A.V.M. Lloyd as A.O.C. on 15 July. (A.H.Q. Med: O.R.B. July).

List from  
enemy sources  
of Italian  
merchant  
ships sunk.

**SECRET**

to Malta's offensive policy was left to the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East (in collaboration with the A.O.C., Malta), but it was stressed that no opportunity was to be missed of any offensive action that might be of real importance, such as attacks on enemy convoys to North Africa and, if the opportunity arose, of attacks on Italian naval forces.

Ibid., 521A

On 4 July, the Middle East Defence Committee signalled their views on the fuel question. While admitting that if the rate of fuel consumption were continued on transit aircraft and offensive operations it would be impossible to keep a sufficient margin of fuel to assist in the approach and unloading of the next convoy to the island, they stressed that it had been necessary to concentrate all our resources on the land battle during our retreat to Alamein. In view of the fact that this land fighting crisis was not yet over, they considered it vital "to concentrate every effort on destroying the enemy on land", and for this purpose it was necessary "to be able to take offensive action from Malta against important enemy convoys, the arrival of which might well have the most serious effect on the (land) battle". Their policy regarding such offensive operations from Malta was, therefore, to retain in the island a striking force of Beauforts with Beaufighters to escort them, and to use these aircraft to attack such objectives as were likely to affect the issue on land. It was intended, however, to restrict such operations to a minimum, and the Malta striking force would only be called upon "in case of vital need". In a further signal to the Chiefs of Staff (dated 22 July) the Middle East Defence Committee stated that their considered opinion was "to put everything we have got into the land battle", and that the remaining eight Beauforts (of No. 86 squadron) being sent to Malta<sup>(1)</sup> should be employed in attacking enemy convoys. The Committee stated that this would mean a further depletion of Malta's stocks of fuel but they considered that this "was a situation which must be accepted" as everything depended on the land battle.

Ibid. 537B

AHQ. M.E.  
D/AOC/1,  
Pt.V (COS  
Papers), 304.

Lord Gort's reaction to these signals was a feeling of "grave anxiety". In his view the inference to be drawn from the decision contained in the second signal was "plainly at variance with the present instructions (of H.M. Government) to prolong the resistance of Malta as long as possible". In Lord Gort's opinion, the choice lay between the continuance of strikes irrespective of over-expenditure of fuel, or the restriction of flying to Malta's daily fighter effort, until the arrival and unloading of a convoy, and he considered that "the continuation of strikes and heavy transit traffic entailed the very grave risk of losing Malta". He informed the Chiefs of Staff that he had "reluctantly" given orders that no further long-range strikes were to be carried out pending their decision, and he reiterated that the continuance of the rate of expenditure of fuel before the arrival of the next convoy definitely endangered Malta's safety.

Ibid., 305

The Chiefs of Staff were inclined to agree with Lord Gort: they considered that the strikes from Malta must be reduced to an absolute minimum, and they instructed the three C's.-in-C. accordingly. The question of supplying Malta with fuel by submarine was also under consideration; the Chiefs of Staff were of opinion that if 500 tons of fuel per month could be delivered to Malta by this means, there would be sufficient petrol for defensive operations up to the end of September,

/including

(1) See page 423 supra: 8 Beauforts had arrived in July and the remaining 8 were sent in August.



Information from Office of Admiral (Submarines) including a sufficient margin for the Beaufighters to operate both before and during the approach of the next convoy. This method of transporting fuel to Malta had already been adopted in the past, notably in August 1941 when three submarines carried 120,300 gallons of "white oils" (besides stores and mail) to the island. Accordingly, the Admiralty sent the submarine Parthian to Malta which arrived there with 10,900 gallons of fuel on 18 July, and in August further supplies were sent by the submarines Rorqual, Clyde and Porpoise. In September (after Malta's fuel stocks had been further replenished by the August "Pedestal" convoy) the Admiralty agreed that 150 tons of fuel should be sent to Malta by submarines for the next two months, H.M.S. Rorqual, Clyde and Porpoise being earmarked for this purpose.

Ibid: and  
A.M. CS.  
15747,  
passim

#### Submarines for Attacks on Enemy Convoys

AHQ. M.E.  
D/AOC/1,  
Pt.V, (COS  
Papers), 307

Meanwhile, in response to a suggestion by the Middle East Defence Committee to the Prime Minister and Chiefs of Staff, it was decided that an increased number of submarines should be sent to the Central Basin which, in conjunction with A.S.V. reconnaissance aircraft, were to be employed in attacks against enemy convoys to Cyrenaica from Italy and Greece. At the beginning of August, seven submarines were sent from Alexandria to Malta, and the Admiralty promised that four more would be sent after the arrival of the "Pedestal" convoy, followed by two others from the United Kingdom in October.

Ibid:, 312

#### Spitfire Reinforcement to Malta

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative "The  
War at Sea"  
Vol.III

On 14 July, the aircraft-carrier Eagle (escorted by one cruiser, one A.A. cruiser and five destroyers -- Operation "Pinpoint") sailed from Gibraltar with a reinforcement of thirty-two Spitfires for Malta. One of the Spitfires crashed while taking off; the remaining thirty-one reached Malta on 15 July. Five days later the Eagle (with similar escort) ferried a further twenty-nine Spitfires from Gibraltar (Operation "Insect"). A U-boat unsuccessfully attacked the force in the early hours of 21 July, and four hours later the Spitfires began to fly off the Eagle from a position 38° 01' north, 03° 05' east(1). Twenty-eight Spitfires arrived at Malta, one having crashed owing to the failure of its long-range tank to operate.

#### Operation "Pedestal" 10 - 14 August

Operation "Pedestal" was similar to Operation "Harpoon"(2) but on a larger scale and without the corresponding operation of a second convoy from the east. The principal feature from the Naval aspect was the increased strength of carrier-borne air protection for the convoy, three "Fleet" carriers -- H.M.S. Indomitable, Eagle and Victorious -- being employed. The whole force (known as Force "F") comprised the following units:-

- (1) Force "Z" comprising two battleships, three cruisers and twelve destroyers. In addition to these there were eight other destroyers for detached escorts, and the carrier Furious for operation "Bellows".(3)

/(2)

(1) i.e. approx: 85 miles north of Algiers.

(2) See Section IV, pages 397 and 398.

(3) Operation "Bellows" was the flying off of 37 reinforcing Spitfires to Malta, two of which crashed on arrival owing to bad landing.

A.M. CS.  
15957, 32

- (2) Force "X" comprising three cruisers, one anti-aircraft cruiser (Cairo), twelve destroyers and one armed tug.
- (3) Force "R" comprising four corvettes, two Fleet oilers and an Admiralty tug. In addition to these there was the Malta Escort Force comprising four minesweepers and seven motor launches.
- (4) Force "Y" (Operation "Ascendant")<sup>(1)</sup> comprising the S.S. Troilus and Orari escorted by two destroyers.

A force of eight submarines was deployed thus:- two north of Sicily and six between Malta and the Tunisian coast.

AHQ. M.E.  
AOC/47/4,  
Pt. IV 543A  
547A  
AHQ. F.C.  
WSD/S9  
(Report on  
Op. "Pedestal")

The convoy comprised twelve British and two U.S. merchant ships. The air operations for the assistance of the convoy were confined to the Malta Command, and in preparation for the operation detachments of Nos. 235, 248 and 252 squadrons (Beaufighters) were sent to Malta from the U.K. Further reinforcements included detachments of No. 40 Squadron (Wellingtons), No. 159 squadron (Liberators) -- night bombers -- No. 55 squadron (Baltimores) -- day bombers -- and No. 203 squadron (Marylands) and seven P.R.U. Spitfires for reconnaissance work.<sup>(2)</sup>

Ibid:

#### Role of the Malta Air Units -- Plan

The role of the Malta air units<sup>(3)</sup> for Operation "Pedestal" was as follows:-

- (1) to locate, report and shadow all enemy surface forces in order to warn the convoy and its escort;
- (2) to destroy enemy surface forces which might jeopardise the safety of the convoy;
- (3) to disorganise the enemy's air forces on the ground by means of low-flying Beaufighters, and by night bombing attacks on Sardinian aerodromes by the R.A.F. Liberators based on Malta, and by large scale night bombing attacks on Sicilian aerodromes by U.S. Liberators based in the Middle East<sup>(4)</sup>.

The aircraft strength of the available Malta units varied during the operation; the battle strength (a) before the operation, (b) before the intensive phase and (c) at the end of the operation was:-

/(a)

- (1) See page 428 infra.
- (2) The total reinforcing aircraft sent to Malta for Op. "Pedestal" were:- 4 Liberators (from M.E.), 28 Beaufighters (22 from the U.K., 6 from M.E.), 14 Beauforts (5 from the U.K., 9 from M.E.), 5 (R) Baltimores and 4 (B) Baltimores (from M.E.), 2 Marylands (from M.E.), 7 P.R.U. Spitfires (5 from the U.K., 2 from M.E.), 2 Wellingtons (from M.E.) and 37 (F) Spitfires (from the U.K. -- Op. "Bellows" -- 11 Aug.).
- (3) The Order of Battle of the units operating from Malta is given in Appendix "P".
- (4) The intended attack by the U.S. Liberators was cancelled. (It had originally been intended that 12 U.S. Liberators should attack Italian fleet ports in South Italy and Sicily, but this was cancelled by the U.S. authorities as being impracticable "owing to range and operational considerations". -- A.M. CS.1567, 112A, 116A).

(a) 9 August (09.00 hrs.)			(b) 10 August (09.00 hrs.)		
Available for ops.	Shortly available	Strength	Available for ops.	Shortly available	Strength
65	9	83	76	13	101

(c) 14 August (09.00 hrs.)		
Available for ops.	Shortly available	Strength
86	11	109

#### Sailing of the Convoy from Gibraltar

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary No.32  
CB.3081(25)

The whole expedition was under command of Vice-Admiral Syfret; Force "X" (escorting the convoy to Malta under Rear-Admiral Burrough) was to go through the Sicilian "Narrows" as far as the approaches to Malta and there meet the Malta Escort Force which was to sweep the convoy into harbour. The convoy entered the Straits of Gibraltar in the early hours of 10 August and on the following day German reconnaissance aircraft began shadowing the convoy. At 12.30 hours the carrier Furious began flying off Spitfires to Malta (Operation "Bellows") from a position 560 miles from the island. This took some hours to complete as it was interrupted by the sinking of the carrier Eagle by a German U-boat. The Eagle sank in eight minutes, some 900 of her personnel being rescued by destroyers and the armed tug. The same evening the Furious sailed back to Gibraltar escorted by a division of spare destroyers. Meanwhile, the merchant ships Troilus and Orari (which had remained at Malta since their arrival there on 16 June in the "Harpoon" convoy) had sailed from Gibraltar on 10 August with their escort of two destroyers (Operation "Ascendant").<sup>(1)</sup>

#### Air Reconnaissance (10-11 August)

AHQ. F.C.  
WSD/S9  
(Report on  
Op. "Ped-  
estal")

During 10 and 11 August the Malta P.R.U. Spitfires (of No.69 squadron) carried out reconnaissances to determine the strength and position of enemy air and surface squadrons, their reconnaissances covering a wide area as far as Cagliari, Naples, Taranto and Navarino. During this period Wellington VIII's (of No. 69 squadron) made five reconnaissance sorties so as to ascertain if the Italian Battle Fleet should leave Taranto or their Cruiser Squadron should leave the Tyrrhenian Sea. At 21.46 hours on the night of 11/12 August one of the Wellingtons sighted two enemy cruisers and two destroyers about 45 miles east-north-east of Cape Colonne, sailing in an easterly direction. The Wellington attacked, straddling one of the cruisers with 500 lb. bombs, but the ships continued their course.

#### Attacks on Enemy Aerodromes (11/12 August)

Ibid:

On the night of 11/12 August, two Liberators (of No.159 squadron) attacked Decimomannu (Sardinia) aerodrome, and nine

/Beaufighters

(1) These ships arrived at Gibraltar on 14 August.

No. 248 sqn.  
O.R.B. Aug.

Beaufighters (of No. 248 squadron) carried out a successful "shoot up" of the aerodromes at Elmas and Decimomannu. At Elmas, two multi-engined aircraft and a hangar were set on fire and several other aircraft were damaged, and at Decimomannu at least five aircraft were left in flames and a number of others were severely damaged.<sup>(1)</sup> Meanwhile one Wellington IC (transit aircraft) bombed Catania aerodrome as a special diversionary task.

Diversion by the Fleet (Eastern Mediterranean - 10-11 August)

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary No.  
32 CB.  
3081(25)

Meanwhile, in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Fleet had carried out a diversion to assist in the safe passage of the convoy: a dummy convoy (M.W. 12) comprising three cruisers, ten destroyers and three merchant ships sailed from Port Said on the evening of 10 August and another force of two cruisers, five destroyers and one merchantman sailed from Haifa next morning. These two forces joined that day and sailed together as far as Alexandria, and then turned back and dispersed during the night.

Passage of the Convoy (11-12 August)

Ibid:

At dusk on 11 August a force of thirty-six German bombers and torpedo aircraft (JU.88's and HE.110's) attacked the "Pedestal" convoy. The JU.'s arrived first and dived from 8,000 to 2/3,000 feet, but neither they nor the HE.'s hit any of the ships which shot down four of the bombers. Some twenty JU.88's made a further attack at 09.15 hours on the following morning (12 August) but were intercepted by the F.A.A. fighters. About a dozen of the enemy got through to the convoy, making high level or shallow dive-bombing attacks but without result; eight enemy aircraft were destroyed by the fighters and two by the ships' gunnery. At mid-day the enemy made heavy attacks from the Sardinian airfields by a combined force of some seventy German and Italian aircraft strongly escorted by fighters. The attack was begun by ten Italian torpedo-bombers each carrying "notobombe F.F." (a species of circling torpedo or mine which was used for the first time in this attack) while eight fighter-bombers made dive-bombing and machine-gun attacks. About half-an-hour after the "notobombe" had been dropped, some forty torpedo-aircraft attacked the convoy. In the meantime the F.A.A. fighters had intercepted the "notobombe" aircraft and shot down one of them as they approached; the other nine dropped their "notobombe" in the path of the convoy which avoided them by making a right-angled turn.

During the dive-bombing attack the merchantman Deucalion was damaged and one bomb hit the flight-deck of the carrier Victorious but, fortunately, failed to explode. The Deucalion's speed was considerably reduced as a result of the damage which she had sustained and she was ordered to follow the inshore route along the Tunisian coast, escorted by a destroyer. At 19.40 hours she was attacked and set on fire by two torpedo aircraft, and eventually blew up.

During the afternoon the convoy (which had passed some 20 miles north of Galita Island) was chiefly engaged in avoiding enemy submarines; the destroyer Ithuriel rammed and sank the Italian U-boat Cobalto. At 18.30 hours a force of about 100 JU.87's and 88's and S.79 torpedo-aircraft, with a strong escort of fighters, approached the convoy. The destroyer Foresight was hit and

/disabled

(1) The Italians admitted that six of these aircraft were destroyed and several others damaged.

disabled<sup>(1)</sup> and the carrier Indomitable received three hits from some JU.'s which dived out of the sun. The Indomitable's flight-deck was put out of action and her fighters had to return to the Victorious. One enemy aircraft was shot down by the ships and the F.A.A. fighters (Hurricanes, Martletts and Fulmars) destroyed nine others. At 18.55 hours (when the attack was over) Force "X" (Rear-Admiral Burrough) was detached to accompany the convoy through the Sicilian "Narrows" and Vice-Admiral Syfret turned away with the heavy ships (Force "Z") and sailed for Gibraltar. By this time it was estimated that the Fleet fighters and ships guns had accounted for fifty-six enemy aircraft destroyed, fifteen probably destroyed and three others damaged, for the loss of thirteen British aircraft.

Ibid: and  
A.M. CS.15767  
(Appx. 'C' to  
Report on Op.  
"Pedestal",  
Narrative of  
Force "F")

#### Air Reconnaissance (12-13 August)

In the meantime heavy calls had been made on the Malta reconnaissance aircraft (of No. 69 squadron). Six P.R.U. Spitfires made twelve sorties covering all ports and harbours where Italian naval forces had been or might be located, and also over the Ionian Sea to block the Gulf of Taranto. At 18.54 hours,<sup>(2)</sup> when the convoy was some 35 miles north of Bizerta, a reconnaissance Baltimore sighted three Italian cruisers and three destroyers which by 19.05 hours had been joined by another cruiser and three more destroyers. This enemy force was again located at 19.18 hours in position about 60 miles north-west of Ustica Island, steering 210° at 20 knots. The day reconnaissance aircraft, having no A.S.V. nor crews trained for night flying, were unable to shadow this force during darkness, and at last light a Wellington VIII (of No. 69 squadron) was sent to continue the search and located the cruisers (at 23.30 hours) steering south. It seemed obvious that the enemy squadron intended to intercept the convoy and a second Wellington VIII (also of No. 69 squadron) which was on patrol, was ordered by an en clair signal from Malta to illuminate and attack the squadron in the hope that the enemy, realising that R.A.F. forces were in the vicinity, might be turned from his purpose. This ruse was partially successful as at 01.30 hours (13 August) the first Wellington reported that the squadron was steering 06° at 20 knots, its position being then 37 miles south-west of Ustica. At 01.50 hours the second Wellington, having located (and unsuccessfully attacked)<sup>(3)</sup> the squadron, reported that it had altered course to 170°, and directly afterwards the first Wellington reported that the enemy's position was 30 miles south-west of Ustica. As the enemy had resumed a southerly course it was decided to strike with the R.N.A. squadron at Malta. Accordingly this squadron (comprising two torpedo-Albacores and one A.S.V. Swordfish) took off at 02.00 hours intending to intercept and strike the enemy off Marettime Island. Meanwhile the second Wellington VIII had been ordered to report the enemy's position every 20 minutes in preparation for illuminating the R.N.A. squadron's strike. At 02.30 hours the Wellington reported that the enemy had altered course to 0°30' and 03.00 hours the first Wellington reported that the enemy squadron was due south of Ustica. In order to discourage the enemy from resuming his original intention, a

Ibid: and  
A.H.Q. M.E.  
Tables of  
Ops. (AHB.II  
J1/31/1)

/further

- (1) The Foresight was taken in tow by the destroyer Tartar, but next day, as they were shadowed continuously by enemy aircraft and U-boats were known to be about, the Foresight was sunk by the Tartar a few miles from Galita Island.
- (2) i.e. just about the time when Force "Z" turned away for Gibraltar leaving Force "X" with the convoy (as stated above)
- (3) No direct hits were claimed in this attack.

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further signal en clair was sent to prepare for a strike by (imaginary) Liberators. This signal may have had the desired effect as the enemy squadron made no further attempt to turn south-westerly. When it had become obvious that the enemy squadron could not reach Marettimo (should it in fact revert to its original intention of intercepting the convoy) in time to be intercepted by the R.N.A. squadron, the strike was recalled.

A.H.Q. F.C.  
WDS/S.9  
(Report on Op.  
"Pedestal")  
and Admiralty  
Battle Sum-  
mary No.32  
CB.3081(25)

The enemy squadron held on its course to the eastward and eventually ran into the R.N. submarine area. H.M. submarine P.42 sighted the squadron a few miles south-westward of Stromboli, and at 08.06 hours it torpedoed the 8-inch cruiser Bolzano and the 6-inch cruiser Muzio Attendolo. The Bolzano was damaged and sailed north for repairs: the Muzio Attendolo had her bows blown off but managed to reach Messina. The two other cruisers put in to Naples.

A.H.Q. F.C.  
WSD/S.9  
(Report on Op.  
"Pedestal")

Meanwhile, a torpedo striking force of Beauforts (drawn from Nos.36, 86 and 217 squadrons) with an escort of Beaufighters (of Nos.235 and 252 squadrons) had been standing by (and had been doing so during the previous day), but this was held back in case the Italian Battle Fleet should sail from Taranto to attack the convoy.

#### Further Attacks on Enemy Aerodromes (12 August)

Ibid:

In the meantime seven Beaufighters (of Nos. 248 and 252 squadrons) had been sent at dusk (on 12 August) to attack Pantellaria aerodrome. On their arrival there was considerable difficulty in locating the target and only three aircraft (of No. 248 squadron) were able to press home the attack, causing a fire. Subsequently two Liberators were sent to bomb the aerodromes at Pantellaria and Gerbini. (Their bomb loads had been given delayed action scaled between "instantaneous" and 18 hours, the intention being not to damage enemy aircraft but to dislocate the aerodromes during the vital operations of the following day when the convoy would be passing through the "Narrows")<sup>(1)</sup>. A Wellington (of No.40 squadron) also bombed Pantellaria aerodrome (dropping 12 x 500 lb. bombs from 9,000 feet), while another Wellington (of the same squadron) bombed Comiso aerodrome causing three explosions.

#### Passage of the Convoy through the "Narrows" (12-13 August)

Ibid:

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary,  
No.32  
CB.3081(25)

From 19.30 hours until last light (12 August) six Beaufighters (of No. 248 squadron) patrolled over the convoy as fighter protection. About 20.00 hours, when the convoy was at the entrance of the Skerki Channel, the cruiser Nigeria, the A.A. cruiser Cairo<sup>(2)</sup> and a tanker (Ohio) were all damaged under water, either by U-boats or mines. The Nigeria turned back to Gibraltar, escorted by two destroyers, but the Cairo's stern had been blown off and she had to be sunk; the Ohio managed to keep going. As these ships had

/been

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea", Vol.III

- (1) These Liberators had been lent for the operation from the Middle East. It had been intended to make two attacks with four Liberators, but only two were serviceable and these could only make one attack each. They were therefore, sent to Pantellaria and Gerbini, but only one Liberator (target Pantellaria) dropped its bombs, the other (target Gerbini) having developed engine trouble and returned. Both these aircraft re-fuelled and flew back to the Middle East.
- (2) The Nigeria and Cairo were the only two ships which were fitted to direct the Malta Beaufighters and Spitfires. Their disablement considerably hampered the fighters' operations.

been hit on the port side, the convoy altered course to the southward to avoid the danger, and in the process it became what has been described as a "heterogeneous mass". In this state, while endeavouring to form into two columns, the convoy was attacked in the fading light by some twenty JU.88's which made dive-bombing and torpedo attacks, hitting the S.S. Empire Hope with a bomb and torpedoing the S.S. Clan Ferguson and Brisbane Star. The Empire Hope was so badly damaged that she had to be sunk, the Clan Ferguson blew up, but the Brisbane Star eventually reached Malta. Soon after this attack the cruiser Kenya was damaged by a U-boat's torpedo, but she was able to continue her course with the convoy. Meanwhile, a force of Beaufighters patrolling over the convoy had been fired on by the ships -- an unfortunate occurrence which did much to negative the protection which these aircraft were endeavouring to give to the convoy. (1)

A.H.Q. F.C.  
WSD/S.9  
(Report on  
Op.  
"Pedestal")

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary  
No. 32

C.B. 3081(25)

The main body of the convoy passed Cape Bon at midnight, and forty minutes later "E"-boats appeared and made a series of attacks which lasted until the convoy was past Kelibia and on the course for Malta. The "E"-boats torpedoed the cruiser Manchester a few miles short of Kelibia and she had, later, to be sunk. Between 03.15 and 04.30 hours (13 August) four or five of the merchant ships which were straggling were hit; four were sunk but the fifth (S.S. Rochester Castle) survived.

Ibid:

The next enemy attack on the convoy occurred at 08.00 hours when some twelve JU.88's made a shallow dive-bombing attack from 6,000 to 2,000 feet, hitting and blowing up the S.S. Waimaruma. Meanwhile, Beaufighters and long-range Spitfires from Malta had been patrolling over the convoy since day-break; they accounted for one dive-bomber during this attack for the loss of one Spitfire shot down, possibly by the fire from the ships. At 10.50 hours some JU.'s made a further attack, disabling the engines of the tanker Ohio, setting the Rochester Castle on fire and stopping the S.S. Dorset. Two destroyers were left with these ships while the convoy sailed on; and a Wellington VIII was sent to act as an anti-"E"-boat patrol for the Ohio which was taken in tow by a destroyer. At 11.25 hours five S.79's attacked the convoy but without result. Further attacks were kept off by the short-range Malta Spitfires flying up to 70 or 80 miles from their base. At 14.30 hours the Malta Escort Force joined the convoy and took charge of the three merchant ships remaining in company, a mine-sweeper and two motor-launches being detached to assist the disabled tanker Ohio. At 16.00 hours Force "X" (under Rear-Admiral Burrough) proceeded westward on the return passage to Gibraltar, the three merchant ships above-mentioned arriving at the Grand Harbour, Malta, about two hours later under the protection of the Malta Escort Force.

A.H.Q. F.C.  
WSD/S.9  
(Report on  
Op.  
"Pedestal")

Admiralty  
Battle  
Summary

No. 32

CB. 3081(25)

The fate of the three remaining (disabled) merchant ships - Dorset, Brisbane Star and Ohio - was as follows:- the Dorset and the Brisbane Star had been repeatedly attacked by German bombers on the evening of 13 August; they were both hit at about 19.00 hours and the Dorset sank. The Brisbane Star (which had taken the inshore route along the coast of Tunisia with an escort of Beaufighters) reached the Grand Harbour on the afternoon of 14 August after unsuccessful attacks upon her by enemy aircraft, one of which was shot down by the Beaufighters.

/Meanwhile,

(1) As had happened during Op. "Vigorous" (See SECTION IV, page 409) the Beaufighters were mistaken for JU.88's, in spite of special black and white under markings.



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Meanwhile, the tanker Ohio had been towed by a destroyer and the minesweeper, under a protective force of Spitfires. On the morning of 14 August she was attacked by five enemy bombers, but managed to escape, one bomber and one of the escorting enemy fighters being shot down by a Spitfire. The Ohio - with her precious cargo of fuel, and her decks almost awash - was towed into Malta on the morning of 15 August.

Meanwhile, the ships of Force "X" returning to Gibraltar had a difficult passage: they rounded Cape Bon at 01.30 hours on 14 August, and from that point until they were past Zembra they ran the gauntlet of "E"-boats lying off shore. At 07.30 hours enemy shadower aircraft appeared, followed by attacks from JU.87's and 88's. About 11.50 hours, fifteen Savoia high-level bombers made an unsuccessful attack, and until 13.15 hours some twenty torpedo-carrying Savoias made further attacks. However, all the ships escaped, and three enemy aircraft were shot down by their gunnery. In the evening, Force "X" joined Force "Z" and the two Forces reached Gibraltar together on 15 August.

### Results

Operation "Pedestal" can only be classed as a partial success: out of fourteen merchant ships only five reached Malta, at a cost of one aircraft-carrier, one cruiser, one anti-aircraft cruiser and one destroyer lost<sup>(1)</sup>, and one carrier and two cruisers damaged.<sup>(2)</sup> But it should be borne in mind that the convoy had met attacks by 150 bombers and 80 torpedo aircraft, in a period of two days, the enemy being supported by fighters in a much greater strength than those which the carriers and the Malta-based aircraft could provide. To quote the Admiralty Battle Summary "Magnificent as the Naval and Royal Air Force fighters were, the scales were too heavily weighted". Moreover, the convoy had to contend with about a dozen enemy U-boats (which had the assistance of air reconnaissance) and with "E"-boats and minefields during the night passage along the coast of Tunisia. Taking these facts into consideration, Operation "Pedestal" might well have proved a failure, whereas the supplies of food, stores and fuel which reached Malta enabled the island to hold out until further supplies could be sent. In a signal to the Chiefs of Staff (of 26 August), Lord Gort stated that the food supplies would last until early in December, and the aviation spirit to about the middle of November (provided that its average consumption could be reduced to 80,000 gallons per week - which the A.O.C., Malta, hoped to achieve).

A.M. C.S.  
15747, 41A

Ibid; 63A

In September, in view of the need to build up further stocks of aviation fuel, the minelayer Welshman was specially fitted for carrying petrol, and this vessel and the fuel carrying submarines slipped into Malta whenever possible, but until the Cyrenaican airfields were again in British hands there was no hope for convoys from the east to get through "Bomb alley".

### Chief (Air) Lessons of Operation "Pedestal"

A.H.Q. F.C.  
WSD/S9  
(Report on  
Op.  
"Pedestal")

In the opinion of the A.O.C., Malta (A.V.M.Park) the chief air lessons learnt from Operation "Pedestal" were as follows:-

#### (1) Reconnaissance

- (a) It was impracticable to rely on "last minute" reinforcements of P.R.U. Spitfires and Baltimores, as

/it

- (1) i.e. H.M.S. Eagle, Manchester, Cairo and Foresight  
(2) i.e. H.M.S. Indomitable, Nigeria and Kenya.



it was essential that reconnaissance should be carried out immediately it was required: (two P.R.U. Spitfires had arrived at Malta in a temporary unserviceable condition).

- (b) The Baltimore crews sent as reinforcements should have been trained in G.R. work whereas instances occurred where the crews were "totally ignorant" of the procedure or form in which enemy sightings should be made.

(2) Bombing

- (a) Liberators from the Middle East arrived with insufficient bomb racks.
- (b) Only two effective sticks of bombs were dropped from an intended total of eight R.A.F. Liberator sorties, and the total lack of U.S. Liberators, meant to attack Sicilian airfields, left the enemy free to operate his aircraft at full scale.
- (c) The night bombing attacks on the Italian cruiser force by the Wellington VIII's on the night of 12/13 August showed the advantage to be gained in patrolling with these aircraft fully armed. The A.O.C. considered it was possible that the bombing attacks of these Wellingtons - which showed the enemy that their position was well known to us - together with the enemy's uncertainty as to what Naval forces were operating against him, may have been the determining factor for the safety of the five ships of the convoy which succeeded in reaching Malta.

(3) Long-range Fighter Protection

The Beaufighters and long-range Spitfires were considerably hampered after the two fighter-directing ships (H.M.S. Cairo and Nigeria) were damaged, the Beaufighters and Spitfires being fired on by our ships, and the task of the Spitfires being made more difficult by reason of enemy raids coming in too low for our Radar system and therefore not appearing on any of the plotting tables. The short-range Spitfires were handicapped by jamming on our Radar system and also by the fact that our ships did not give "help" calls as anticipated.

A.M. CS.15767,  
136A

The following is an extract of a signal (dated 17 August) from S.O. Force "F"<sup>(1)</sup> to the Admiralty:-

"F.O. 10th C.S.<sup>(2)</sup> is loud in his praises for both Beaufighters and Spitfires from Malta who seemed to do everything possible under circumstances of being bereft of their fighter-direction ships ... Long range Spitfires were out as early as possible on D.4 and Force "X" had a number of Spitfires overhead for (the) remainder of (the) journey. They shot down a number of enemy aircraft, and undoubtedly greatly reduced (the) scale of attack".

/(4)

- (1) Vice-Admiral Syfret
- (2) Rear-Admiral Burrough

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(4) Strikes

- (a) If torpedo-carrying aircraft were employed in attacking large units of an enemy fleet, it was considered essential that some high diversion should be provided. In Operation "Pedestal", due to the lack of adequate day-bombers, it was found necessary to convert Beaufighters to carry bombs for high diversion, and to use low escort Beaufighters to "shoot-up" the destroyer screen's decks and bridges as the attacks were being delivered.
- (b) For night strikes, there was only the Royal Naval Air Squadron consisting of two torpedo Albacores and one A.S.V. Swordfish. This was quite inadequate, and it was considered that in similar operations fifteen Barracudas should be provided.

(5) Dislocation of Enemy Aerodromes

It was considered that a plan with a limited objective of dislocating enemy aerodromes for 18 hours by means of delayed action bombs was quite feasible, even on a dark night. This assumption was supported by the Wellington attack on Comiso.

Enemy and R.A.F. Losses

A.H.Q. F.C.  
WSD/19 (Report  
on Op.  
"Pedestal")

During Operation "Pedestal" R.A.F. fighters made 407 sorties<sup>(1)</sup> in which fourteen enemy aircraft were destroyed, three probably destroyed and nine damaged: the R.A.F. losses were one Beaufighter and two long-range and two short-range Spitfires<sup>(2)</sup> (of which two pilots were saved).

Further Spitfire Reinforcement --- Operation "Baritone"

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea", Vol.III

It had been arranged that a further thirty-two Spitfires should be flown to Malta on the return of the carrier Eagle from operation "Bellows".<sup>(3)</sup> As the Eagle had been sunk, she was replaced for this second operation ("Baritone") by the Furious which left Gibraltar on the morning of 16 August under escort of a cruiser and twelve destroyers. All the Spitfires were flown off the Furious but only twenty-nine arrived at Malta, one having crashed while taking off and the pilots of two other aircraft having baled out, one for engine trouble and the other for under-carriage failure.

Position of the Land Fighting

In the meantime, important events had occurred in the fighting on land. On 6 July - after our retreat before Rommel's final bid for Egypt - our forces had stabilised their position at Alamein, and three weeks later (26/27 July) the Eighth Army launched an attack which proved abortive owing to the enemy's

/minefields

(1) The sorties were:-	Beaufighters	18
	L.R. Spitfires	97
	S.R. Spitfires	292
		<u>407</u>

(2) The second S.R. Spitfire crashed while landing.

(3) See page 426 supra. (These 32 Spitfires had been brought to Gibraltar in the S.S. Empire Clive).

minefields and his preponderance of artillery. On 31 August, Rommel began a new offensive against the southern sector of our defence, but withdrew five days later after he had sustained heavy losses to his armour. Meanwhile our forces were steadily building up their strength for a projected offensive (and advance into Cyrenaica) which opened on the night of 23/24 October after a heavy ground and air bombardment of the enemy's positions. This was the beginning of the battle of Alamein, which was to prove to be "the turning point of the war".

#### Further Shipping Strikes from Malta

On the completion of Operation "Pedestal" the Malta squadrons resumed their shipping strikes. On 17 August, six Beauforts (of No. 86 squadron) escorted by three Beaufighters (of No. 252 squadron) and eight Spitfires (of No. 126 squadron and No. 1435 flight) attacked an enemy convoy comprising the 8,326 ton merchant ship Rosolino Pilo and two destroyers, about 35 miles off Lampedusa Island. Two torpedo hits were scored on the merchantman which was left stationary and down by the stern with smoke pouring from it. The Beaufighters also attacked, scoring a hit on the vessel's stern with a 250 lb. bomb and then, in conjunction with the Beauforts, they attacked the escorting destroyers with machine-gun and cannon fire. During the operation the aircraft also attacked and probably destroyed a JU.88 and an enemy fighter. Photographs showed that the merchant ship was sunk.<sup>(1)</sup>

On 20 August, twelve Beauforts (of No. 39 squadron) with an escort of ten Beaufighters (of No. 227 squadron) - six of which carried bombs - attacked an enemy convoy of one 8,000-ton tanker and one small vessel, escorted by some destroyers, a Cant.Z.501 and six fighters, 10 miles north-east of Cape Spartivento. It was (incorrectly) estimated that the tanker was fully laden and drawing 22/24 feet, and accordingly the Beauforts' torpedoes were released with a 22 feet setting, but no hits were scored. However, four of the Beaufighters dropped seven 250 lb. bombs scoring a possible hit on the small vessel<sup>(2)</sup>, and the tanker and the destroyers were also raked with machine-gun and cannon fire.

Ibid:

On the following day (21 August) the same convoy was again attacked by nine Beauforts (of No. 39 squadron) and four bomb-carrying Beaufighters (of No. 227 squadron), escorted by eight Beaufighters (of No. 248 squadron), some 12 miles off Paxos Island. Three torpedo hits were scored on the 8,000-ton tanker<sup>(3)</sup> and one bomb hit on a destroyer. The Beaufighter escort shot down two P.32's, one JU.52 and two BR.20's, and probably destroyed a JU.58. The tanker was later photographed beached in shallow water in Sarada Bay, Corfu. Three nights later (24/25 August), two Wellingtons (of No. 69 squadron) were sent to attack the tanker; they dropped 35 x 45 lb. fire bombs which fell within 400 yards of the vessel and resulted in small explosions on the water and flames which lasted for some minutes.

Ibid:

Other operations included an attack on 27 August by seven Beauforts (of No. 39 squadron)<sup>(4)</sup> escorted by nine Beaufighters -- four carrying bombs -- (of No. 227 squadron)<sup>(5)</sup>, some 73 miles off Cape Amer, on the 5,400-ton merchant ship Istria which was

/escorted

- (1) This has been confirmed from enemy sources as sunk.
- (2) This was officially assessed under Category IV.
- (3) This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
- (4) On 20 August, No. 39 squadron was re-formed by incorporating the aircraft and personnel of No. 217 squadron and a detachment of No. 86 squadron.
- (5) Three Beaufighters and one Beaufort returned early (unserviceable).

No. 39 sqn.  
O.R.B. Aug.

SECRET

Malta's Air Reconnaissance

A.H.Q., Med.  
O.R.B. July  
No.69 Sqdn.  
O.R.B.

As formerly, air reconnaissance from Malta was carried out by No.69 (G.R.) Squadron, equipped with Baltimores and P.R.U. Spitfires (and, later, Wellingtons). During July, shipping reconnaissance consisted chiefly of shadowing enemy convoys bound for Benghazi and photographing the Beaufort attacks on them.

In the early part of July, the enemy began to employ "F"-boats (tank landing craft). These vessels were built at Palermo which became the focus of a good deal of attention from Malta reconnaissance patrols. At one time as many as fifteen "F"-boats were seen in Palermo harbour: they were loaded with fighting vehicles, tanks and gun carriages, and left in groups of three or four, taking the western route to Libya via Pantellaria and Lampedusa Islands. "F"-boats were also seen at Messina: they had presumably been brought down from the west coast of Italy from Genoa or Naples as "F"-boats had been seen under construction at both these ports.

The Malta reconnaissance aircraft also kept the units of the Italian Fleet under observation. Reconnaissance of Navarino (Greece) showed the presence of three 6-inch cruisers, two of which had left Taranto between 30 June and 7 July. The third was an "E"-class cruiser last seen in Spezia on 10 June. Two cruisers - the Bolzano and Gorizia - were located at Messina and five battleships remained at Taranto. The battleship Littorio (which had been severely damaged during Operation "Vigorous" in June<sup>(1)</sup>) was still in dry dock, heavily camouflaged, at Taranto. It was rendered serviceable by the end of August and photographed as it left the dock on the 26th of that month.

A further duty of the reconnaissance aircraft was the locating of grounded enemy aircraft on the Sicilian and Italian airfields. In July, reconnaissance patrols estimated the number of Italian and German fighters on the Eastern Sicilian aerodromes as 120 to 140. The number of Ju.88's in Sicily varied between 90 and 120, while at Catania the number dropped from 62 in July to 33 on 1 August, with 23 at Comiso and the same number at Gerbini. Meanwhile, 16 Ju.87's were located at Gela. Three new satellite airfields were constructed at Gerbini during July, making a total of five all told.

In August, the arrival at Taranto of a third Littorio-class battleship - thought to be the newly commissioned Roma - was photographed in the harbour. During this month, photographic recording of enemy merchant shipping and its movements for the purpose of our torpedo strikes became the primary task of interpretation, followed by careful inquests into the success or otherwise of attacks which were taken from Baltimore aircraft detailed to cover the strikes.

A.H.Q., Med.  
O.R.B. Sept.  
Appx. "C"  
and Oct.  
Appx. "B".

During September, photographic reconnaissances of Sicilian aerodromes were carried out which showed an increase of Ju.88's from 53 at the beginning to 75 at the end of the month. By that date there were 403 aircraft of all types in Sicily: of these 83 were German bombers, 143 were Italian bombers and 172 were German fighters. By the middle of October the strength of Sicilian based enemy aircraft had increased to 663, including 206 German bombers, 150 Italian bombers and 227 German and Italian fighters. It was also observed that a number of gliders were

/allotted

(1) See Section IV.

allotted to each "wing" of Ju.87's for transport of equipment. At Pachino landing grounds, photographs showed 27 aircraft which had no tail planes, and the careless manner in which these aircraft were dispersed suggested that they were fighter dummies.

As heretofore, the units of the Italian fleet were kept under close observation; in this connection, three 6-inch cruisers were located at Navarino presumably to cover the enemy's eastern supply line down the coast of Greece. Meanwhile the Italian battleships remained at Taranto, the two 8-inch cruisers Trieste and Gorizia being based at Messina: reconnaissances also revealed a new Regulo-class 5.3-inch cruiser at this port.

#### Malta's Defence

A.H.Q., Med.  
O.R.B. July,  
Appx. "D"

The resumption of enemy air attacks on Malta towards the end of June<sup>(1)</sup> resulted in an alteration in the island's fighter policy as regards interception tactics. Thenceforward, fighters were sent to the north of the island to meet and attack incoming raiders "head on" before they reached their objective. After the first ten days of fighting, these tactics proved so successful that the enemy resorted to fighter sweeps at great heights. To combat this method the Malta fighters patrolled at 20,000 feet and were thus able to keep the raiders from coming down to fight. On several occasions the enemy bombers were forced to jettison their bombs in the sea and then turn for home while still some distance from the island.

A.H.Q., Med.  
O.R.B. Aug.

In August, enemy raids on the island were considerably reduced, and during the unloading of the "Pedestal" convoy no attempt at bombing the ships was made. The Malta fighters employed the same tactics as in the previous month and the enemy raiders seldom came down to fight. Meanwhile a limited number of Hurricane-bomber sorties and numerous Spitfire sorties were made against enemy aerodromes in Southern Sicily in an endeavour to get enemy aircraft to come up and fight. Four night intruder operations were also carried out by Beaufighters. These operations included a machine-gun and cannon attack on Marsala flying-boat station on the night of 26/27 August (when a merchant vessel was attacked and a Do.18 aircraft shot down in flames), and on the seaplane hangar at Syracuse and mechanised transport at Pachino aerodrome, on the following night.

Ibid:  
Appx. "C"

Fuehrer Con-  
ferences on  
Naval Affairs,  
1942  
(Conference  
of 26 Aug.)

Although the number of enemy raids on Malta decreased, the German Naval Staff still regarded the capture of the island as of great importance. In their opinion the capture of Malta remained "a most desirable objective for the future", but this project did not materialise.

#### The October "Blitz"

A.H.Q. Med.  
O.R.B. Oct.  
and Ibid:  
Appx. "A"

In October, the enemy made a final attempt to subdue Malta by heavy daylight bombing attacks. He had mustered about 600 aircraft for the operations, and according to a German radio announcement his intention was "to keep the British squadrons grounded and to deny access to the port of Valetta". During these attacks the enemy changed his tactics by increasing his fighter escorts and decreasing the number of bombers, but these tactics proved unsuccessful. This is demonstrated by the fact that at the peak of the "blitz" (between 11 and 19 October) there was only one night when Malta aircraft did not carry out

/shipping

(1) See SECTION IV, Page 359.

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escorted by a destroyer and one JU.88 and one Cant.Z.1007. The Beaufighters attacked first with 250 lb. bombs, scoring a hit on the Istria's stern; they also raked the destroyer with machine-gun and cannon fire. The Beauforts then attacked and obtained three torpedo hits on the Istria which blew up. Meanwhile the Beaufighters destroyed the Cant. and damaged the JU.

Ibid:

On 30 August, four Beauforts (of No.39 squadron) with an escort of eight Beaufighters, five of which carried bombs, (all of No.227 squadron) attacked the 5,077-ton tanker Sanandrea and her escort of one destroyer, one Cant.Z.501 and several JU.88's and MA.202's. The aircraft located this convoy about 10 miles east-south-east of Ugento (in the "heel" of Italy), the Beaufighters opening the attack by dropping six 250 lb. bombs and raking the Sanandrea and the destroyer with cannon and machine-gun fire. The Beauforts then dropped four torpedoes, scoring a direct hit on the Sanandrea which blew up in flames. The Beauforts and Beaufighters also damaged the Cant. and destroyed one MA.202 and probably destroyed two JU.88's and damaged a third.

A.H.Q. Med:  
O.R.B. Sep.,  
Appx. "B"

Meanwhile, the Malta Spitfires had prevented the enemy day-bombers from attacking the island, and the torpedo-bombers and fighter-bombers were therefore able to develop their attacks on the Axis shipping to Libya under favourable conditions. During September, the enemy was forced to use the easterly supply route, via Taranto or Brindisi, and the Western coast of Greece, thereby keeping as far away as possible from Malta and giving his ships the advantage of shelter and concealment provided by the Ionian Islands, and of taking refuge, when necessary, in Grecian harbours. Moreover, his ships began to make use of the narrow corridor between the southern Pelopennesse and the coast of Cyrenaica where they were out of effective range of the R.A.F. Beauforts operating either from Malta or Egypt. Nevertheless, in spite of these deployments by enemy shipping, the Malta aircraft scored several successes, three merchant vessels being sunk or beached and others compelled to turn back or to put into European harbours. In every daylight torpedo and bombing attack the enemy convoys and their escorts were also subjected to machine-gun and cannon fire by the escorting Beaufighters which destroyed two enemy aircraft, probably destroyed one other and damaged three more. A feature of the month was the employment of Wellington VIII's (of No.69 squadron) and the increasing number of attacks on enemy convoys carried out by night. In

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Tables of Ops.  
(AHB. II  
J1/31/1)  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol.4; List  
from Enemy  
source of  
Italian  
merchant  
ships sunk.

addition to attacks by the Beauforts and Wellingtons, the Swordfish and Albacores of the R.N.A. squadron carried out three attacks. These operations included an attack on the night of 2/3 September when a flare-carrying Swordfish and two (torpedo) Albacores sighted a 5,000-ton merchantman escorted by two destroyers and a flak-ship, 15 miles north-east of Cape Spartivento. The merchant ship was hit by two torpedoes, one abaft the funnel and one abaft the bridge, and was left down by the stern and pouring out clouds of smoke.<sup>(1)</sup> On the next day a reconnaissance aircraft found this vessel beached some 3½ miles south-east of Locri. Two Albacores (one torpedo and one bomber) attacked it (on the night of 4/5 September) and scored a torpedo hit on the port quarter: a direct bomb hit was also scored on a destroyer which was standing by. Photographs showed that the merchantman had a large hole blown in her star-board side.<sup>(2)</sup>

/On

- (1) The torpedoes were released from 70 feet at a range of 600 yards.
- (2) This was officially assessed as 'sunk'. (It is not mentioned in the List from enemy sources).

On the morning of 6 September an enemy convoy of two 7,000-ton merchantmen and one of 4,800 tons (the S.S. Ankara) with an escort of eleven destroyers and a patrolling force of six MA.200's and six JU.88's, was sighted sailing south-east towards the Grecian coast. A striking force of nine Beauforts (of No.39 squadron) and eleven Beaufighters -- six carrying bombs -- (of Nos.89 and 227 squadrons) intercepted this convoy some 30 miles south of Cape Santa Maria di Leuca. Five of the Beaufighters attacked the escorting aircraft and the six others dropped 12 x 250 lb. bombs - scoring several near misses - and raked the merchant ships and destroyers with machine-gun and cannon fire. Meanwhile the Beauforts scored one direct and one possible torpedo hits on one of the merchant vessels which resulted in a large column of smoke.<sup>(1)</sup> Later reconnaissance reported that only three merchant ships and ten destroyers remained in the convoy, and on 9 September the missing merchant ship was photographed beached south of Arilla Bay near Corfu. One Macchi 200 was destroyed and two others and one JU.88 damaged. In the meantime, on the night of 7/8 September, three Wellingtons (of No.69 squadron) were sent to attack the three remaining ships of this convoy which had continued on its course. They found one large merchant ship, one smaller merchant ship and three destroyers, some 50 miles north of Cape Amer, and dropped 12 x 500 lb. bombs, several of which fell within a few yards of the larger vessel, but the results were not observed.<sup>(2)</sup>

Ibid: and  
A.H.Q., Med.  
Q.R.B. Oct.  
Appx. "B".

In October, night attacks on enemy shipping were made by seventeen Wellingtons, six Swordfish and seven Albacores and three Beaufighters made a daylight attack on a merchant vessel. Hits with torpedoes or bombs were obtained on nine ships four of which were sunk.<sup>(3)</sup> No aircraft were lost during these night attacks.

The most successful of these operations occurred on the night of 28/29 October against an enemy convoy sighted by a Baltimore on reconnaissance patrol off the coast of Greece. At 22.17 hours a (torpedo) Wellington (of No.69 squadron) found the convoy consisting of the 2,550-ton tanker Luisiano and a merchant ship, escorted by two destroyers, 23 miles south-west of Sapienza. The Wellington attacked and scored a hit on the merchant ship.<sup>(4)</sup> At 21.17 hours a second Wellington arrived: it found no trace of the merchant ship, and attacked the Luisiano (which was flying a barrage balloon) setting it on fire from stem to stern.<sup>(5)</sup> Next morning a reconnaissance aircraft found nothing except wreckage, oil streaks and the half-submerged barrage balloon.<sup>(6)</sup>

The daylight operation by the Beaufighters was made on 14 October when three of these aircraft (of No.227 squadron) attacked a 1/2,000 merchant vessel escorted by one destroyer, off the coast of Tripoli. The Beaufighters attacked at mast height but two of them were shot down before they reached the target. The third dropped two 500 lb. bombs and fired with cannon and machine-gun but no results were seen. The survivors of one of the crashed Beaufighters were picked up by the destroyer which, it may be mentioned, was guided to the spot by one of the P.R.U. Spitfires.<sup>(7)</sup>

/Malta's

- (1) This was officially assessed as damaged. (Two of the M.V's and the Ankara were from Taranto: they had joined the third M.V. which had sailed from Brindisi)
- (2) This was officially assessed under Category IV.
- (3) One of these four ships, the S.S. Titania (5,397 tons) was hit by a torpedo from F.A.A. aircraft and then sunk by a submarine.
- (4) This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
- (5) This has been confirmed from enemy sources as sunk.
- (6) The Wellington was captained by P/O. Matthews. (The torpedo was released from 70 feet at a range of 1,000 yards).
- (7) The Italians here showed a commendable sense of humanity.



SECRET

G.A.F. Activities in the Med. 1941-1943 (AHB.6. Translation No. VII/II)

shipping strikes, and on that particular night no enemy shipping passed within range of Malta's aircraft. Most of the raids were intercepted and broken up out to sea north of the island. By 15 October it was estimated that the enemy had lost 80 aircraft destroyed, of which 40 were bombers, and he then began to reduce the number of twin-engined bombers, interspersing them with bomb-carrying ME.109's. According to an enemy source, on 18 October the German C.-in-C., Southern Area, forbade any further day attacks by JU.88 formations, even with fighter cover, because of the heavy losses in bombers. This was the turning point of the German air campaign in the Mediterranean area, the strength of Malta's defences being superior to the Luftwaffe's offensive powers.

Ibid: and A.H.Q. Med. O.R.B. Oct. Appx. "A"

Meanwhile, the enemy's day attacks were continued by fighter-bombers (in 'tip and run' raids) so as to give all possible assistance to the Axis North African supply routes. These raids persisted until 29 October, and on that day a further reinforcement of Spitfires from Gibraltar landed safely on the island in spite of half-hearted efforts by the enemy to intercept them.

G.A.F. Activities in the Med. 1941-1943 (AHB.6. Translation No. VII/II)

At the end of October, the Supreme Commander of the Luftwaffe ordered the destruction of the Malta airfields within a period of eight days, with the following force:-

	<u>Estimated No.</u> <u>of aircraft</u>
6 bomber Gruppen	180
1 torpedo-carrying Gruppe	30
4 fighter Gruppen	120
1 Stuka Gruppe	30
1 fighter-bomber Staffel	9
Total	<u>369</u>

The German C.-in-C. Southern Area, at once pointed out that according to their previous experience it was not possible to effect complete destruction of the airfields, and that only the occupation of Malta could provide a decisive answer. However, the attacks on the airfields were made, but within one week the Allied landings in North Africa (Operation "Torch")<sup>(1)</sup> necessitated the switching of the Luftwaffe from Malta to that theatre.

A.H.Q. Med. O.R.B. Oct. and Ibid: Appx. "A"

The Axis losses in these attacks on Malta were estimated as being 118 aircraft destroyed, 50 probably destroyed and 137 damaged, the Axis losing about fifteen aircrew for every British pilot lost. It is little wonder that experienced German pilots who had been made prisoners of war admitted to a general distaste among the Luftwaffe personnel for flights over Malta during the October "blitz".

/THE

(1) See A.H.B. Narrative - MALTA.



THE EASTERN BASIN

Meanwhile, the retreat of the Eighth Army to Alamein (at the end of June) had resulted in the withdrawal of the larger Naval units from Alexandria to Syrian ports, and a corresponding backward movement of the R.A.F. squadrons. The retreat had deprived the Allies of many of the landing-grounds used heretofore by the medium and heavy bombers of No.205 Group and the Western Desert Command, and the Wellington bombers were thus forced to move back to the Suez Canal zone with refuelling grounds on the Alexandria road, while the R.A.F. and U.S. "Halpro" Liberators - augmented by the arrival of some Halifaxes from the U.K. - moved back to Palestine. This meant that the twin-engined Wellingtons could only reach Tobruk, but the four-engined Liberators and Halifaxes could still operate as far as Benghazi.

Increased striking power of the R.A.F.

The R.A.F.'s striking power was by now considerably increased by the development of A.S.V. tactics for locating and attacking enemy shipping, and also by the development of long-range night torpedo attacks. The Wellingtons of No.38 Squadron, after their period of training and experiment in the early part of the Summer<sup>(1)</sup> had become proficient in this technique, and the night searching and striking force was paying good dividends after a long period of trial and error.

No.201 (N.C.) Group

With the exception of the medium and heavy bomber attacks on Tobruk and Benghazi<sup>(2)</sup> the air/sea war in the Eastern Basin was mainly carried on by the Squadrons of No.201 (N.C.) Group, as heretofore. This Group was also affected by the retreat to Alamein, its Headquarters being moved back to Ismailia on 1 July but an Advanced H.Q. being kept at Alexandria. Meanwhile this Group had been augmented by a Free French (Nancy) Flight of Bisleys.<sup>(3)</sup> In addition to its own squadrons the Group could call upon bomber squadrons of No.205 Group and the Western Desert fighter squadrons if and when required.<sup>(4)</sup>

/In

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. July

Ibid:  
No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B's and  
A.H.Q. M.E.  
Tables of  
Ops.  
(AHB. II J1/  
31/1)

- (1) See SECTION IV, page 370.
- (2) See sub-section PORT BOMBING - pages 458 et seq. infra.
- (3) This Flight ceased to operate in the Middle East on 6 Sept.
- (4) In this connection, Nos.252 and 272 sqns. (Beaufighters, based at Edku) had been temporarily placed under No.252 Wing (of No.211 Grp., Western Desert Command): they were, however, frequently called upon for operations by No.201 Grp., and by the end of August they again came under No.201 Grp. In August, No.38 sqn. (Wellingtons) was placed under No.201 Grp., and on 1 Sept. this Grp. assumed control of a new sqn. -- No.458, R.A.A.F. (Wellington VIII's) -- which was transferred from No.205 Grp. On 6 Sept. No.47 sqn. (Wellesleys) also came under No.201 Grp. In October, two Wings -- Nos.247 and 248 -- of No.201 Grp. (which till then had been non-effective) -- were allotted certain units and became operational. By 15 October the composition of No.201 Grp. (whose H.Q. had been moved back to Alexandria) was as follows:-

/NO. 201 GROUP

(Footnote contd.)

(Footnote No.4 contd. from previous page)

NO. 201 GROUP -- ALEXANDRIA

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
No.1 G.R. Unit	Ismailia	Wellington D.W.I.	Mine-sweeping	
No.5 M.E.T.S.	Shallufa	Beaufort/Wellington (T.B.)	Suez Canal (Training)	Torpedoes
No.15 Sqn. S.A.A.F.	Mariut	Blenheim V (Bisley)	Light bomber	Det: at Kufra (under No.203 Group)
No.47 Sqn.	Shandur	Beaufort I	G.R.	Det: at St.Jean with Wellesleys
No.203 Sqn.	L.G.206	(Blenheim IV/V (Baltimore I/II/III)	G.R.	Det: at Gianac- lis (247 Wing)
No.230 Sqn.	Aboukir	Sunderland D.O.22	G.R.	Det: at Alex- andria
No.252 Sqn.	Edku	Beaufighter IC/IV	Fighter	Day - Coastal
No.272 Sqn.	Edku	" "	"	" "
No.459 R.A.A.F. Sqn.	L.G.208	Hudson III	G.R.	Dets: at St. Jean and Aden
No.700 sqn. F.A.A.	Beirut	Walrus	G.R.	Control - C-in-C. Med: thro' 201 Grp.
Sea Rescue Flight	L.G.206	(Wellington/Various) (& Fairchild Ambulance)	Sea Rescue	
<u>No.235 WING</u>	<u>ST.JEAN: BEIRUT</u>		<u>NAVAL CO-OPERATION</u>	<u>(DET: AT LATAKIA)</u>
No.13 (Hellenic) sqn.	(Gaza East) (L.G.376)	Blenheim IV	G.R. & A.S.	
No.47 sqn. Air Echelon	Shallufa	Wellesley	G.R.	
No.459 sqn. R.A.A.F. Det:	St. Jean	Hudson III	G.R.	
<u>F. A. A. SQUADRONS</u>				
No.815 sqn.	Dekeila	Swordfish	G.R.	Det: at Gaza East L.C.376. Control C-in-C. Med: thro' 201 Grp.
No.821 sqn.	Dekeila	Albacore	Shipping Strike	" " " "
No.826 sqn.	El Biria	Albacore	" "	" " " "
<u>No.247 WING</u>	<u>GIANACLIS</u>		<u>NAVAL CO-OPERATION</u>	
No.203 sqn. Det:	Gianaclis	(Maryland/Baltimore) (Blenheim IV/V)	G.R.	
No.221 sqn. Det:	Gianaclis	(Wellington IC) (Liberator II)	Torpedo bomber	
<u>No.248 WING</u>	<u>SHALLUFA</u>		<u>NAVAL CO-OPERATION</u>	
No.38 sqn.	Shallufa	(Wellington T.B. (Wellington IC/VIII)	Torpedo bomber	
No.39 sqn.	Shallufa	None on Mayfly	Torpedo bomber	(Some a/c shown on Malta Mayfly)
No.221 sqn.	L.G.211	(Wellington VIII/IC) (Liberator II)	A.S.V./T.B.	
No.458 sqn., R.A.A.F.	L.G.211	Wellington VIII	Medium bomber	Dets: at Gianaclis, 247 Wing & at Malta.

No.235 Wing  
O.R.B. July

In the meantime it was anticipated that the Axis Powers would switch their submarine activities from the North African coast to the Levant, in consequence of the Eighth Army's retreat to Alamein. It was therefore decided that No.235 Wing (operating under No.201 Group) should move into the Levant area and take over the anti-submarine air protection of our convoys sailing between Alexandria, Haifa, Beirut, Tripoli (Syria) and Farmagusta (Cyprus). Accordingly, on 7 July, No.235 Wing Headquarters moved to St. Jean aerodrome (near Acre) (1). It was arranged that this Wing should have operational control of No.13 (Hellenic) squadron (based at Gaza) No.700 squadron, F.A.A. (based at Beirut), No.47 Air Echelon (based at St. Jean), the Free French Flight (based at Rayak) and detachments from other squadrons of No.201 Group as might be required for routine work or special operations, the two chief squadron detachments being from No.221 (A.S.V. Wellingtons) and No.203 (Blenheims) (2). A detachment from the Wing -- known as No.235 Wing Advanced -- was sent to Beirut to strengthen the liaison with the Royal Navy by contact with the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Beirut, and the Senior Naval Officer, 10th Submarine Flotilla, and also to assume control of No.700 squadron F.A.A.

#### Operations of No.201 Group and No.235 Wing

##### 1. Attacks on Enemy Shipping

A notable feature during July and August was the smashing of the enemy's attempt to run supplies along the coast from Tobruk to Mersa Matruh (the nearest landing point to his front line at Alamein) by means of "F"-boats. These vessels could carry tanks and mechanised vehicles in addition to supplies of all sorts, and troops; (3) they were usually accompanied by "flak" vessels and protective aircraft. But these precautions were often unavailing, the most persistent damage being done to the "F"-boats by No.201 Group's Beaufighters and A.S.V. Hudsons. The latter aircraft -- armed with 100 lb. bombs -- used to reconnoitre the coast before dawn, and having found their quarry, attack from the dark side during the first few minutes of half-light. The Beaufighters, also armed with 100 lb. bombs, and the Bisleys (of No.15 squadron, S.A.A.F.) carrying 250 lb. bombs, carried out daylight attacks on the "F"-boats, and night attacks were made upon these craft by Swordfish and Albacores of the F.A.A., also armed with bombs.

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. July

A.H.Q.M.E.  
Tables of Ops.  
(A.H.B.II.  
J1/31/1)

The operations by the Beaufighters included an attack on some barges and schooners in the coastal waters of Ras El Rum to Sidi Barrani, on 25 July, by six of these aircraft (of Nos.252 and 272 Squadrons). One barge was set on fire and sunk and another was hit repeatedly, but it appeared to have an armoured deck with a Breda gun placed amidships. On 1 August, eight Beaufighters (of No.252 Squadron) on an offensive coastal sweep between Mersa Matruh and Sidi Barrani attacked four enemy "F"-boats, one of which blew up and another was set on fire. The same day two other Beaufighters (of the same squadron) on an offensive sweep between Mersa Matruh and Tobruk attacked two small vessels but without visible results. Later on, two more Beaufighters of this squadron attacked an enemy "F"-boat, causing a heavy explosion in the rear superstructure of the vessel which was seen listing heavily to starboard. On 7 August, five Beaufighters (of No.272 Squadron) on patrol off Mersa Matruh attacked three enemy barges of which one was severely damaged. Meanwhile, the Hudsons (of No.459

/Squadron)

- Ibid:
- (1) H.Q. No.235 Wing shared the St. Jean airfield with No.242 Wing but had its own accommodation and operations rooms.
  - (2) The remainder of No.203 sqn. was equipped with Marylands and Baltimores.
  - (3) An "F"-boat could carry about as much cargo as 150 three-ton trucks.

Squadron) made many coastal sweeps. On 9 August, one of the Hudsons, on a search from Cape Azzaz to the Ishaila rocks, attacked six enemy "F"-boats, dropping seven 100 lb. bombs from only 25 feet which straddled five of these vessels; two hits were claimed on the rearmost "F"-boat which was left smoking.

## 2. Attacks on Enemy Land Communications

The Beaufighters were not only employed on "barge-strafting"; on several occasions they switched their attacks on to the enemy's columns of trucks along the coast road. On 25 August, eight Beaufighters (of No.272 Squadron) attacked enemy heavy traffic on the Mersa Matruh - Sidi Barrani section of the road. Two large trucks, drawing trailers, and three lorries were set on fire and others were hit and badly damaged, and many casualties were inflicted on enemy personnel. The next day, the Beaufighters attacked three eastbound lorries and three stationary lorries, west of Mersa Matruh: one of the moving lorries was overturned and was left smoking, and one of the stationary lorries was set well on fire.

These land attacks by the Beaufighters - although giving good results - could not in fact be expected to effect any considerable stoppage of the enemy's supplies. On the other hand, the attacks on small enemy ships and barges proved to be a very real hindrance to the supply line, and, in this connection the following points were made:-

File 58694.  
23A

- (a) A ship or "F"-boat sunk was a total loss whereas an M.T. vehicle pierced by machine-gun fire could be repaired.
- (b) Small ships and barges were more easy to approach and to hit than lorries, and could be more easily taken by surprise.
- (c) Although bombing attacks on M.T. vehicles had a cumulative moral effect on the enemy, comparatively little material damage was caused in relation to the effort expended.

## 3. Operation "Chocolate"

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. July  
Appx. "B"

Meanwhile the enemy's possession of all coastal landing-grounds west of the Alamein line had precluded the striking force of the F.A.A. Albacores (on account of their short range) from operating against the enemy's Crete - Tobruk shipping. A solution to this problem appeared to be some method of utilising one of the former advanced landing-grounds where the Albacores could alight and re-fuel before making their strike. Accordingly, No.201 (N.C.) Group decided to find a landing ground south of the enemy positions and far to the west of the main battle area, as the enemy was believed to be concentrated along the coastal areas only. Air reconnaissances showed that landing-ground 126 was the most suitable for this purpose: its use would entail three hours flying from L.G. 100 to L.G. 126 and it was estimated that the intended force of ten Albacores (of No.826 Squadron) to make a shipping strike would require 1,500 gallons of Octane petrol and 60 gallons of Shell 100 oil. For this purpose, six Bombays were provided by Air Headquarters, Middle East, which were to carry the fuel, R.A.F. personnel<sup>(1)</sup> and spares, and also one company of

/troops

(1) i.e. one fitter, one rigger and one W/T operator.

troops who were to secure the landing-ground during the process of re-fuelling.

The operation (known as "Chocolate") was carried out successfully on 9/10 July after Marylands of No.203 Squadron searching for enemy shipping had sighted an enemy convoy south-west of Crete. Owing to the difference in speed of the Albacores and Bombays and that the latter had only sufficient petrol to go straight to L.G. 126 and back, it was decided to send these two forces separately. Accordingly the Bombays took off about 15 minutes after the Albacores, and both forces met in the vicinity of L.G.126 but could not locate the landing-ground. They therefore landed on a suitable piece of ground and refuelled, as arranged, before darkness set in. At 01.40 hours (10 July) the ten Albacores took off to attack the convoy, but only four of them located the target which they found between 04.10 and 04.25 hours. Two possible hits were claimed on a 5,000 ton merchantman and near misses on two other merchantmen of 14,000 and 8,000 tons respectively, and on one unidentified vessel.<sup>(1)</sup> Of the remaining Albacores, one had developed engine trouble and returned to base (Dekeila), one attacked the alternative target, Tobruk harbour, starting a fire, and the other four aircraft having searched for the convoy to the limit of safe fuel endurance, were therefore forced to jettison their torpedoes and return to base. Meanwhile the Bombays, having collected their ground party and obliterated all traces of their visit, also returned to their base.

Operation "Chocolate" demonstrated that the temporary use at night of a southerly desert landing ground, far behind the enemy's most eastern forces, was a practical and valuable operation, and could be employed for striking forces ordinarily out of range of enemy shipping routes. At the same time there would be considerable risk of the refuelling and striking forces failing to find each other unless they could proceed in formation. The A.O.C. No.201 Group suggested to the A.O.C.-in-C. that the possibility of using the landing-ground at Siwa for further operations of this nature should be considered, from which, he felt, Squadrons of Albacores and also Beauforts could operate. It was considered, however, that such an operation would be too hazardous "in view of possible enemy intentions".<sup>(2)</sup>

File 58694  
22A

Ibid:  
(Note by Dy.  
A.O.C-in-C?)

Official  
Account of  
Air Ops.,  
M.E., Feb.  
'42 to Jan.  
'43.

Meanwhile, the R.A.F. day-bombing of enemy raids over the land battle had reached a peak when the Luftwaffe tried for the first time to interfere. On 3 July the enemy aircraft were repulsed with heavy losses, eleven out of thirteen Stukas being shot down by a South African Hurricane squadron, after "dog-fights" all over the sky between strong formations of ME.'s and Macchi's and the R.A.F. fighters. By a happy coincidence, the promotion of the A.O.C.-in-C., Sir Arthur Tedder, to Air Chief Marshal was gazetted in London on that day - a circumstance which gave a remarkable fillip to the R.A.F. personnel who felt that this represented a token that their work was appreciated by the Home Country.<sup>(3)</sup>

/4.

- R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vol.3.
- (1) These were officially assessed under Category IV.
  - (2) This suggestion was made on 19 July - nine days after Op. "Chocolate" - and circumstances affecting such a proposition were liable to alter as the fighting continued.
  - (3) On the same day the Sec. of State for Air signalled his congratulations to A.C.M. Tedder, adding "All here have the greatest confidence in you, your staffs and your squadrons .....you are writing a glorious page in the history of the Royal Air Force."

4. Operation "Agreement" (Raids on Tobruk and Benghazi)

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea", Vol.III

On the night of 13/14 September, raids were made on Tobruk and Benghazi with the object of holding these ports for twelve hours while shipping, harbour facilities and supplies were destroyed, thereby interrupting the enemy's traffic for a short period at a critical stage of his supply problem.

Ibid: and  
No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Sep.

The raid on Tobruk was carried out by combined Naval and military forces -- under cover of R.A.F. protection and diversionary bombing<sup>(1)</sup>. The attack on Benghazi was made by a military force of 200 men from Kufra: no Naval units participated but the R.A.F. assisted, as at Tobruk, with diversionary bombing.<sup>(2)</sup>

Both these attacks failed to achieve their purpose and heavy losses were sustained.

The Naval units in the Tobruk operation comprised the destroyers Sikh and Zulu carrying 350 Royal Marines, the A.A. cruiser Coventry (escorted by destroyers as far as 27° east) and eighteen Motor Torpedo Boats and three Motor Launches which carried 200 troops. The naval force was not to be finally committed to the operation until a bridgehead south of Tobruk had been seized by a force of 100 men advancing overland across the Desert from Kufra.

Aircraft of No.201 (N.C.) Group co-operated by carrying out reconnaissances to cover the possible intervention of enemy surface forces, and by providing anti-submarine protection to the Naval units. During the preliminary stages two Sunderlands (of No.230 squadron) gave anti-submarine protection to the Coventry and four destroyers which left Port Said on the night of 12/13 September for Tobruk, while one Bisley (of No.15 squadron S.A.A.F.) escorted six other destroyers which sailed from Alexandria to rendezvous with the Coventry. On 13 September, these combined Naval forces were escorted by three Bisleys until 17.00 hours, and Wellingtons (of No.201 squadron) continued the escort throughout the night. Meanwhile, twelve Beaufighters (of Nos.252 and 272 squadrons) were employed as fighter protection until dark.

During the night the military force penetrated the Tobruk perimeter and by 01.20 hours it had captured gun positions outside the south end of the harbour for the Motor Torpedo Boats and launches to enter and disembark their troops. Unfortunately, the "success" signal was not received by the majority of the M.T.B's and only two of them landed troops. While these operations were in progress, H.M. cruiser Dido and five destroyers carried out a diversionary bombardment of the Daba area, under cover of two Bisleys. Swordfish (of No.815 squadron F.A.A.) gave anti-submarine protection and three Albacores "spotted" for the Naval gunnery and dropped flares over the target. At the conclusion of the bombardment the warships returned to Port Said without incident.

Meanwhile the Sikh and Zulu, which were engaged in landing the Marines north of the town, were picked up by enemy searchlights and heavily fired on by the shore batteries, the Sikh being disabled (at 05.30 hours) and eventually scuttled or blown up. The Zulu was forced to retire out of range and the Coventry and eight destroyers -- which were returning to Alexandria -- turned back to

/her

(1) & (2) See sub-section PORT BOMBING, page 461 infra.

her assistance. Several attacks were made on the warships by enemy bombers and at 11.20 hours a force of about fifty aircraft attacked the Coventry which was set on fire and abandoned and had to be sunk by the Zulu. Some hours later the Zulu was struck by a bomb and sunk. During these attacks the R.A.F. Beaufighters made thirty sorties to protect the ships: they claimed one JU.88 and one JU.87 as probably destroyed and four JU.'s damaged, and they forced several of the enemy bombers to jettison their bombs.

Ships Casualty List,  
(Admiralty Historical Section)

In addition to the loss of the Coventry, Sikh and Zulu, four M.T.B.'s and two M.L's were sunk.

#### 5. Attacks on Enemy Convoys

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Aug.

Apart from the "barge-strafting" attacks by the Beaufighters, No.201 (N.C.) Group's Wellingtons were employed in strikes on enemy convoys whenever an opportunity arose. On the night of 16/17 August, three A.S.V. Wellingtons (of No.221 squadron) took off from their base at L.G.226 to locate and illuminate an enemy convoy off the Libyan coast, for a striking force of ten Wellingtons (of No.38 squadron). The convoy comprising four ships, was located in position 33° 27' north, 23° 29' east, and flares were dropped by the A.S.V. Wellingtons and a sighting report was sent and "homing" procedure commenced. The striking force reached the target, but owing to thick cloud visibility was very restricted and three of the Wellingtons, observing gun flashes from enemy ships in the vicinity, proceeded to bomb them.

Ibid: and  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping  
Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vol.3

One direct hit was claimed with a 1,000 lb. bomb (dropped from 4,000 feet) on a light which resulted in an explosion, and near misses were observed on other vessels.<sup>(1)</sup> Another Wellington saw three destroyers and attacked the near-most one, but the bomb fell wide. On the return journey another Wellington dropped two bombs on an enemy gun position at Ras El Daba which was firing at him, but results were not seen. The remaining aircraft brought their bombs back to base.

Ibid:  
Sep. and  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping  
Ops.(Merchant)  
Vol.4

A successful attack on an enemy convoy occurred on 3 September; at 15.00 hours on that day a Maryland of No.203 Squadron observed a southbound enemy convoy comprising three merchantmen and four destroyers, south-west of Crete. Three Beauforts (of No.39 Squadron) escorted by four Beaufighters (of No.252 Squadron) took off to attack this convoy but failed to find it. However, a force of eight Beaufighters (of Nos.252 and 272 Squadrons), which had been sent to attack the convoy's escort to cover the Beauforts' torpedo attack, located the convoy and shot down an escorting HE.111K. On the return journey a Beaufighter attacked three Fiesler Storchs, one of which was destroyed and the others probably destroyed. During the night, three A.S.V. Wellingtons and two A.S.V. Liberators (of No.221 Squadron) and six torpedo and two bomber Wellingtons (of No.38 Squadron) took off to attack the convoy which they sighted some 50 miles north-west of Tobruk. One merchantman was hit and split in two by the Wellington's torpedoes, another merchantman was sunk by H.M. Submarine Thrasher (which had been "homed" by one of the A.S.V. Wellingtons)<sup>(2)</sup>, and two other merchant vessels were set on fire by the torpedo Wellingtons.<sup>(3)</sup> At dawn, seven Hudsons (of No.459 Squadron) were

/sent

List from  
enemy sources  
of Italian  
merchant  
ships sunk.

- (1) These were officially assessed under Category IV.
- (2) The sinking of these two ships (the Davide Bianchi - 1,477 tons, and the Padenna - 1,589 tons) has been confirmed from enemy sources.
- (3) These were officially assessed as "severely damaged".

sent to attack the remnants of the convoy but found only two ships ablaze, and three hospital ships engaged in rescuing survivors. The Hudsons located and attacked one destroyer, by low level bombing, which was set on fire. A later reconnaissance showed one merchantman on fire and almost submerged<sup>(1)</sup> and, another vessel stationary and on fire.

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Sep.  
& Oct.

During September and October, shipping searches and strikes by aircraft of No.201 (N.C.) Group were of almost daily occurrence, interspersed with "barge", "road" and (railway) "train strafing" operations by the Beaufighters of Nos.252 and 272 Squadrons. On 6 October, a successful attack was made by three of the Beaufighters on the sea-plane base at Bomba: some twelve enemy 3-engined sea-planes were attacked, one of which caught fire, and six others were damaged. The following day (7 October), four of the Beaufighters (of the same squadron) renewed this attack on Bomba sea-plane base; four Cants moored in the water were shot up and also one other on the slipway. The Beaufighters then attacked enemy traffic on the Gazala road, setting a lorry and a petrol bowser on fire and leaving another lorry and trailer smoking. The Beaufighters next attacked five enemy camps and a parade of troops, inflicting 50 casualties. On their return flight the Beaufighters sighted eight fully laden "F"-boats escorted by two Macchi 202's, about 10 miles north of Sidi Barrani. One Beaufighter "strafed" the leading "F"-boat, scoring several hits which caused it to alter course violently. During this operation a Macchi attacked one of the Beaufighters causing slight damage; all the aircraft returned to base.

No.252 Sqn.  
O.R.B. Oct.

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Oct  
and Ibid:  
Appx "B" and  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol.4;  
List from  
enemy sources  
of Italian  
merchant ships  
sunk

One of the most successful series of operations against an enemy convoy occurred on 25/26 October during the battle of Alamein. By this time the enemy was badly short of many things, particularly fuel, owing to weeks of incessant R.A.F. air attacks on his shipping. Much depended on a convoy of two merchant ships (one carrying petrol) and the 4,869-ton tanker Proserpina, escorted by four destroyers, which was discovered late in the afternoon of 25 October by No.201 (N.C.) Group's reconnaissance aircraft, sailing south from Italy for Tobruk. Four separate striking forces took off in succession to attack this convoy, guided by a series of reconnaissance flights. The first striking force of nine torpedo-Wellingtons (of No.38 squadron) one bomber Wellington (of No.458 squadron) and six A.S.V. Wellingtons (of No.221 squadron) attacked the convoy during the night, four torpedoes and one stick of 100 lb. bombs being released, but only a near miss (by the stick of bombs) being obtained. Next morning (26 October) the day reconnaissance aircraft re-located the convoy and kept it under observation, and by the early afternoon the convoy was about 18 miles north-west of Tobruk and within range of No.201 (N.C.) Group's day striking force comprising eight torpedo-Beauforts (of No.47 squadron) and five Bisley low-level bombers (of No.15 squadron S.A.A.F.), escorted by nine Beaufighters (of Nos.252 and 272 squadrons). The convoy was escorted by two JU.88's and three single-engined fighters, serving as top cover. The striking force pressed home the attack, the tanker Proserpina being hit by a torpedo and by four 250 lb. bombs; a heavy explosion resulted, followed by sheets of flame and smoke and she afterwards sank. The larger merchant ship appeared to have been hit by bombs as smoke was seen rising from it immediately after the attack.<sup>(2)</sup> During the attack, one of the Bisleys collided with the tanker's mast and crashed into the sea.

/A

(1) This was probably the Alba Chiara (1,245 tons) stated to have sunk 24 miles from Ras el Tin (i.e. approx. 30 miles from Tobruk on 5 Sept.)

(2) This was officially assessed under Category IV.



A second force of five Beauforts and eight Beaufighters<sup>(1)</sup> failed to locate the convoy, but the Beauforts sighted a large barge about 15 miles north-east of Tobruk, which they attacked with torpedoes but no results were observed. Meanwhile, the Beaufighters intercepted five HE.111's, destroying two, probably destroying another and damaging two others.

There was now some anxiety about the convoy; the tanker was believed to have sunk, but the two merchant ships were presumed to be still on their way to Tobruk (although the larger one was thought to have been damaged). A force of eighteen U.S. Liberator bombers was sent to attack these ships, both of which they located. Two hits were claimed on one of the ships but the result was not known.<sup>(2)</sup> By this time the evening was drawing on and three torpedo Wellingtons (of No.38 squadron) took off and located and attacked the two merchant ships at dusk, just outside the entrance to Tobruk harbour. Several torpedoes struck the larger ship which exploded with great violence, a huge column of smoke rising to 3,000 feet.<sup>(3)</sup> During the night a fourth striking force of three torpedo and two bomber Wellingtons was sent out but found only the tanker still blazing fiercely from end to end, with intermittent explosions. There was no trace of the smaller ship which may have been sunk by the U.S. bombers.

Ibid: and  
No.38 sqn.  
O.R.B. Oct.

The destruction of this convoy was a severe blow to the enemy who urgently needed the fuel and supplies which it was bringing.<sup>(4)</sup> The R.A.F. losses during the operations were six aircraft; the crew of one of these was saved.<sup>(5)</sup>

Meanwhile, the enemy's losses to his convoys and supply ships had resulted in his endeavouring to ferry supplies by air from Greece via Crete. On 25 October, a force of thirty-three transport aircraft (JU.52's), escorted by six ME.110's, was attacked by eight Beaufighters (of No.272 squadron) about 75 miles north by west of Tobruk. The Beaufighters shot down four of the JU.52's and severely damaged two others.

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B., Oct.

Three days later (28 October) the land and air battle of Alamein reached its zenith, and it was probably on that day that the victory was decided, although the conflict continued furiously during the next few days. Meanwhile it had become more necessary than ever for the enemy to get further supplies into Cyrenaica. The fate of the convoy to Tobruk (above described) decided him to try Benghazi, and on 28 October -- while the land battle was at its height -- a tanker and a supply ship sailed south from Italy. They were attacked by Malta aircraft, the tanker being sunk and the supply ship severely damaged.<sup>(6)</sup>

/On

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Oct.  
Appx. "B"

- (1) Of No.39 sqn. and Nos.252 and 272 sqns.
- (2) This was officially assessed under Category IV.
- (3) This was the M.V. Tergestea (5,890 tons).
- (4) A.C.M. Tedder signalled to the A.O.C., No.201 Grp. (A.V.M. Slatter) as follows:- "My sincere congratulations on the destruction of the enemy convoy yesterday night under the noses of his shore defences. It was a magnificent example of sheer courage, tenacity and determination to kill".
- (5) Of these losses, one was the Bisley that crashed in the first attack, and another Bisley and a Beaufighter collided on the return flight from the first attack. The other three aircraft lost were shot down by A.A. fire from the ships and in combat.
- (6) See pages 438 & 439 supra.

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Nov.;  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol.4; List  
from enemy  
sources of  
Italian mer-  
chant ships sunk

No.38 sqn.  
O.R.B. Nov.

No.47 sqn.  
O.R.B. Nov.

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Nov.  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol.4; List  
from enemy  
sources of  
Italian  
merchant  
ships sunk.

Nos.39 and  
272 sqns.  
O.R.B.'s Nov.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. Oct.  
Appx. 'H'

On the night of 31 October/1 November the enemy tried again: this time it was Tobruk, for even if a fuel convoy got into Benghazi there was not sufficient time to transport the petrol to the battle area either by road or by barge over the much longer distance from Benghazi. The S.S. Tripolino (1,464 tons) and the S.S. Ostia (348 tons), believed to be laden with petrol, were sent from Crete under cover of night, escorted by two destroyers. When they were within 38 miles of Tobruk they were attacked by a striking force from No.201 (N.C.) Group comprising two A.S.V. Wellingtons (of No.221 squadron), six torpedo Wellingtons (of No.38 squadron) and one bomber Wellington (of No.458 squadron). The destroyers laid a smoke screen round the two ships but one of the Wellingtons found a gap (illuminated by the A.S.V. Wellingtons which were carrying flares) and released two torpedoes at the Tripolino which blew up and sank immediately.<sup>(1)</sup> The Ostia was also attacked but results were not observed. At dawn, three Beauforts (of No.47 squadron) sent to attack the Ostia found her and the destroyers some 25 miles from Tobruk. One of the Beauforts scored a direct torpedo hit on this ship which completely disintegrated.<sup>(2)</sup>

In normal circumstances the enemy would probably have waited for a few days before making another attempt, but Rommel's need for petrol was too urgent for further delay, and on the following night (1/2 November) a third convoy, sailing from Crete, was sighted by A.S.V. Wellingtons (of No.221 squadron), 10 miles south-west of Gavdos Island. The convoy comprised the S.S. Brioni (1,987 tons) and Zara (1,976 tons) with escorting destroyers. Three other destroyers were also reported at 02.45 hours (2 November), 60 miles south-south-east of Gavdos Island. A force of torpedo and bomber Wellingtons (of Nos.38 and 458 squadrons) was sent to attack the convoy but only sighted the destroyers which they attacked, claiming hits with 100 lb. bombs and a near miss with a 1,000 pounder. Later, five Beauforts (of Nos. 39 and 47 squadrons) were sent to make a dawn attack on the convoy but only the destroyers were sighted and no attack was made. A further striking force of six Beauforts (of No.39 squadron) escorted by seven Beaufighters (of No.272 squadron) eventually found the convoy north-north-west of Tobruk; it was covered with an air escort of two ME.110's, two JU.88's and four MA.'s. The Beaufighters drove off these aircraft while the Beauforts attacked the merchant ships which were torpedoed and set on fire and ultimately sank.<sup>(3)</sup> During the attack one Beaufort was shot down by A.A. fire, the crew escaping into their dinghy; one other Beaufort and one Beaufighter were missing. One JU. was destroyed, and one probably damaged.

This was the last enemy convoy which tried to enter Tobruk. In the month before the Eighth Army's offensive began at Alamein, it was believed that only one supply ship had got into Tobruk harbour, and that during a period of six weeks not a single tanker managed to reach Tobruk, due to the efforts of the R.A.F. and the submarines of the Royal Navy.

The successful efforts of No.201 Group's squadrons in attacking enemy shipping and destroying the convoy on the night of 26/27 October evoked the following signal (on 29 October) from the Eighth Army's Commander to Air Chief Marshal Tedder:-

/ "I

- (1) Sgt. McNall captained the successful Wellington (The torpedoes were released at a range of 500 yards).
- (2) P/O Pile captained this Beaufort.
- (3) Four torpedoes were released, two from 70/80 feet at ranges of 800 yards, and two from 50/60 feet at ranges of 1,000 yards.

"I would like to express my very sincere thanks for the way in which 201 Group are assisting to make easier the task of the 8th Army. Recent attacks carried out against enemy ships so vital to his effort were a wonderful achievement. I would be grateful if you would convey to those responsible our gratitude for operations carried out which must be epics in attacks against ships at sea".

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B's  
July - Oct.

#### 6. Reconnaissance and Anti-Submarine Operations and Patrols

During the period under review, anti-submarine operations were carried out by Sunderlands of No.230 Squadron, Blenheims of No.13 (Hellenic) Squadron, Wellesleys of No.47 Air Echelon, Hudsons of No.459 Squadron, R.A.A.F., and Walrus and Swordfish aircraft of Nos.700 and 815 Squadrons (F.A.A.). These Squadrons made continuous patrols and searches of the coastal waters, the Walrus (based at Beirut) and the Wellesleys (based at St. Jean) patrolling the coasts of Palestine and Syria, the Hudsons patrolling the Delta area and the other Squadrons operating from Port Said to Sidi Barrani and Sollum. On occasion, Blenheims of No.203 (G.R.) Squadron undertook anti-submarine patrols off the coast of Palestine and over the Delta, in addition to their general reconnaissance duties. A.S.V. Wellingtons of No.221 Squadron and Bisleys of the Free French "Nancy" Flight gave anti-submarine protection to our convoys along the Palestinian coast as and when required, and Bisleys of No.15 Squadron, S.A.A.F., made offensive searches for submarines in addition to their reconnaissances for enemy surface shipping and their attacks upon land transport vehicles and railway trains.

Rommel's advance, which pushed the Eighth Army back to Alamein, brought about a change in the enemy's submarine policy. Prior to July, the U-boat effort was mainly against the British western supply routes, but thereafter the enemy submarines began to be in evidence in the Levant area. The U-boats generally operated singly, confining their attacks to the night-time. However, comparatively few British ships were sunk in the Mediterranean by U-boats between the end of May and the end of October. During that period the R.A.F. made over sixty attacks on U-boats; they also co-operated in other attacks made by Naval units, which claimed eight U-boats destroyed and three damaged.

The anti-submarine policy of No.201 (N.C.) Group was necessarily affected by the number of aircraft which it had available for the purpose. Considerable economy was effected in reconnaissance searches by maintaining a series of standard patrols carried out by all operational aircraft flying between coastal landing-grounds.

It was found impossible to provide close anti-submarine escorts for all convoys by day and by night, but when areas in which U-boats were operating could be accurately forecasted by the Navy's Intelligence branch, aircraft at once concentrated thereon. If a U-boat was sighted it was chased continuously up to forty-eight hours by aircraft co-operating with Naval surface units.

The above procedure was shared by No.201 (N.C.) Group's aircraft and those of No.235 Wing. The development of this combined effort - which worked in close association with the Naval C.-in-C's staff - became one of the most important factors in this category of activity in the Mediterranean.

Between 1 July and 1 November, aircraft of No.201 (N.C.) Group and No.235 Wing accounted for (a) one submarine destroyed,

/(b)

(b) one probably destroyed and (c) several others damaged. The circumstances of (a) and (b) were as follows:-

No.201 Grp.  
O.R.B. July

- (a) On 11 July, a Walrus (of No.700 Squadron, F.A.A.) attacked the Italian U-Boat Ondina which had been sighted by the destroyer Protea and H.M.S. Southern Seas, some 40 miles north-west of Beirut. The Protea dropped depth-charges over the U-boat which surfaced after these had exploded and the Walrus then dropped two 250 lb. depth charges from a height of forty feet. The depth charges straddled the U-boat abaft the conning tower, one hitting the conning tower on the starboard side and the other falling a few feet from the port side. Five men were on deck when the attack took place and were rescued - with other survivors - by H.M.S. Protea when the U-boat sank.<sup>(1)</sup>

Ibid:  
Aug.

- (b) On 26 August a Wellesley (of No.47 Squadron Air Echelon) on anti-submarine escort duty to a convoy some 20 miles north-west of El Arish (Egypt), sighted the wake and the periscope of an Italian U-boat. The Wellesley attacked with four 250 lb. depth-charges (from only fifteen feet) which exploded each side of, and about twenty feet ahead of, the apex of the U-boat's swirl. When the resulting explosions had subsided a large air bubble appeared and thereafter other air bubbles were seen rising continuously from a patch of water 50 x 15 feet.<sup>(2)</sup>

Ibid:  
Aug. & Oct.

Italian U-boats believed to have been damaged included the following:- an attack by a Swordfish (of No.815 Squadron, F.A.A.) on 4 August, 30 miles north-north-east of Alexandria; an attack by a Swordfish (of the same Squadron) on 18 August, 80 miles north-east of Port Said; an attack by an A.S.V. Wellington (of No.221 Squadron) on 22 August, 80 miles west of Tyre; and an attack by a Blenheim (of No.13 Hellenic Squadron) on 14 October, 20 miles north-west of Tyre.<sup>(3)</sup> In addition to these attacks, an Italian U-boat was probably damaged on 25 August by a Bisley (of No.15 S.A.A.F. Squadron), some 50 miles north-west of Port Said, while carrying out an anti-submarine patrol between Cape Brulos and Port Said,<sup>(4)</sup> and another Italian U-boat was probably sunk on the following day by a Wellesley (of No. 47 Squadron Air Echelon) between Port Said and Gaza.<sup>(5)</sup>

No.235 Wing  
O.R.B., Aug:

#### Enemy Air Attacks on Alexandria, the Delta and Suez Canal Areas

A.H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B. Appcs.  
(Op.  
Summaries)

During July, the enemy made intermittent raids and reconnaissances over the Delta and Canal areas. On the night of 2/3 July, about fifty enemy aircraft operated against the El Imayid-Alexandria area and the Canal. Bombs were dropped along the Canal near Amirya where the landing-ground was also machine-gunned. Six night-fighter Beaufighters (of Nos.46 and 89 Squadrons)<sup>(6)</sup>

/took

#### (Final Assessment: of A.M.C.O.12/1946 Enemy Submarine Casualties)

Admiralty  
Monthly Anti-  
Sub. Report  
CB.04050/43(8)

- (1) This was officially confirmed as sunk.
- (2) This was officially assessed as "probably sunk".
- (3) These were all officially assessed as "probably damaged(B)"
- (4) This was officially assessed as "probably slightly damaged."
- (5) This was officially assessed as "probably sunk".
- (6) Of No. 250 Wing, Ismailia (under Air H.Q. Egypt).

took off to intercept but failed to contact the raiders owing to dense low cloud. On the nights of 5/6 and 6/7 July, a few enemy aircraft operated against the Canal area: one raider was shot down by the Beaufighters, west of Cairo, and another was probably destroyed.

A further raid was made on the night of 4/5 July by a force of between thirty-five and forty enemy aircraft over the Alexandria area and the Canal zone. Bombs were dropped at Port Said, Suez and Alexandria where a warehouse was destroyed and some casualties occurred. Night-fighter Beaufighters went up on patrol and shot down a JU.88 and an HE.111, north-east of Alexandria: three other enemy aircraft were shot down and one was damaged, off Port Said.

Occasional reconnaissance raids were made -- chiefly by JU.88's: on the night of 25/26 July, four Spitfires (of No.601 Squadron)(1) shot down one of these aircraft and probably destroyed another, west of Alexandria, and the following night a Spitfire intercepted and shot down a JU.88 reconnoitering over Alexandria. Those reconnaissance raids were followed by bombing attacks on the nights of 27/28, 28/29 and 29/30 July, during which damage was caused to buildings in the Canal area and at Heliopolis, and several casualties occurred. The night-fighter Beaufighters shot down one HE.111 and damaged another, and also destroyed a Cant. Z. 1007.

Ibid:

In August, the enemy raids were chiefly of a reconnaissance nature, made by JU.86's flying at heights up to 45,000 feet which made interception difficult. On 24 August, a JU.86 reconnoitred the Delta area at about 42,000 feet: Hurricanes (of No. 94 Squadron)(2) attempted to intercept but were unable to gain sufficient height, but a Spitfire (on a test flight) chased the raider out to sea for 80 miles and got in several bursts at close range which set its engine on fire.

A few enemy bombing raids were made during this month, including an attack on the night of 24/25 August when five enemy aircraft bombed and machine-gunned a landing-ground south of Alexandria, causing slight damage. A Hurricane (of No.73 Squadron)(3) intercepted a JU.88 and shot it down near Burg El Arab.

Ibid:

During the first week of September, the enemy made several raids against the R.A.F. landing-grounds in the Alexandria area. On the night of 4/5 September, about eighty enemy aircraft operated against the Amrya area: the night-fighter Beaufighters shot down a JU.88 and two Cant. Z.1007's. On the night of 7/8 September, enemy aircraft dropped bombs in the vicinity of Heliopolis, Shallufa and Faiyom: night-fighter Beaufighters shot down two JU.88's, west of the Delta, and severely damaged one unidentified aircraft over the Canal zone.

In the following week the enemy turned his attention to the area round Cairo. On 11 September, about six ME.109's made a machine-gun attack at mid-day on a landing-ground and a military camp west of that city: one training aircraft was shot down and two others were destroyed on the ground, and several casualties to personnel occurred. Two Hurricanes (of No.127 Squadron)(4)

/intercepted

(1) Of No.243 Wing, Kilo. 8, Suez Road (under No.211 Grp., Western Desert Command)

(2) Of No.250 Wing.

(3) Of No.243 Wing.

(4) Of No.244 Wing, Helwan (under No.211 Grp., Western Desert Command)

**SECRET**

intercepted the raiders and shot down one ME.109, while another was probably destroyed by A.A. fire.

The night of 26/27 September was marked by a low-level bombing and machine-gun attack by some nine enemy aircraft (believed to have been JU.88's) on the aerodrome at Heliopolis: some damage was caused to barrack buildings, and bombs also fell near military hospitals and a camp near Cairo, causing slight damage and a few casualties. The night-fighter Beaufighters on patrol failed to intercept successfully. During the same night about six enemy aircraft attacked the landing-grounds south-west of Alexandria: one of these aircraft forced-landed near Amrya its crew of four being captured. In the morning (27 September) three ME.109's made a low level machine-gun attack on a landing-ground south-west of Cairo and shot down a Boston which was about to land. That night (27/28 September) four enemy aircraft (believed to have been HE.111's) operated over the Gulf of Suez, probably laying mines. The night-fighter Beaufighters went up on patrol and shot down one of the raiders, south of Cairo.

Ibid:

In October, there were desultory raids on the Delta area; these included an attack on the dockyard at Alexandria on 1 October by three ME.109's, but no damage was caused; Spitfires (of No. 92 Squadron) on patrol did not sight the enemy. Next day a JU.88 returning from a reconnaissance of the Burg El Arab area was intercepted north-west of Alexandria by No.92 Squadron Spitfires and shot down into the sea. In the evening, four ME.109's escorted by five other aircraft bombed a landing-ground near Burg El Arab from a height of 12,000 feet, but no damage was caused.

On the night of 26/27 October, about twelve enemy aircraft dropped bombs in the Alexandria, Amrya and Burg El Arab areas, causing slight damage: a night-fighter Beaufighter intercepted a CR.42 which went into a vertical dive, after being hit, and was probably destroyed.

#### Operations of No. 1 G.R. Unit, Ismailia

No.1 G.R.  
Unit O.R.B.  
July

At the beginning of July - when the Eighth Army had been pushed back to Alamein - it was anticipated that the enemy might make mining raids on the Suez Canal, and in response to a signal from the C.-in-C., Mediterranean, three D.W.I. Wellingtons (and one in reserve) of No.1 G.R. Unit, Ismailia, were ordered to stand by ready for such an emergency. During the enemy raid on the night of 2/3 July<sup>(1)</sup> some mines were dropped over a section of the Canal between Kilo.82 and Kilo.94. At 11.00 hours (3 July) the D.W.I. aircraft began a systematic sweep of this area of the Canal which was divided for this purpose into three sections. As each sweep took place, stationary Naval craft "pulsated". The sweeps were mainly of an exploratory nature to ensure that no finely set mines<sup>(2)</sup> had been dropped, but no mines were exploded during the "runs" of the D.W.I. aircraft. That night (3/4 July) the enemy made another mining raid, this time over the southern end of the Canal. Some fifty mines were dropped during the two raids, of which fourteen fell into the Canal. For the next fifteen days the D.W.I. Wellingtons -- in co-operation with the Navy -- carried out mining sweeps.

Ibid:

At this stage of the War it was not possible to close the Canal completely to shipping until all mines had been dealt with; moreover, it was found that the enemy was dropping mines fitted with

/ "clocks"

(1) See page 453 supra

(2) Finely set mines would become "live" immediately they were dropped.

"clocks" which allowed a delay-action setting of anything up to 80 days. The role of No.1 G.R. Unit therefore became of an exploratory and precautionary nature; intensive morning sweeps were carried out to ensure that if mines had become "live" overnight they would be destroyed, and it was considered that this procedure justified the risk in passing ships through the Canal as soon as the sweeps were completed.

Ibid: Aug:  
Sept. & Oct.

During August, September and October, no enemy mining raids were made on the Canal; meanwhile the D.W.I. aircraft carried out routine sweeps at intervals. On 10 October the control of No. 1 G.R. Unit was transferred from Air Headquarters, Egypt, to No.201 Group.

### PORT BOMBING

#### A. FROM MALTA

The enemy's heavy air attacks on Malta in July - which continued intermittently during August and September until the final "blitz" in October<sup>(1)</sup> - precluded bombing attacks from the island on the enemy's ports. Moreover, there were only some four or five Wellingtons (of Nos. 38 and 221 Squadron detachments) at Malta and, on occasion, bombers in transit to the Middle East, which were available for such operations.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
O.R.B.  
Appos.  
(Op. Summaries)  
and  
Table of Ops.  
(A.H.B. II  
J1/31/1)

During July, the harbour and railway area at Messina were attacked on the nights of 7/8 and 14/15 by a single Wellington with 500 lb. bombs, but results were not observed. No other ports were bombed from Malta throughout the period under review, although in August, in connection with Operation "Pedestal", strategic bombing of the aerodromes at Camiso, Decimomannu, Pantellaria Island and Catania was carried out by a single Wellington and two Liberators in transit to the Middle East. Until the enemy had been smashed at Alamein (during the end of October and the first week in November) the R.A.F. at Malta had, perforce, to bide its time before it could renew its bombing effort against the enemy's ports and bases.

#### B. FROM EGYPT

At the beginning of July, while the Eighth Army was stabilising its position at Alamein and the enemy was endeavouring to break through its lines, the long-range bomber squadrons of the Western Desert Command - in co-operation with Liberators and Fortresses of the U.S. Air Force - were engaged in almost nightly attacks on Tobruk, varied by some heavy blows at Benghazi. The R.A.F. and U.S. Liberators and the R.A.F. Halifaxes (lately arrived from the United Kingdom) - although based as far back as Palestine - could reach Benghazi, while the medium Wellington bombers, operating from the Suez Canal Zone, were able to reach Tobruk by re-fuelling en route between their base and Alexandria.

/For

(1) See page 440 supra.



SECRET

For the defence of Tobruk the Germans had moved in the heaviest A.A. barrage that had yet been seen in the desert. They had assembled a large number of weapons and their gunners had had considerable practice during their service in Africa and they shot with considerable accuracy. During one of the first attacks on Tobruk a Wellington, which had been detailed to drop sixteen flares to illuminate the target, remained in the barrage for well over an hour during which time it made sixteen separate "runs", its pilot considering that the illumination would be much more effective if the flares were dropped singly over carefully selected points, instead of being dropped in groups of four at a time which was the normal procedure. The Wellington was hit during its first and most of its succeeding "runs", but it succeeded in returning to its base.

A.M.O. Ops.  
(Personal  
Telegrams)  
II J1/64,  
Pt. II, 2535

The vital importance of denying the use of Tobruk and Benghazi was emphasized by the Vice-Chief of the Air Staff to Air Chief Marshal Tedder. In a signal (dated 11 July) he stressed that as it was more difficult to stop enemy convoys getting to North Africa a "more determined effort" would have to be made to close the terminal ports. He stated that this would call for "sustained and heavy bombing" of these two ports "on the greatest scale of which your forces are capable". While fully realising the importance of the targets close behind the enemy's land battle front, the V.C.A.S. enjoined Air Chief Marshal Tedder to make "the fullest use of your resources in long range and medium bombers to destroy the facilities at Benghazi and Tobruk".

Ibid:  
(unnumbered)

In his reply, Air Chief Marshal Tedder pointed out that enemy supplies were his main pre-occupation and that he was doing everything possible to interrupt them both at sea and in port. He informed the V.C.A.S. that towards the end of June and the early part of July there had been a very large number of effective sorties against both Tobruk and Benghazi which coincided with "the most critical days of the Eighth Army's retreat when Wellington attacks on enemy columns contributed very considerably in checking the enemy's advance". But he did not consider that it was possible to close Benghazi with the heavy bomber forces at his disposal, and he pointed out that although during the past year the R.A.F. had twice blown up ammunition ships in Benghazi harbour, this had not had the effect of closing that port. He stated however, that he would continue "to direct the maximum heavy and medium bomber force against enemy supplies of which Benghazi and Tobruk and to a lesser extent Matruh are the focal points" although he felt it unwise to neglect night attacks on enemy concentrations and columns in the battle area "since all evidence goes to emphasise the value of 24 hour bombing in reducing enemy resistance and will to fight".

The outcome of these signals were further intensified bombing attacks on Tobruk and Benghazi and some attacks on Mersa Matruh. During July, Tobruk was attacked in force more than thirty times: these attacks were usually made at night but sometimes by day, while seven attacks were made on Benghazi by heavy-bomber formations. The attacks on Tobruk continued almost without intermission during August and September, and did not cease until the end of October when the Eighth Army had begun its historic advance from Alamein. This task of the R.A.F. was thus summed up in an order issued by the Bomber Commander: (1) "Tobruk and Benghazi harbours are the front and back doors through which the enemy is getting his supplies. The front door is being slowly closed to him - there must be no back door".

/On

(1) Air Cdre. A.P. Ritchie, A.F.C.



Air H.Q.,  
M.E. O.R.B.  
Appcs. (Op.  
Summaries)  
and  
Tables of  
Ops.  
(AHB.II  
J1/31/1)

On the night of 4/5 July, Liberators of the U.S.A.A.F. and No.159 Squadron, (1) R.A.F., attacked shipping and harbour installations at Benghazi; bombs burst on the Juliana mole and two ships lying south-west of Juliana Point were hit. The next attack on Benghazi was made on the night of 8/9 July by the U.S. and R.A.F. Liberators, but details of damage were not observed. During the same night U.S. Fortresses and Wellingtons (of Nos. 37, 104 and 148 squadrons) (2) attacked shipping and harbour facilities at Tobruk with 1,000 lb. and 500 lb. bombs, starting four or five fires in the dock area and other fires accompanied by explosions near the fuel tank depot. One of the Wellingtons failed to return. On the next night the Wellingtons attacked Tobruk and started large fires at the tank repair depot and on the base of the oil pipe-line jetty, and also at the power house. Other fires broke out near the fuel storage tanks, the flames being still visible when our aircraft were 70 miles distant on their return flight. This attack was repeated on the following night (10/11 July) by Wellingtons of the same squadrons augmented by those of Nos. 40, 70, 108 and 162 squadrons. (3) A probable hit was obtained on a ship in the harbour (4) and large fires and explosions occurred in the dock area. One Wellington bombed the satellite aerodrome at El Gubbi starting two fires amongst grounded aircraft.

U.S., and R.A.F. Liberators (of No.159 Squadron) attacked Benghazi at dusk on 11 and 13 July with 1,000 lb. and 500 lb. bombs. During the second of these attacks two ships in the harbour were hit and set on fire, (5) and one of the three sunken wrecks (which the enemy had converted into landing-stages by concreting them to the jetties) was also hit. One of the Liberators was shot down by A.A. fire, three of its crew escaping by parachute. Two days later the Liberators repeated the attack, starting a fire at the base of the Central mole; one Liberator was shot down.

One of the most successful attacks on Tobruk occurred during the afternoon of 17 July when four U.S. Liberators and four R.A.F. Liberators (of No.159 Squadron) attacked shipping and harbour installations with 1,000 lb. and 500 lb. bombs (totalling 20 tons) from 13/14,000 feet. The R.A.F. Liberators claimed direct hits on petrol storage tanks which resulted in violent explosions followed by fires and columns of black smoke which were visible for 75 miles. Meanwhile the U.S. aircraft scored a hit on a 10,000 ton merchant ship and a medium sized tanker which was set on fire (6); a small motor vessel was also hit. This attack was followed soon after mid-night by a force of some forty Wellingtons (of Nos. 37, 40, 70, 104, 108 and 162 Squadrons) which added to the flames by dropping 250 lb. bombs and incendiaries. A second large fire, accompanied by explosions, was started near a concentration of transport vehicles north-west of the harbour; accurate A.A. fire was encountered and a number of enemy searchlights were in operation.

Ibid:

The bombing attacks on Tobruk were interspersed with occasional mine-laying operations in the harbour. On the night of 20/21 July - while Wellingtons, (7) Halifaxes (8) and U.S. Fortresses

/carried

R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vol.3

- (1) Of No.292 Wing, (205 Grp.).
- (2) Of Nos.231 and 236 Wings, (205 Grp.).
- (3) Of Nos.231 and 238 Wings, (205 Grp.) and A.H.Q. Egypt.
- (4) This was officially assessed under Category IV.
- (5) These were officially assessed as "severely damaged".
- (6) These were officially assessed under Category IV.
- (7) Of Nos.108 and 148 Squadrons.
- (8) Of No.76 Squadron. These aircraft and the U.S. Fortresses carried 1,000 lb. bombs.

**SECRET**

carried out diversionary bombing on the docks and jetties - five torpedo Wellingtons (of No. 38 Squadron) dropped ten parachute mines in the harbour from heights of 5,500 to 7,500 feet. This procedure was repeated on the night of 22/23 July when three torpedo Wellingtons (of the same squadron) dropped six parachute mines in allotted areas while bombers attacked the harbour. The mine-laying aircraft encountered accurate A.A. fire directed by nine searchlights.

Ibid:

Meanwhile the smaller Cyrenaican ports had also been attacked on several occasions by light and medium bomber aircraft. On the night of 17/18 July, twelve Albacores (of No. 826 Squadron, F.A.A.) attacked shipping in Mersa Matruh harbour, by dive-bombing from 4,000 to 1,500 feet and dropping 500 lb. and 250 lb. bombs and incendiaries. A large petrol fire was started near the shore and some explosives occurred in the town. While this attack was in progress, Blenheims (of No. 14 Squadron) dropped 250 lb. bombs on the harbour jetties. The attack by the Albacores was repeated on the following night by five Albacores (of No. 821 Squadron F.A.A.) while three other Albacores illuminated the harbour. In the meantime four Blenheims (of No. 14 Squadron) had bombed the tank workshops from 7,000 to 5,000 feet - some hours earlier. Other attacks on Mersa Matruh included mine-laying by No. 38 Squadron Wellingtons on the night of 20/21 July, and further bombing attacks by the Albacores and Blenheims. On the night of 27/28 July, twelve Bostons (of No. 24 Squadron, S.A.A.F.) bombed the harbour and barracks with 250 lb. bombs and incendiaries from heights of 3,000 to 10,000 feet. One fire was started in a building on the south-west edge of the harbour, and three fires accompanied by explosions were started near the barracks; a direct hit was scored on a gun position. One aircraft received slight damage from A.A. fire. This attack was repeated on the two following nights by Albacores and Bostons, and on seven nights in the first week of August (including further mine-laying by the torpedo Wellingtons). Heavy, but inaccurate A.A. fire was encountered during these operations.

In addition to the attacks on Mersa Matruh the ports of Bardia, Bomba and Sollum were bombed on several occasions, and mines were laid in Sollum harbour.

Ibid:

Meanwhile, with a view to interrupting enemy supplies via Crete, six R.A.F. Liberators (of No. 159 Squadron - carrying 500 lb. bombs) were briefed to attack shipping at Suda Bay at dusk on 21 July. Two of the Liberators made this attack and registered a near miss on a ship, but the other four aircraft, owing to fighter opposition and lack of cloud cover, attacked (the secondary target of) Heraklion, their bombs falling in the harbour area and scoring a direct hit on a jetty which caused an explosion followed by a column of smoke. The Liberators encountered heavy and accurate A.A. fire at Suda Bay, but that of Heraklion was inaccurate.

Ibid:

During August, the main weight of the allied port bombing was directed against Tobruk, more than 1,600 sorties being made in 31 large raids. On the night of 31 July/1 August, Halifaxes<sup>(1)</sup>, R.A.F. Liberators<sup>(2)</sup> and Wellingtons<sup>(3)</sup> bombed shipping, harbour and petrol installations at Tobruk, from heights varying from 11,000 to 7,000 feet. A hit was scored on a large merchant ship near the south side of the harbour, and another ship nearer the shore was set

/on

(1) Of No. 76 Squadron.

(2) Of No. 159 Squadron.

(3) Of Nos. 37, 40, 70, 108, 148 and 162 Squadrons.

on fire. Large fires and explosions were started along the waterfront near the main jetties, and one fire near the petrol storage tanks north-east of the harbour, while a number of bombs burst near gun positions. Considerable A.A. fire was encountered and one Halifax and one Wellington failed to return. On the same night, Wellingtons, (of No. 104 Squadron) bombed Mersa Matruh, starting small fires among the barrack buildings.

Ibid:

Official  
Account of  
Air Ops., M.E.  
Feb. 1942 -  
Jan. 1943

Similar attacks on Tobruk were repeated night after night. On two occasions U.S. and R.A.F. Liberators made dusk attacks, carried out from a great height, the crews using oxygen and having to contend with intense cold. During one of these operations the oxygen mask of a gunner froze, just when the aircraft was approaching the target. The gunner fell unconscious on to the floor and the mask was torn from his face. His life was saved by the navigator, who filled his mouth from an emergency bottle and, putting his lips on those of the unconscious gunner, blew the oxygen into his lungs.

Air H.Q.,  
M.E., O.R.B.  
Apps. (Op.  
Summaries)  
and Table of  
Ops. (A.H.B.  
II J1/31/1)

During a dusk attack on Benghazi by the U.S. Liberators on 9 August, a merchant ship lying at the Central mole was hit: (1) other bombs burst on the Central, Cathedral and Outer moles. Meanwhile the Wellingtons continued their nightly attacks on Tobruk, in which the Halifaxes and Liberators participated. On the night of 9/10 August, Halifaxes (2), Liberators (3) and Wellingtons (4) bombed shipping and harbour installations starting fires and explosions among the docks near the main jetties, and causing a number of explosions among a group of transport vehicles, and silencing an A.A. battery.

Ibid:

During this month (August), Mitchells of Nos. 81, 82 and 83 Squadrons U.S.A.A.F. (carrying 500 lb. bombs) began to be employed in bombing raids. On the night of 16/17 August, Mitchells (of No. 81 Squadron) bombed the harbour of Mersa Matruh while F.A.A. Albacores illuminated the target with flares. A number of fires started at the tank repair workshops: one of the Albacores was lost.

On the night of 22/23 August, Mitchells (of No. 82 Squadron) bombed the tank workshops at Mersa Matruh, causing an explosion and a fire, while a Wellington illuminated the target with flares. Meanwhile, just before dark, U.S. and R.A.F. Liberators attacked shipping and harbour installations at Tobruk, obtaining bomb burst on one of the jetties and sinking a small launch: one Liberator failed to return.

Ibid:

One of the heaviest attacks on Tobruk was made on the night of 28/29 August when Halifaxes, R.A.F. Liberators and Wellingtons bombed the harbour and shipping. Hits were scored on three ships, two of which were set on fire, (5) and large fires were started among the docks and the naval fuel tanks. One of the Wellingtons failed to reach Tobruk and bombed Sollum, causing a fire and an explosion.

#### Rommel's Last Attack

Meanwhile, since the beginning of August, the desert had been fairly quiet. The two armies faced each other on a line south from Alamein while the opposing air forces flew as little

/as

R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vol. 3

- (1) This was officially assessed under Category IV.
- (2) Of Nos. 10 and 76 Squadrons.
- (3) Of No. 159 Squadron.
- (4) Of Nos. 37, 38, 40, 70, 104, 108, 148 and 162 Squadrons.
- (5) These were officially assessed under Category IV.

as possible so as to build up their strength. Then on the night of 30/31 August, Rommel launched his final attack with the full force of the "Afrika Korps". But as soon as his panzers began to advance they were heavily bombed by the Wellingtons many of which flew double sorties, while by dawn Bostons, Baltimores and U.S. Mitchells (escorted by Spitfires, Kittyhawks and Tomahawks) attacked enemy concentrations in the southern section of the front. The fighting went on all through the day, but the Allies' aircraft were hampered by a great sand storm which blotted out the airfields while those of the enemy were clear. During the succeeding nights the Wellingtons continued to bomb the enemy's armour and transport vehicles: they were most ably assisted in their attacks by the F.A.A. Albacores which flew on ahead of the Wellingtons and illuminated the targets with flares. The work of the Albacores was described as a "magnificent" achievement: it was recognised by Air Chief Marshal Tedder in a signal to the C.-in-C., Mediterranean, asking that the Albacore squadrons (Nos. 821 and 826) should be congratulated; "There is no doubt" he wrote, "that these continuous night attacks were one of the decisive factors in crushing the enemy attack."

By 5 September the enemy's attacks had been repulsed: the Luftwaffe which had often put up formations of a hundred aircraft at a time, had lost between fifty and sixty for certain (and many more probably destroyed and damaged), and the "Afrika Korps" had suffered severe losses in armour and M.T. vehicles. Rommel's attempt to beat the Eighth Army and capture Egypt had utterly failed, fundamentally owing to the continued interruption by the allied air forces of his supply lines coupled with the continuous attacks on his ports before the battle began, and secondly from the effect on the morale of his troops from incessant bombing during the progress of their assault.

#### Heaviest Bombing Attacks on Tobruk and Benghazi

Air H.Q., M.E. O.R.B. Apps. (Op. Summaries) and Table of Ops. (A.H.B. II J1/31/1)      Meanwhile, during the height of the battle, the U.S. and R.A.F. heavy bombers continued their nightly bombardment of Tobruk. Their heaviest attack was made on the night of 13/14 September during operation "Agreement".<sup>(1)</sup> While the Naval and Military units were making a landing, a force of fourteen Halifaxes (of No.462 Squadron R.A.A.F.), sixty-two Wellingtons (of Nos. 37, 38, 40, 70, 104, 108 and 162 Squadrons) and five U.S. Fortresses attacked the harbour installations. Violent explosions were caused and large fires were started at the naval fuel tanks and the petrol installations north-west of the harbour. The fierce conflagration which ensued caused a pilot of a heavy bomber (returning from a simultaneous raid on Benghazi)<sup>(2)</sup> to report that when he flew over Tobruk one fuel tank was "glowing and pulsating like a big red orchid". At the beginning of this attack the whole of the Tobruk barrage was firing furiously, but when the last of our bombers withdrew only three guns were firing, wildly and intermittently; the remainder had been silenced by the bombing.

Official Account of Air Ops. M.E. Feb. 1942 to Jan. 1943.

Air H.Q., M.E. O.R.B. Apps. (Op. Summaries) and Table of Ops. (A.H.B. II J1/31/1)      On the night of 15/16 September, a further raid was made on Tobruk, and on the following day (16 September) the R.A.F. and U.S. Liberators raided Benghazi in the second of a series of attacks which were outstanding in the history of air raids on that city. The bombers took off during the morning from near Cairo and flew in close formation until they reached Benghazi. They had to dispense

/with

(1) See page 447 supra.

(2) This raid on Benghazi was made by U.S. R.A.F. Liberators (of No.159 Squadron) (damage could not be observed owing to low cloud and ground haze).

with fighter protection for their 1,200 miles flight as none of the fighters had sufficient range to reach the target. At mid-day the bombers reached Benghazi harbour where some ships were off-loading on to the sunken wrecks ("George", "Harry" and "Johnny"). A 6,000 ton supply ship was hit and set on fire<sup>(1)</sup> and two of the converted wrecks were hit.

This raid was repeated at dusk on 22 September by U.S. Liberators, and some hours later (in darkness) by R.A.F. Liberators. In the dusk attack one ship alongside the Outer mole and another ship off-loading on to "Harry" were hit and set on fire, the second vessel (the M.V. Apuania - 7,949 tons which was probably carrying petrol or ammunition) blowing up with a violent explosion.<sup>(2)</sup> The force of this explosion broke "Harry" from the Cathedral mole (to which she had been cemented) and overturned "Johnny" on to her port side; it also sank two smaller vessels and a converted wreck (known as "Ink"), and burnt out another ship lying on the far side of the Cathedral mole. When the R.A.F. Liberators arrived they found the harbour still partly obscured by smoke from the fires started by the U.S. Liberators. The bombs from the R.A.F. Liberators completed the destruction of the shipping in the harbour and of the off-loading facilities. The effect of this series of attacks certainly halved the value of Benghazi as the "back door" to Cyrenaica for the stores which Rommel so urgently needed after the failure of his assault at the beginning of the month.

Meanwhile the Halifaxes and Wellingtons had continued their nightly attacks on Tobruk. On the night of 30 September/1 October, the Wellingtons claimed a direct hit on a medium sized merchant ship outside the harbour loom, while other bombs burst near some ships inside the harbour.<sup>(3)</sup> Three of the Wellingtons were unable to reach Tobruk and bombed objectives near Fuka and Sollum: two aircraft failed to return from these operations. For the next few days the bombers were employed on enemy shipping strikes at sea, and they then re-visited Tobruk. On the night of 11/12 October the Wellingtons<sup>(4)</sup> started a large petrol fire -- visible for 100 miles -- in the stores dispersal area near the El Gubbi satellite landing ground. A direct hit was scored on a gun position and other bombs burst near gun and searchlight positions at the southern end of the harbour, starting several fires. Two Wellingtons, which were unable to reach Tobruk, bombed Sollum but the results were not observed. Meanwhile ten Wellingtons (of Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons) dropped mines in the harbour.

A week later (19 October) saw the real beginning of the battle of Alamein when a force of Baltimores and U.S. Mitchells (escorted by Spitfires and Kittyhawks) raided the landing-ground at Daba, starting a large fire and destroying several grounded aircraft, and bombing M.T. vehicles, tents and gun positions. Then, on the night of 23/24 October, the Eighth Army began its assault, supported by a large force of Wellingtons (and flare-carrying Albacores) which bombed the enemy's lines and played havoc with his ammunition dumps, gun positions and M.T. vehicles. From that night until the end of the battle the bombers were engaged in similar operations over the battle area, and when (on 4 November) the enemy began his retreat -- which quickly developed into a disordered flight -- the intensive bombing of Benghazi and Tobruk was temporarily suspended.

/GIBRALTAR

R.A.F. Anti-  
Shipping Ops.  
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- (1) This was officially assessed as "damaged"
- (2) These were officially confirmed as "damaged" and "sunk", the sinking of the Apuania being confirmed by enemy sources. (List from enemy sources of Italian merchant ships sunk).
- (3) These were officially assessed under Category IV.
- (4) Of No.37 Sqn. (Wellingtons of Nos.70, 108 and 148 sqns. - also took part.

SECRET

GIBRALTARSpheres of R.A.F. Activities, Malta and Gibraltar

Coastal  
Cmd:  
S.15,350,  
98A

Ibid:  
104A, 106A

In June, the A.O.C.-in-C., Coastal Command (A.C.M. Joubert de la Ferte) visited Gibraltar and reported that the activities of the R.A.F. Gibraltar in the Western Mediterranean suggested the need for the definition of a boundary between the operational spheres of the R.A.F. Malta and Gibraltar. The Air Ministry agreed and (after consultation with the Admiralty) it was decided that a boundary line should be fixed at 07°31' east.

Erection of Fighter Aircraft for Malta

"Flying from  
the Rock"

During July, the R.A.F. Gibraltar undertook considerable activities for the assistance of the R.A.F. Malta, by arranging to assemble the much needed fighter aircraft for that island which were to be brought by sea from the United Kingdom. The distance from the U.K. to Gibraltar precluded anything except long range aircraft from making this journey by air, and the method employed was to send crated aircraft to Gibraltar and fly them from there to Malta (or from aircraft carriers at some point between Gibraltar and Malta). This method necessitated the erection of these aircraft at Gibraltar, and accordingly arrangements were made to assemble them at the North Front aerodrome.<sup>(1)</sup> Towards the end of July a group of N.C.O's and airmen -- known as the Special Erection Party -- arrived at Gibraltar to undertake this work, and the shipment of crated aircraft to Gibraltar began in August.

The work of erection was first carried out in a hangar at the New Camp, but it was not possible to make test flights of the aircraft when erected, and there was not sufficient space for their dispersal. Very soon the number of aircraft required rose much beyond the quota as originally anticipated, and this resulted in an increase of the personnel of the Special Erection Party. On 1 September, the whole party moved to an adequate but bare site at the North Front where workshops and offices were improvised from empty aircraft crates, and where there was room for test flights to be carried out. A fortnight later (15 September) a shipment of seventy Spitfires, twenty-two Hurricane fighters and five Hurricane bombers arrived, together with fifteen tractors and six cranes to speed up the work of handling these aircraft. In the space of eleven days all these aircraft had been assembled, test flown, and dispersed to vacant areas at various points on the station.

Ibid:

Air H.Q.,  
Gib: O.R.B.  
June

"Flying from  
the Rock"

The potential danger to the erected aircraft from enemy raids was definitely grave, and several instances of destruction and damage to aircraft had already occurred, notably on the night of 28/29 June when a raid by Italian aircraft had destroyed one Hudson, damaged a Wellington and a Fulmar and had made several craters in the dispersal area. The only satisfactory solution to this problem was the formation of a fighter unit, and eighteen of the newly-erected Spitfires were withdrawn from the dispersal areas and formed into a fighter defence flight.

The next shipment of aircraft arrived on 29 September and consisted of twenty Spitfires. Some of these had been damaged during the voyage and this retarded their assembly. However, some

/soldiers

(1) A somewhat similar procedure had been adopted two years before (1940 - but on a much larger scale) for the reinforcement of short-range aircraft from the U.K. to the Middle East, by sending crated aircraft by sea to Takoradi (Gold Coast) and flying them from there across Africa to Egypt. (See R.A.F. Narrative: "The West African Reinforcement Route").

soldiers of the Somerset Light Infantry were loaned to assist in the non-technical part of the work and the aircraft were ready by 11 October. Meanwhile, the demands upon assembled aircraft increased: thirty were required for aircraft carrier use at Malta and twelve Spitfires had to be fitted with overload tanks for an immediate direct flight to Malta. The aircraft required for the carriers needed certain modifications which could not be provided at Gibraltar, and the necessary apparatus was flown from the U.K. with two specialist sergeants in charge, and the modifications were begun on 24 October. By 28 October the work was completed and the aircraft were taken on the carriers.

Meanwhile, preparations were being put in hand for the forthcoming allied landings in North Africa -- Operation "Torch"(1), and on 28 October a further supply of 116 Spitfires and 13 Hurricanes arrived and orders were given for their assembly and testing. These fighters were to be held for an "unspecified purpose" (i.e. operation "Torch"). The Special Erection Party, assisted by 150 soldiers, assembled and serviced 108 of these Spitfires and the 13 Hurricanes by the dawn of D-day (8 November).

#### Flying Control

Ibid:

Meanwhile, the increasing volume of transit aircraft -- including American aircraft flying to the U.S. squadrons in the Middle East -- necessitated a proper flying control organisation, and on 20 August a senior Flying Control Officer arrived at Gibraltar. For the next three weeks flying control was exercised by duty pilots assisted by an airfield control pilot who was appointed for each particular occasion by the squadron concerned or by the Royal Naval Air Service. On 15 September the first flying control watch was opened, the judge's box of the former race course being used as the control tower. The Flying Control Officers had several problems to contend with; these included the miniature sand storms stirred up by the fighters when they were being run up on the edge of the runway, and the flooding of the unfinished surface of the runway during the Winter rains which needed 100 men to sweep and clear it of such casual water before any aircraft could land.

The great problem was the absence of diversion bases. The pilots had the alternative of "ditching" their aircraft or of trying to reach the airfield. This caused considerable concern on one occasion (in October) when five Hudsons of No.233 Squadron returned from an anti-submarine patrol to find that Gibraltar was unexpectedly fog-bound. The R.A.F. Meteorological Officer thought that the fog would clear before the aircrafts' endurance was exhausted, and the aircraft were therefore ordered to remain in the circuit until a favourable opportunity occurred for an attempted landing. At the same time the Navy was asked to have launches standing by round the Rock in case any of the aircraft were compelled to "ditch". Fortunately the fog cleared in time for four of the Hudsons to land (after remaining in the circuit for some three hours). The fifth aircraft, while attempting to land before the fog cleared, hit the sea and "ditched": the crew were picked up by one of the Naval launches.

#### R.A.F. Operational Activities

Air H.Q.,  
Gib: O.R.B's  
July - Oct.

As formerly, the R.A.F. squadrons at Gibraltar were mainly employed in anti-submarine patrols and sweeps and the protection of shipping and convoys.

/During

(1) See A.H.B. Narrative - MALTA.



Ibid: Aug:

During operation "Pedestal" (in August) Catalina, Hudson and Sunderland aircraft gave anti-submarine protection to our Naval forces and the merchant ships of the convoy during their passage through the Straits of Gibraltar, and to H.M. ships on their return to Gibraltar after the convoy had reached Malta. At 09.50 hours on 12 August, a Hudson aircraft on this duty sighted a surfaced Italian U-boat in position 37°23' north, 01°02' east. The Hudson attacked with four Torpex Mark VII depth-charges which straddled the U-boat as it was submerging.<sup>(1)</sup> A few minutes later the U-boat re-surfaced and some of the crew appeared on the conning tower. The Hudson then attacked it with machine-gun fire to which the U-boat replied with its front gun and machine-guns. At 10.30 hours the Hudson left the scene owing to shortage of fuel, leaving the U-boat still on the surface.

Ibid:

On 16 August, during operation "Baritone"<sup>(2)</sup>, three Hudson aircraft made an anti-submarine patrol ahead of Force "H" from dawn until dusk, the Spitfires being flown off the carrier Furious from a position north of Algiers.

#### Attacks by French Aircraft

Ibid:

On 29 August, two instances occurred of Vichy French Curtisses attacking Gibraltar aircraft. One of these attacks was made by a Curtiss 75A on one of four Hudsons (while searching for the survivors of a missing Wellington) in position 33°24' north, 08°25' west (south of Casablanca). After hitting and slightly damaging the Hudson with machine-gun fire the Curtiss broke off and flew in the direction of Casablanca. During the same day a transit Wellington en route to Bathurst was attacked by a Curtiss 75A in position 33°55' north, 07°45' west. The Curtiss continued to attack for about 16 minutes by which time the Wellington, which had immediately turned out to sea, was about 45 miles from the French Moroccan coast. The Wellington was hit and damaged but its rear gunner estimated that he had scored several hits on the Curtiss although no definite damage was seen.

#### Attacks on Enemy Submarines

Ibid: Sept.

Between the beginning of July and the end of October several attacks were made by Gibraltar aircraft on enemy submarines, including the sinking of a German U-boat (on 14 September) by a Sunderland of No.202 squadron. The U-boat had been reported by H.M. submarine Talisman at 13.40 hours in position 37° 19' north, 02° 23' east, and at 14.30 hours the Sunderland sighted the U-boat, and sank it in spite of heavy A.A. fire. About 36 of the U-boat's crew were photographed, some in a dinghy and others in the sea.<sup>(3)</sup>

#### Photographic Reconnaissance

Ibid: July  
- Oct.

Photographic reconnaissances of the ports and aerodromes of Southern Spain, the West African coast from Agadir to Casablanca and the North African coast in the vicinity of Oran and Algiers, were carried out by Gibraltar P.R.U. Spitfires and Marylands from time to time as heretofore.

Admiralty  
Monthly Anti-  
Submarine  
Report  
C.B.O4050/43(8)

- (1) The U-boat was officially assessed as "probably slightly damaged"
- (2) See page 435 supra.
- (3) This was officially confirmed as sunk.



SECTION VI

(4 November 1942 - 14 May 1943)

STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE PERIOD

Fuehrer  
Conferences  
on Naval  
Affairs, 1942

After the initial success of Operation "Torch" the war in Africa entered a new phase. Menaced from the west by the Allied armies which had landed in North-west Africa and being unable to halt the Eighth Army in its victorious advance from Alamein, the Axis armies were forced back into Tunisia which, in the view of the German High Command, had always been and still was "the decisive key position in the Mediterranean." The Axis forces managed to hold out in their Tunisian strongholds until the middle of May (1943): by that time the combined pressure of the Allied armies in the north-west and the Eighth Army from the south-east - coupled with the vital co-operation of the Allied air forces and the virtual blockade of Tunisia by the latter and the Royal Navy - broke them irretrievably and forced them to surrender.

From the aspect of air/sea warfare the period was noteworthy in the following respects:-

1. The final relief of Malta and Malta's change from a Mediterranean outpost to an offensive base for attacks on Tunisia and Italy.
2. Changes in the operational command of the Allied Air and Naval forces (following upon the junction of the Axis forces in Tunisia and North Africa under Von Arnim and Rommel, and the approach of the Eighth Army to the Mareth line), viz:-

Air

- (a) the formation of the Mediterranean Air Command as a combined R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. operational Headquarters to co-ordinate all air effort in the Mediterranean theatre
- (b) the expansion of Air Headquarters, Egypt, into Air Defence Headquarters, Eastern Mediterranean, responsible for protecting the coast line and convoys from Tripolitania, to the Levant. (Beyond Tripolitania the work of the A.D.E.M. was undertaken by the North-west African Coastal Air Force<sup>1</sup> whose responsibility reached to French Morocco)

Naval

the division of the sphere of operations into the Mediterranean and Levant Commands.

3. The capture of Tobruk and Benghazi by the Eighth Army and the subsequent Allied occupation of the remaining Tunisian ports, culminating in the fall of Tunis and Bizerta on 7 May.

/ As

1 See page 477 infra

As in previous phases, the war in Africa was largely a war of supplies. Towards the end of 1942 the Allied air forces were able to attack the enemy's supply lines from three sides, Cyrenaica, Malta and North-west Africa. In general, the squadrons from North-west Africa made daylight attacks on the Tunisian ports while bombers from Malta carried out attacks by night. Tunis received the heaviest attacks, U.S. Fortresses and Liberators being chiefly employed on these operations. These attacks on his ports, bases and shipping lanes resulted in the enemy employing a large fleet of transport aircraft to augment his supplies to North Africa. The R.A.F. made numerous attacks on these transport aircraft, but until full pressure could be brought against the enemy from both east and west in the Spring of 1943, the enemy contrived to keep his forces sufficiently supplied.

#### Position at the End of 1942

As the Eighth Army pursued Rommel's retreating forces during November, it was followed closely by the Naval Co-operation Wings of No.201 Group. Their task was to maintain a continuity of operations against the receding Axis shipping routes, to protect Allied sea-borne supplies and to assist the Navy in clearing captured enemy ports for the reception of Allied supply ships. Meanwhile the R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. struck at the enemy's supplies by bombing his ports and bases along his line of retreat.

After the capture of Tobruk (13 November), No.247 (N.C.) Wing's offensive forced enemy convoys to Benghazi and Tripoli westwards into Malta's range, and when Benghazi fell (19 November) the enemy gave up trying to run his supplies through the shorter Mediterranean route and endeavoured to supply Tripoli by sending his ships from the west along the coast of Tunisia. This resulted in Tripoli becoming the principal target in Tripolitania of the Allied air forces.

#### R.A.F. Naval Co-operation

Meanwhile, in order to augment Malta's striking power as the war moved westward, units of No.201 Group were transferred to that island. At the same time, anti-submarine and long-range fighter escorts were maintained from special mobile Wings as the Allies' shipping routes extended further to the west. By the beginning of 1943 a chain of Naval Co-operation units covered the sea routes from Syria to the Gulf of Sirte. Similarly a chain of short-range fighter units under Air Headquarters, Egypt, - with liaison officers from the Royal Navy - was established to safeguard Allied shipping against enemy aircraft based on the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

#### Final Relief of Malta

During November and December, Malta was finally relieved by convoys from the east, and thereafter convoys sailed to Malta almost without incident, the ships returning to Egypt for re-loading. The British re-occupation of the Cyrenaican airfields again enabled maximum air cover to be given, and by that time the R.A.F., Malta was sufficiently strong to negative threats from enemy aircraft based in southern

/Italy

Italy and Sicily. By the end of 1942 the Axis air forces in the Mediterranean had been outfought, and a force strong enough to ensure that the Allies retained air superiority had been built up. Thenceforward, Malta's aggressive policy became increasingly strong while the power of the Axis air forces steadily declined.

Events Leading to the Final Overthrow of the Axis in Africa

By the beginning of January (1943) the enemy had been forced to relinquish the use of his sea routes east of Malta, and the Eighth Army's capture of Tripoli (23 January) made little difference to his supply position, since Tripoli's value as an off-loading port had practically ceased at the end of 1942. In the New Year, the enemy's direct routes from Naples to Tunis and Bizerta were rendered impracticable by the Allied air strikes from Malta and North-west Africa. The enemy therefore began to bring his supplies to Sicily by sea and across the train ferry at Messina, and from Palermo and Trapani in small ships and auxiliary craft which were sent under cover of darkness to the Gulf of Tunis. Nevertheless, these tactics were only a temporary prolonging of the war in Africa, the final outcome of which was not far distant.

Fuehrer  
Conferences on  
Naval Affairs,  
1943

By the beginning of March the situation had become critical for the Axis. More ships were required to transport troops and supplies to Tunisia and an increasing need for the protection of these ships was daily becoming more apparent. To the German High Command the solution of this problem appeared to lie with the Italian navy, but this proved a broken reed and the burden of naval protection had to be borne by the German U-boats and the Luftwaffe. The Germans were well aware that the loss of Tunisia would be followed by the loss of Italy, but the saving of Tunisia required control of the sea. Hitler therefore decided "to confront the Italians with the alternative of either making an all-out effort to get supplies through, regardless of personnel considerations, or to lose Tunisia and with that also Italy". To implement this decision Admiral Doenitz<sup>1</sup> was sent to Rome to confer with Mussolini, but in spite of the Duce's promises the hoped-for assistance by the Italian navy never materialised. Meanwhile the Allied sea and air attacks continued to destroy the Axis shipping, and in April the Italians suffered the loss of the cruiser Trieste, and the disablement of the cruiser Gorizia, from Allied air attacks.

During the latter phases of the campaign the North-west African Coastal, Strategic and (to a lesser degree) Tactical Air Forces (which had been formed in February)<sup>2</sup> co-operated with the Royal Navy in striking at every enemy ship in the Mediterranean. These operations - although absorbing a large proportion of the effort of the Allied air forces - hastened the consistent decline of the supplies handled at the African ports in the enemy's possession, until eventually the Allied aircraft and warships achieved a virtual blockade of Tunisia, with the consequent cessation of enemy traffic to that province.

/In

<sup>1</sup> Admiral Doenitz had succeeded Grand Admiral Raeder on the latter's resignation as C.-in-C. of the German navy on 30 January (1943).

<sup>2</sup> See page 476 infra.

In the meantime, the Eighth Army's continued advance had driven Rommel from his Buerat line (in January) and forced him to continue his retreat northwards. By 21 February the Eighth Army had reached the Mareth line, and the successful outflanking of that position (in March), and the resumed offensive in Tunisia of the Allied "Torch" forces during that month, led to the final collapse of the Axis armies in May.

CHANGED STATUS OF THE CENTRAL BASIN:  
REORGANISATION OF COMMANDS

As a result of the Allied landings and subsequent advance in North Africa<sup>1</sup> and the advance of the Eighth Army from Alamein, the centre of gravity of operations in the Mediterranean shifted to the Central Basin where the R.A.F. Malta co-operated with the Allied "Torch" air forces and squadrons from Egypt and the Western Desert. Meanwhile, the Eighth Army re-captured Tobruk on 13 November, and two months later it occupied Benghazi (19 January) and Tripoli on 23 January.

Relief of Malta

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea",  
Vol. III.

After the August convoy (Operation "Pedestal")<sup>2</sup>, Malta had to wait for three months before the next convoy could be sent. By the beginning of November, Malta was again in urgent need of food and other supplies, and it was decided to send the fast minelayer Manxman under cover of the "Torch" landings and the Eighth Army's advance along the Libyan coast. The Manxman sailed from Port Said on the night of 10 November with 200 naval and military personnel and 350 tons of food, and reached Malta on the afternoon of 12 November. Meanwhile, plans had been made for the minelayer Welshman to bring supplies from the U.K. via Gibraltar and Algiers (Operation "Analysis"). The Welshman left Plymouth on 1 November and reached Malta on the morning of 18 November<sup>3</sup>.

Ibid:

An attempt to send two small merchant ships from the west (Operation "Crupper") was unsuccessful, the two ships being captured by the Germans and taken to Bizerta where they arrived on 9 November.

On 20 November the mine-laying cruiser Adventure carrying some Service passengers and nearly 2,000 aircraft depth-charges, was sent from the U.K. to Malta, and on 15 December she made a second successful voyage to the island with R.A.F. personnel and stores.

Operation "Stoneage"

Ibid:

Meanwhile a convoy to Malta from the east had been prepared to sail from Port Said (Operation "Stoneage"). The convoy (numbered M.W. 13) comprised four merchant ships escorted by a cruiser and ten "Hunt" class destroyers, cover being provided by four cruisers of the 15th Cruiser Squadron and seven Fleet destroyers. Air Headquarters, Egypt, and the R.A.F., Malta provided ample co-operation. A combined Operations Room was set up at the Headquarters of No. 201 Group and provision was made by No. 201 Group for anti-submarine protection for the convoy, while reconnaissance and shadowing of enemy surface

No. 201 Gp.  
O.R.B. Nov:

Ibid:  
Appx: "B"

/ forces

1. Operation "Torch"
2. See SECTION V., pages 426 et seq:
3. In January, the Welshman resumed her mine-laying duties: she was subsequently sunk (probably by a U-boat) on 1 February.

SECRET

471.

forces in Taranto was undertaken by the R.A.F., Malta. Air Headquarters, Egypt, arranged for fighter protection from D. plus 1 until the convoy should pass longitude 29° 30' east from whence R.A.F. Western Desert Command was to be responsible. On D. plus 3, R.A.F., Malta was to provide fighter cover, the change-over line between Egypt and Malta being 19° 15' east. No. 247 (Naval Co-operation) Wing (of No. 201 Group) was briefed as a striking force against enemy surface forces should they attempt to intercept the convoy.

The convoy sailed at dusk on 16 November, No. 201 Group providing as escort throughout the night of Hudsons (of No. 459 squadron) and Swordfish (of No. 815 squadron, F.A.A.). The convoy reached Alexandria at dawn on 17 November: fighters from the Western Desert Command were on patrol all day and "inner" and "outer" patrols<sup>1</sup> were maintained by Wellesleys (of No. 47 Squadron Air Echelon) and Bisleys (of No. 15 squadron, S.A.A.F.). On 18 November, Bisleys and Hudsons carried out anti-submarine sorties, and Beaufighters (of No. 252 squadron) gave dusk and dawn protection, but in spite of the efforts of the Beaufighters the cruiser Arethusa was torpedoed and damaged just after dusk by some Italian S.M. 79's when the convoy was about 80 miles north-east of Benghazi. A destroyer escorted the Arethusa back to Alexandria which they reached on the evening of 21 November. During their return passage Hudsons and Bisleys and a Sunderland (of No. 230 squadron) provided anti-submarine escort.

During the next day (19 November) the convoy was covered continuously by Malta Beaufighters and Spitfires, while six Baltimores of No. 203 squadron (No. 201 Group) from Gambut made a special reconnaissance to cover the approach of Italian naval forces should they attempt to intercept the convoy. At the same time Malta aircraft made photographic reconnaissances of the Italian ports and shortly before midnight they confirmed that all the major Italian naval units were still in harbour.<sup>2</sup> The convoy reached Malta safely in the early hours of 20 November, the Naval escort returning to Alexandria escorted by Hudsons, Bisleys and Wellingtons.

#### Further Convoys to Malta

After the successful passage of M.W. 13, further convoys for the relief and build-up of Malta proceeded as a matter of routine. On 1 December, convoy M.W. 14 (comprising five merchant ships) sailed from Port Said with an escort of destroyers, a covering force being provided by a cruiser and six more destroyers (Operation "Portcullis"). Air and anti-submarine protection was provided by Air Headquarters, Egypt, No. 201 Group and R.A.F., Malta, a striking force from No. 247 Wing being briefed as formerly. The convoy arrived at Malta on the morning of 5 December without incident, although it had been shadowed by enemy aircraft during its passage.

Further convoys (M.W. 15, M.W. 16 and M.W. 17) sailed on 6, 9 and 17 December respectively; the operations for their passage and cover were known as "Quadrangle", A, B and C, Air Headquarters, Egypt, No. 201 Group and R.A.F., Malta providing the necessary air protection. As a result of all these convoys the Governor of Malta reported that approximately

/ 70%

- 1 It was arranged that the "inner" patrols were to be at a distance of 5 miles from the destroyer screen, and the "outer" were to be 15 miles ahead of the leading ships.
- 2 In fact the Italian fleet made no effort to intercept the convoy.

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea" Vol. III

No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Nov:

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative "The  
War at Sea",  
Vol. III and  
No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Dec.

70% of the island's commodities had been raised to the full scale; moreover, supplies of urgently-needed aviation fuel had also been received.

With the relief of Malta - after the island's long and anxious defensive period - the R.A.F., Malta resumed its former aggressive policy, and was ready to repay with interest the damage which the island had sustained in the enemy "blitzes" of the Spring and Autumn. The Royal Navy shared this offensive spirit: destroyers and M.T.B's sailed from bases in Malta to harass the enemy, and R.N. submarines - in addition to their attacks on enemy shipping - patrolled as far as the Italian coast and attacked railway bridges and other targets with gun-fire.

#### Build-up of the R.A.F., Malta

A.H.Q., M.E.

Tables of Ops:

Nov: Dec: '42 No.69(G.R.) squadron  
& Jan: '43.

At the beginning of November, Malta's air units comprised:-

No.69 sqn. (P.R.U.) detach:	Wellington VIII's (A.S.V) & Baltimores
No.89(Night-fighter) squadron	Spitfires
No.126(F) squadron	Beaufighters
No.185(F) squadron	Spitfire V's
No.229(F) squadron	Spitfire V's
No.249(F) squadron	Hurricane II's & Spitfire V's
No.227(F) & shipping strikes) sqn:	Spitfire V's
	Beaufighters
No.272(F) sqn: detach:	Beaufighters
No.1435(F) flight	Spitfire V's
No.39(T.B.) squadron	Beauforts
No.40 sqn: (Med: B.) detach:	Wellington IC's
No.104 sqn: (Med: B.) detach:	Wellington IIC's
No.828 (F.A.A.) sqn: detach:	Albacores
No.830 (F.A.A.) sqn: detach:	Swordfish) Shipping strikes

Of these, No.227 squadron and the detachment of No.272 squadron had been moved to Malta from No.201 Group. The detachments of Nos.40 and 104 squadrons belonged to No.238 Wing of No.205 Group<sup>1</sup>: by the end of December the whole of these two squadrons<sup>2</sup> had moved to Malta where they were controlled operationally by the A.O.C. through No.238 Wing.

The transfers of these units to Malta were made to increase Malta's striking power as the war moved westward. In pursuance of this policy, No.821 squadron, F.A.A., (Albacores) was moved to the island from No.201 Group in December, and the Headquarters of No.248 (N.C.) Wing of No.201 Group was also moved to Malta to operate the T.B./A.S.V. Wellingtons and G.R. and F.A.A. squadrons. In addition to these units, Malta was further reinforced by the end of December by No.23 squadron (Mosquito II's) from the United Kingdom, and a detachment of No.46 squadron (Beaufighters) from No.201 Group. In January, detachments of Nos.221 and 458 squadrons (Wellington VIII's) from No.201 Group were also moved to Malta.

#### /Reorganisation

- 1 No.205 Grp. was under operational control of the Western Desert Command.
- 2 With the exception of a detachment of No.104 Sqn. At the end of January: (after the fall of Tripoli) Nos.40 and 104 sqns. returned to No.205 Grp.

A.H.Q., Med:  
O.R.B. Jan.  
'43.

RE-ORGANISATION OF COMMANDS

A.O.C.-in-C. ME/  
67/1 (Commnd: in  
the Med: Policy)

3A  
(CAS. to A.C.M.  
Tedder, 19.11.42)

Ibid:5A(Air Min:  
to C's-in-C.  
19.11.42)

Ibid:9A(A.C.M.  
Tedder to CAS.,  
28.11.42.)

Ibid:11A(A.C.M.  
Tedder to CAS.,  
30.11.42.)

Ibid:12A(CAS.  
to A.C.M. Tedder,  
1.12.42.)

Ibid:14A(Air Min:  
to Gen. Eisenhower,  
1.12.42.)

Meanwhile, towards the end of November, the question as to the re-organisation of Commands in the Mediterranean was being examined by the Chiefs of Staff, following upon certain suggestions<sup>1</sup> by the Joint Planning Committee. The three C's-in-C., Middle East, were asked for their views on the matter, and a few days later Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder visited Algiers and Malta. At Algiers the Air-Chief-Marshal was very unfavourably impressed with the air situation of Operation "Torch": in his opinion the U.S.A.A.F. was "running a separate war" although General Eisenhower assured him that he had given instructions that it was to be under the operational control of Air-Marshal Welsh. Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder felt strongly that one air command for the whole Mediterranean should be set up at once under an A.O.C.-in-C., who should be subordinate to General Eisenhower as regards operations in Algeria and Tunisia and should co-operate with General Eisenhower with regard to air operations over the rest of the Mediterranean theatre.

On 30 November, General Eisenhower proposed to the combined Chiefs of Staff that Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder should go to Algiers for a period of two weeks as his adviser on air matters. While concurring with this request, the Chiefs of Staff told the General that they were doubtful if Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder's presence at the Allied Headquarters in an advisory capacity would be satisfactory, and they suggested that the Air-Chief-Marshal should be made responsible to the General for all operations of the "Torch" air forces (both British, American and Free French), and responsible for all other operations in the Middle East to the Chiefs of Staff by whom he would be instructed to

/co-operate

1. These suggestions were, briefly:

- (a) one Naval Commander for the whole Med., Red Sea, and Atlantic within 600 miles of Gibraltar, the Naval Commander to be responsible to the Admiralty for all except combined ops: in the Western Med: for which the latter would be responsible to Gen. Eisenhower.
- (b) land command to be divided by a line joining the Tunisian-Tripolitanian frontier to Corfu.
- (c) two Air Commanders: one under Gen. Eisenhower comprising 12th U.S.A.A.F. and all R.A.F. aircraft based in French North Africa except "Coastal aircraft"; the other to be called "Middle East and Mediterranean" and to include all air forces based east of the Tunisian-Tripolitanian frontier plus all "Coastal aircraft" in the Western Med: and Gibraltar.
- (d) Malta to remain in the Middle East Command.
- (e) two Naval sub-commands, one each end of the Med: and an Air sub-command for the (so-called) "Coastal aircraft" in the Western end.
- (f) a Combined Naval H.Q. for the control of the Med: to be set up near Gen. Eisenhower's H.Q. and to be controlled by local representatives of the C.-in-C., Med: who would themselves remain at Cairo.

Ibid: 17A  
(Gen. Eisenhower to Air  
Min. 4.12.42)

co-operate with the General "in such a way as to secure most quickly the defeat of both Nehring and Rommel".<sup>1</sup> In his reply, General Eisenhower did not think that Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder "could well serve as a Commander in two separate theatres which were under separate ground Commanders": he informed the Air Ministry that "because of the pressure of time and the presence here of Lieut.-General Spaatz of the 8th. U.S. Air Force in the United Kingdom" he was appointing General Spaatz as his deputy for air, but "his position was not that of a Commander". General Eisenhower also asked for the loan of two R.A.F. Staff Officers who should be "thoroughly experienced in the type of air fighting that must take place".

Ibid: 19A  
(ACM. Tedder to CAS.  
5.12.42).

On the receipt of this information (through the Chief of the Air Staff), Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder pointed out that he was being requested by General Eisenhower for the loan of bombers, and by Air-Marshal Welsh for fighters, from the Middle East Command, and that he felt strongly that as far as the R.A.F. was concerned a Unified Command was urgently essential. In his opinion "practically the whole enemy effort whether in Tunisia or in Libya came from ports and air bases in Southern Italy and Sicily", and the majority of these were closer to the R.A.F. heavy bomber bases in Cyrenaica than they were to those being used in North Africa. The R.A.F., Malta, had played and was playing a vital part in these operations, especially "Torch", and he considered that "close co-operation of the air operations from the east and from the west was most urgently required".

Ibid: 20A  
(M.E. Defence Com: to Air  
Min: 5.12.42)

Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder's views were upheld by the Middle East Defence Committee who signalled the Prime Minister and Chiefs of Staff that in their view the A.O.C.-in-C. should be appointed at Algiers under the supreme command of General Eisenhower in the "Torch" area; that such A.O.C.-in-C. should exercise strategic direction over all air forces in the Mediterranean theatre, the U.S. forces to remain under U.S. command but to operate under the A.O.C.-in-C's strategic direction as they were already doing in the Western Desert. In conclusion, the Committee emphasised that Tunisia was the key to the operations in the Mediterranean and they postulated that the strategic direction of all air forces should be placed immediately in the hands of one man who, they were "convinced", should be Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder in view of his experience of operations in the Mediterranean. The appointment of two Staff officers in an advisory capacity, as requested by General Eisenhower would, in the Committee's opinion, "be of no practical value whatsoever".

Ibid: 22A  
(ACM Tedder to CAS.,  
9.12.42)

A few days later, Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder flew to Algiers in response to a further request from General Eisenhower to visit him "in order thoroughly to co-ordinate air activities" of the Air-Chief-Marshal's and the General's air forces. While at Algiers Air-Chief-Marshal Tedder discussed with General Eisenhower the question of a unified air Command and also of the air Command in North Africa. In the Air-Chief-Marshal's view the existing air organisation was "almost crazy, with two air forces working together with no effective command". Although he considered that Lieut.-General Spaatz was "performing a useful function in co-ordination" he had "no operational experience or knowledge" and "he was not commanding". The Air-Chief-Marshal felt strongly that one effective Commander of both the air forces was essential and he believed that the only solution was to appoint an

A.H.Q. M.E.  
A.O.C./67/1,  
24A(A.C.M.  
Tedder to CAS  
13.12.42)

/ American

1. This was, in effect, A.C.M. Tedder's own suggestion to the C.A.S. with regard to the appointment of an A.O.C.-in-C., Mediterranean (mentioned above), but it proposed A.C.M. Tedder himself for that appointment.



American Commander with "a first class British Deputy". He thought, however, that General Eisenhower was "coming round to an agreement on unified British Air Command in the Mediterranean" but in his (Tedder's) opinion the General had undertaken Operation "Torch" with the idea of the United Kingdom and North Africa being one theatre and was apprehensive that if North Africa and Libya were linked together as one theatre he would lose control over the American Air Forces in the U.K. on which he hoped to draw for the North African operations.

A.M. OS. 17572, 106A  
(Genl. Eisen- hower to Combined (U.S. & Brit:) Chiefs of Staff, 31.12.42)

General Eisenhower's discussions with Air Chief Marshal Tedder bore fruit in due course as far as unified Command for the "Torch" Air Forces was concerned. During the next two weeks the General found time to make "a thorough study of the Allied air organisation" and by the end of December he had come to the conclusion that "a single Command of the entire "Torch" Air Forces was necessary". In his opinion the initial organisation was not necessarily faulty, but he now felt that the employment of both American and British air units in the same areas had created conditions requiring centralised control "by an officer who can act in his own name without referring his problems to me". The General informed the Combined Chiefs of Staff that he had decided (subject to their approval) "after earnest consideration and long reflection" to set up, directly under himself, an Allied Commander-in-Chief for Air, and he nominated Major-General Spaatz for that appointment.

A.H.Q.M.E. A.O.C./67/1, 39A

The final answer to this and other suggestions was reached towards the end of January (1943) at Anfa (Casablanca)<sup>(1)</sup> where the Prime Minister, President Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs of Staff were in conference. At this Conference - which was visited by Generals Eisenhower and Alexander<sup>(2)</sup> and Air Chief Marshal Tedder - the question of a comprehensive re-organisation of the whole of the Mediterranean theatre was discussed with a view to setting up a unified Command of the Allied Naval, Land and Air Forces. It was apparent at this stage of the African campaigns that Von Arnim's forces in Tunisia and Rommel's "Afrika Korps" - which was being steadily pursued by the Eighth Army - would effect a junction, and it was decided that when this event had occurred the projected unified Command should be formed.

OCS. 163  
(23.1.43)  
CCS. 170/2  
(23.1.43)

In accordance with this decision the British Chiefs of Staff submitted proposals to the Combined Chiefs defining the Naval, Land and Air Commands, which were approved by the Prime Minister and the President.

#### Air Forces

Ibid:

The agreed proposals authorised the formation of a Mediterranean Air Command (M.A.C.) under an Air Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, which was to comprise three subordinate Commands: North-West African Air Forces (N.A.A.F.) Middle East, and Malta. The Air C.-in-C. was to be subordinate to General Eisenhower in respect of:

- (a) the air forces stationed from time to time in the North-West African theatre and their operations
- (b) The operations of other Mediterranean air forces in conjunction with operations conducted in or from the North-West African theatre,

/and

1. This was the "Casablanca Conference".  
2. G.O.C.-in-C., Middle East.

and General Eisenhower was to afford the Air C.-in-C. all possible support and facilities in the North-west African theatre for the operation of the Mediterranean air forces and for their efficient co-operation with the land and sea forces in that theatre.

It was also agreed that Air Chief Marshal Tedder should be the Air C.-in-C., Mediterranean, with his headquarters at Algiers. The organisation of the Middle East Command was to remain unaltered: it was to be placed under command of Air Chief Marshal Sholto Douglas<sup>(1)</sup> as A.O.C.-in-C. Malta was to become a separate Command (but directly under M.A.C.); the third Command under M.A.C. - North-west African Air Forces - was to be commanded by Major-General Spaatz.

#### Formation of M.A.C. and N.A.A.F..

A.H.Q.M.A.C.  
ORB.App.2  
(Genl.  
Eisenhower's  
General  
Order No.20)

The expected junction of Von Arnim's and Rommel's forces and the approach of the Eighth Army to the Mareth line, both occurred in the middle of February, and the two theatres of war thus became merged into one. Accordingly, the agreed proposals of the Chiefs of Staff were put into force by General Eisenhower (on 17 February). Air Chief Marshal Tedder assumed command of M.A.C. with Air Vice Marshal Wigglesworth<sup>(2)</sup> as his Deputy and Brigadier-General Craig, U.S.A.A.F., as his Chief of Staff. Air Chief Marshal Sholto Douglas became A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, and Major-General Spaatz assumed the command of N.A.A.F. with his headquarters at Constantine. Air Vice-Marshal Park remained at Malta as A.O.C. of that Command.

#### Role and Composition of N.A.A.F.

A.H.Q.M.A.C.  
ORB.Feb.,  
App.6.(Genl.  
Eisenhower's  
General  
Order No. 1)

N.A.A.F. absorbed the "Torch" (R.A.F.) Eastern Air Command and the 12th. U.S. Air Force. Its primary task was to shatter the enemy air force and then to attack his land and sea forces. The Command was organised into five subsidiary formations, viz:-

- (i) N.A.A.F. Strategic Air Force (General Doolittle)
- (ii) N.A.A.F. Tactical Air Force (Air Marshal Coningham)<sup>(3)</sup>
- (iii) N.A.A.F. Coastal Air Force (Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd)<sup>(4)</sup>
- (iv) N.A.A.F. Training Command (Brig-Genl. Cannon)
- (v) N.A.A.F. Service Command (Brig-Genl. Dunton)

A.H.Q.M.A.C.  
ORB.March,  
Appx.24

There was also a N.A.A.F. Photographic Reconnaissance Wing (Colonel Roosevelt)<sup>(5)</sup>, and (later) a N.A.A.F. Troop Carrier Command<sup>(6)</sup>.

#### Role and Composition of N.A.A.F. Strategic, Tactical and Coastal Air Forces, and Photo. Reconnaissance Wing.

A.H.Q.M.A.C.  
ORB.Feb.,  
App.6.(Genl.  
Eisenhower's  
General Order  
No.1.Annex:2)

- (i) The functions of Strategic Air Force were to plan and control air operations of all bombers and escort fighters assigned to the Command for strategic support of land and sea forces. It comprised:-

/(U.S.A.A.F.)

1. Dy. Chief of Air Staff, 1940; A.O.C.-in-C., Fighter Command, 1940-42.
2. Dy. Director Intelligence, Air Ministry, 1936-9.
3. A.O.C., Western Desert Air Force
4. Formerly A.O.C., Mediterranean (Malta)
5. A son of the President
6. The Chain of Command of M.A.C. is given in Appendix "T"

(U.S.A.A.F.)

97th Heavy Bomber Group  
 513th Heavy Bomber Squadron  
H.Q. 7th. Wing comprising:-  
 12th., 17th., 310th., and 320th. Medium Bomber Groups  
 1st., 14th., and 82nd. Fighter Groups

(R.A.F.)

Nos. 142 and 150 Bomber Squadrons (Wellingtons)  
 and ancillary units.

(ii) The main function of Tactical Air Force was close support of ground troops in Tunisia. It comprised:

(U.S.A.A.F.)

Ibid:  
Annex 1

XII Air Support Command consisting of:

H.Q. and H.Q. Squadron  
 68th. Observation Group  
 31st., 52nd., 81st. and 325th. Fighter Groups  
 47th. Light Bomber Group  
 and ancillary units

(R.A.F.)

No. 242 Group (formerly of Eastern Air Command)  
 which consisted of:

H.Q. No. 242 Group  
No. 322 Wing (Nos. 81, 154, 232 and 242  
 Fighter squadrons (Spitfires) and Nos.  
 18 and 114 Light Bomber Squadrons (Bisleys)  
No. 324 Wing (Nos. 72, 93, 111, 152 and 243  
 Fighter squadrons (Spitfires))  
No. 326 Wing (Nos. 13 and 614 Light Bomber  
 (Bisleys) and Nos. 225 and 241 Fighter-  
 bomber squadrons (Hurricanes))  
 and ancillary units.<sup>(1)</sup>

Ibid:  
Annex 3

(iii) The functions of Coastal Air Force were:-

- (a) to plan the defence of North-west Africa
- (b) to direct the operation of the air-ground and ground-air recognition system for North-west Africa
- (c) to control all sea/air reconnaissance
- (d) to control all anti-submarine operations
- (e) to control air operations for the protection of shipping in co-operation with the Royal Navy.
- (f) to control all shipping strikes undertaken by the Command.

Coastal Air Force comprised:-

350th. (U.S.) Fighter Group (Nos. 345, 346 and 347 squadrons Airacobras), and the following units of the former R.A.F. Eastern Air Command, viz:-

/No.

1. In March a Tactical Bomber Force was added.

- No. 323 Wing (Nos. 32, 87 and 253 Fighter squadrons - Hurricanes - and No.43 Fighter squadron Spitfires)
- No. 325 Wing (Nos. 153, 255 and 500 Fighter squadrons - Beaufighters)
- No.328 Wing (Nos. 500 and 608 G.R. squadrons - Hudsons and No.813 T.S.R. squadron - Swordfish - detailed from the F.A.A. and Air/sea Rescue aircraft - Walrus)

H.Q. and H.Q. squadrons of the (U.S.) 1st. and 2nd Defence Wings and ancillary units.

A.H.Q., M.A.C.  
O.R.B. Apl:  
Appx. 31.

The chief function of the Photographic Reconnaissance Wing was photo: reconnaissance of strategic targets in enemy occupied Tunisia, Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and southern France. It comprised the 3rd. U.S. P.R. Group and No.682 squadron, R.A.F. Detachments of this Wing were attached to the N.A. Strategic and Tactical Air Forces.

#### Naval Forces

C.C.S. 169  
(23.1.43).  
Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea". Vol. IV.

On 20 February, the re-organisation of the Naval Command of the Mediterranean (as proposed at the Casablanca Conference) was effected. Admiral-of-the-Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham<sup>(1)</sup> became once-more C.-in-C., Mediterranean, but the character of the Command was altered. The former Command comprised only the eastern half of the Mediterranean, whereas the new Command comprised the original "Torch" area which was extended eastwards to an imaginary line drawn from the Tunisian-Tripolitanian boundary to latitude 35° north, longitude 16° east, and thence to Cape Spartivento in Italy.<sup>(2)</sup> Admiral Harwood relinquished his title of C.-in-C., Mediterranean, and assumed that of C.-in-C., Levant, which was the new designation of his existing Command in the Eastern Mediterranean, and included the Red Sea.<sup>(3)</sup>

Admiral Cunningham's Command included Malta which became an increasingly effective Naval and air base<sup>(4)</sup> for offensive action during the campaign in Tunisia. The Allies were, however, not yet in a position to supply the Naval and air forces in Malta, for as long as the enemy could maintain his air strength over the Sicilian "Narrows" it was inadvisable to send convoys to Malta through the Western Mediterranean. It was therefore decided that the supply of Malta should continue to be the responsibility of the C.-in-C., Levant.

#### Land Forces: Formation of Eighteenth Army Group

CCS. 169  
(23.1.43);

The co-ordination of the armies and corps which were to close the encirclement of Tunisia had also been approved at the Casablanca Conference. It had been agreed that after the

/Eighth

1. Admiral Cunningham had been promoted on 21st January.
2. On 1st June the boundary was moved eastward to 20°.
3. On 27th March, Vice-Admiral Leatham assumed the post of C.-in-C., Levant on the relinquishment of that Command by Admiral Harwood on medical grounds.
4. To quote Gnl. Eisenhower: "The services of Malta's air forces in striking at Axis communications were matched by the attacks of Malta's destroyers and of the 10th. Flotilla upon the enemy's shipping". (Despatch).

A.H.Q., M.A.C.,  
ORB., Feb.,  
Appx:2 (Genl.  
Eisenhower's  
General Order  
No.20)

Eighth Army had entered Tunisia it should be transferred from the Middle East Command to that of the Allied Forces under General Eisenhower, and that General Alexander should become General Eisenhower's Deputy. Further, that General Alexander's primary task should be to command the Allied forces on the Tunisian front with the assistance of a small Headquarters Staff of his own provided by the Middle East Command. On 20th February, therefore, General Alexander became Deputy C.-in-C., Allied Forces, and C.-in-C., Eighteenth Army Group which comprised the British First and Eighth Armies (Generals Anderson and Montgomery) the U.S.II Corps (General Patton) and the Free French XIX Corps (General Juin).

General Alexander's first action was to re-group the Tunisian forces: he divided the battle area into three national sections, the British First Army to operate in the north, the U.S. II Corps in the south, and the Free French XIX Corps in the centre. The British Eighth Army remained as an advancing force in the zone of operations to the south-east. At the same time provision was made for a general reserve, to be administered by the newly-arrived British IX Corps Headquarters commanded by Lieut:-General Crocker.

A.H.Q., M.A.C.,  
ORB., Feb.,  
Appx.8.

In view of the Eighth Army having come under General Alexander, Air Chief-Marshal Tedder transferred the operational command of the Western Desert Air Force to that of N.A.A.F. (as envisaged in the approved proposals of the British Chiefs of Staff).

#### THE WESTERN AND CENTRAL BASINS

The temporary abandonment of major ground operations by the Allied "Torch" forces in January had little effect upon the air/sea warfare in the Western and Central Basins where the Allies were making every effort to cut the enemy's line of communication to Tunisia. The enemy's policy for transporting (a) personnel and (b) supplies across the Sicilian "Narrows" was as follows:-

- (a) the employment of destroyers making passage by night at high speed
- (b) merchant ships sailing by day under fighter cover.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
DAOC/CC/4  
("Strategy")  
(War Cabinet's  
"Chieftel"  
No.1 of  
23.1.43.)

These methods rendered night attacks by Allied naval surface forces impracticable, and the Allied strategy was therefore confined to submarine action, searches, shipping strikes by night by torpedo aircraft, daylight shipping strikes by bombers, and heavy and medium bomber attacks on ports according to the location of enemy target ships. It had, however, been found by past experience that bombing attacks on ports and bases (e.g. Benghazi and Tripoli in 1941/42), however relentless, did not achieve decisive results. The most effective method was to locate and sink supply ships at sea, for which adequate air reconnaissance and air striking forces furnished with the requisite fighter cover were essential factors.

In both the Western and Central Basins the "Torch" air forces (comprising the R.A.F. Eastern Air Command and the 12th U.S.A.A.F.) continued their operations which included almost daily shipping sweeps, convoy escorts, and attacks on enemy-occupied ports and bases and enemy airfields. In the Central Basin the R.A.F. Malta - re-inforced with squadrons from No.21 Group - again pursued its aggressive policy against Axis shipping and supply ports and railways in Sicily and Italy, and by 'intruder' operations over enemy airfields.

/OPERATIONS

# OPERATIONS OF THE "TORCH" AIR FORCES

## Attacks on Enemy Shipping

H.Q. E.A.C. Op:  
Summaries; H.Q.  
12th. U.S.A.A.F.  
Intell: Summaries;  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops:  
(Merch't) Vol. 4;  
List from Enemy  
Sources of  
Italian  
merchant ships  
sunk.

The most successful attacks on enemy shipping during January and February were made by aircraft of the 12th. U.S.A.A.F. On 20th January, six U.S. Mitchells, escorted by twelve Lightnings, were sent to attack shipping between Tunisia and Sicily. At 13.41 hours (off Plana Island)<sup>(1)</sup> they sighted the Italian 5,022-ton tanker Saturno escorted by a small motor vessel and two destroyers. The Mitchells dropped fifteen 500 lb. bombs (from a height of 200 feet), scoring one direct hit and two near misses on the Saturno which caused an explosion, the vessel settling low in the water and subsequently sinking. Two days later (22nd January) five U.S. Marauders, escorted by twelve Lightnings, bombed a 4,000-ton freighter and a cargo ship, obtaining hits on the stern and amidships of the freighter which was left listing<sup>(2)</sup>, while near misses were registered on the cargo ship. On 23rd January, five escorted U.S. Marauders attacked some freight barges off the Tunisian coast: one barge exploded, one was set on fire and capsized, and a third was listing when last seen. Four days later (27th January), six escorted U.S. Mitchells bombed two enemy destroyers both of which had their decks loaded with troops; two direct hits were scored on the starboard side of one of the destroyers which was set on fire and left listing heavily<sup>(3)</sup>, while near misses were obtained on the other. On 29th January, six U.S. Mitchells, escorted by twelve Lightnings, attacked an enemy convoy some 30 miles off Cape Bon, comprising the 3,094-ton merchantman Vercelli,<sup>(4)</sup> one 1,500-ton merchantman, six freighters, four destroyers and several small escort vessels. The convoy was bombed from 100 feet, two direct hits being scored on the Vercelli which blew off her superstructure and sank her. The other merchant ship was hit and set on fire while one of the freighters was hit which caused an explosion.<sup>(5)</sup> While the attack was in progress, a formation of about sixteen enemy aircraft attacked the Mitchells: one ME.109, one ME.110 and one ME.210 were destroyed, one ME.109, one ME.110 and one ME.120 were probably destroyed, and one JU.88 was damaged.

On 10 February, nine escorted U.S. Mitchells, while on an offensive shipping patrol, sighted and attacked four barges (believed to be Siebel ferries) some 40 miles north of Cape Bon. The bombs, dropped from 500 feet, sank two of the barges.<sup>(6)</sup>

Meanwhile, the Hudsons of Nos. 500 and 608 squadrons, R.A.F. were continuing their anti-submarine searches and patrols and escorts to Allied shipping. During these operations they made several attacks on U-boats, these included a moonlight attack on 17 January by a Hudson (of No. 500 squadron) while carrying out a sweep near Bone. The Hudson sighted a fully-surfaced U-boat which it attacked with three 250 lb. depth-charges. The depth-charges overshot the target, and a firing duel followed. The Hudson then climbed to 3,000 feet and dive-bombed the U-boat

/with

1. Approximately 30 miles north of Tunis.
2. This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
3. This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
4. The Vercelli was the ex-French ship Brestois.
5. These were officially assessed as "damaged" and "severely damaged" respectively.
6. These were officially confirmed as sunk.

with one 250 lb. bomb from 1,600 feet which exploded within 20 feet of the U-boat's starboard bow. The Hudson then "strafed" the U-boat with machine-gun fire, the U-boat replying before submerging. The Hudson remained in the vicinity for over three hours and observed an oil streak about eight miles long.

H.Q., E.A.C.Op.  
Summaries and  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol.4.

A successful attack by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish on enemy shipping at Ferryville on the night of 13/14 December<sup>(1)</sup> was repeated on the night of 12/13 January. Two Swordfish attacked a 3,000-ton coaster and a smaller vessel in the harbour, the coaster being hit amidships by one torpedo which caused an explosion:<sup>(2)</sup> no results were seen from the attack on the smaller ship.

#### Attacks on Enemy Airfields and Transport Aircraft

H.Q. 12th.U.S.  
A.A.F.Intell:  
Summaries  
(AHB.II J15/8)

During January, the 12th. U.S.A.A.F. made several heavy attacks on the Castel Benito airfield (south of Tripoli) so as to supplement the air attacks which were being made by Middle East squadrons and thus hasten the liquidation of the enemy's air forces based in Tripolitania. On 9th January, five U.S. Marauders, escorted by twelve Lightnings, attacked Castel Benito dropping 40 x 100lb. fragmentation bombs on the hangars from 5,000 feet. Three ME.109's which endeavoured to intercept were probably destroyed. Three days later (12th January) twelve escorted U.S. Fortresses repeated this attack with 120 lb. fragmentation bombs, 500 lb. and 1,000 lb. bombs: numerous bursts were seen on the hangars and four fires were started. About seventy-five grounded aircraft were observed of which at least twenty were claimed as destroyed. On the same day another aerodrome about 20 miles west of Castel Benito was also bombed. After leaving this target the U.S. aircraft were attacked by twenty-thirty ME.109's of which fourteen were claimed as destroyed and three others probably destroyed: one of the Fortresses was severely damaged.

Ibid:

A third attack on Castel Benito was made (on 18th January) by thirteen escorted U.S. Fortresses which dropped 65 x 100 lb. and 42 x 1,000 lb. bombs from 1,300/17,000 feet, while the escorting fighters provided high cover at 23,000 feet. Several fires were started in the target area; moderate "flak" was encountered. About fifteen/twenty ME.109's and F.W. 190's attacked the Fortresses; two of the enemy fighters were destroyed and four others probably destroyed. One Fortress and one Lightning were missing.

Ibid: and  
H.Q. E.A.C.Op.  
Summaries

Meanwhile the enemy's forces were withdrawing from Tripolitania, their new base being made at Medenine (Tunisia). Patrolling U.S. Lightnings reported that there were about 100 aircraft on the Medenine landing-ground, and on the night of 22/23 January eleven Wellingtons (of the R.A.F. Eastern Air Command) bombed this airfield with 24 x 500 lb, 2 x 1,000 lb., and 2 x 4,000 lb. bombs and incendiaries. The results of this attack were difficult to assess but three large fires were started. During the operation a considerable number of aircraft were seen, but on the following night when eighteen U.S. escorted Mitchells were sent to attack the same target no enemy aircraft were observed. From this it was presumed that

/the

1. See A.H.B. Narrative of "Operations in North Africa".
2. This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".

the aircraft had been dispersed as a result of the raid by the Wellingtons on the previous night.

Ibid:

The outstanding raid of the month occurred on 22nd January when three attacks were made on the El Aouina (Tunis) airfield. The first attack was made at 11,00 hours by forty U.S. Fortresses, escorted by Lightnings, during which 471 fragmentation clusters and 57 x 500 lb. G.P. bombs were dropped from 20,000 feet. Several fires were started some of which were visible for up to 100 miles on the return flight. The second attack was made at 12.40 hours by twelve escorted U.S. Marauders which dropped 208 x 100 lb. bombs on dispersed aircraft, several of which were destroyed. At 14.40 hours the third attack was launched, this time by eighteen escorted U.S. Mitchells which dropped 203 fragmentation clusters from 8,000/9,600 feet, numerous hits being observed in the dispersal areas and several fires being started among parked transport aircraft. During these three attacks moderate and fairly accurate "flak" was encountered: one Mitchell was shot down.

Ibid:

Early in February, the 12th. U.S.A.A.F. made heavy attacks on the landing-ground at Gabes. On 3rd February, fifteen U.S. Marauders, escorted by sixteen Lightnings, dropped 1,566 x 20 lb. fragmentation bombs from 10,000 feet onto the main airfield, bursts occurring in the target area. The Marauders were attacked by a formation of ME.109's and a running fight ensued lasting for forty minutes. The U.S. aircraft claimed three enemy aircraft destroyed, two probables and three damaged: one Marauder and one Lightning were lost. This attack was repeated on the following day by eighteen escorted Fortresses which dropped 2,592 x 20 lb. fragmentation bombs from 20,000 feet, starting several fires on the airfield and in the dispersal area. Nine enemy fighters were claimed as destroyed, three probably destroyed and eight damaged. Later the same day twenty-four other escorted Fortresses attacked an important landing-ground west of Gabes, many bursts and columns of smoke being seen in the target area. In a running fight with enemy fighters, extending for over 50 miles, sixteen enemy fighters were claimed as destroyed, nine probably destroyed and one damaged for the loss of one Fortress and four Lightnings.

Ibid:

The attacks on enemy air bases were extended in February across the sea to the Sardinian airfields in the vicinity of Cagliari and at Elmas and Decimomannu. On 7th February, U.S. Fortresses and Marauders bombed Elmas airfield and the sea-plane base at Cagliari, and that night R.A.F. Wellingtons attacked the landing-ground at Villacidre, some 20 miles north-west of Cagliari. For the next nine days bad weather conditions prevented further attacks, but on 18th February, forty-four escorted U.S. Fortresses bombed the airfield at Elmas, and on the same day U.S. Mitchells and Marauders attacked the airfields at Villacidre and Decimomannu. At Villacidre bursts were seen on the north-east side of the airfield: a considerable number of grounded enemy aircraft were believed to have been destroyed at Decimomannu over which two Marauders collided and were lost.

Ibid:

During January, the numbers of enemy transport aircraft from Sicily and Naples increased considerably, as many as seventy-two JU.52's landing at Tunis in a single day. The U.S. Lightnings escorting the Marauders and Mitchells on anti-shipping sweeps, intercepted these JU.52's on several occasions. On 14th January, six JU.52's, one ME.323 and two escorting F.W.190's were destroyed and three JU.52's probably destroyed: on 17th January, two JU.52's and one JU.88 were destroyed for the loss of one Lightning, and on 21st January, one JU.52 and one F.W.190 were shot down.

/Merger



Merger of Eastern Air Command and 12th. U.S.A.A.F.

As already stated,<sup>(1)</sup> the (R.A.F.) Eastern Air Command and the 12th. U.S.A.A.F. were absorbed into the North-west African Air Forces on the formation of that Command on 18th February. During the few months of their existence as separate entities the Eastern Air Command and the 12th. U.S.A.A.F. had done excellent work: in addition to their heavy commitments in supporting ground operations they had provided protection to Allied shipping convoys, maintained daily anti-shipping and anti-U-boat sweeps and patrols, and had carried out heavy and repeated attacks on enemy airfields and supply ports and bases. During all these varied operations the Eastern Air Command and the 12th. U.S.A.A.F. had together destroyed over 600 enemy aircraft, probably destroyed upwards of 200 more, and damaged more than 300 others.<sup>(2)</sup>

Work of the Allied Naval Forces

The vital work of protecting Allied supplies and of harassing the enemy's supply lines had been shared by the Eastern Air Command and the 12th. U.S.A.A.F. with the Allied Naval forces. It was estimated that 90% of the Axis flow of men and supplies across the Sicilian "Narrows" was seaborne, only 10% being by air,<sup>(3)</sup> and the enemy's sea-borne route with constant air cover was considerably less vulnerable than the extended coastal route of the Allies between Algiers and Bone. None the less, submarines of the Royal Navy concentrated in the dangerous approaches to Tunis and Biserta, and the cruisers and destroyers of the Naval Force "Q" made repeated shipping attacks at night from Bone. A particularly successful attack occurred in the early hours of 2nd December when three cruisers and the destroyers Quentin and Quiberon attacked an enemy convoy about 40 miles north of Cape Bon and sank or set on fire four supply and troop ships and three destroyers.<sup>(4)</sup>

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative "The  
War at Sea",  
Vol.III.

The constant night patrols of Force 'Q' forced the enemy to make daylight passages under air cover and this afforded opportunities for shipping strikes to the Fleet Air Arm squadrons operating from Bone and Malta. Moreover, Royal Naval minelayers undertook the dangerous task of mining enemy waters. Between 1st January and 7th April, H.M.S. Abdiel laid eight minefields in the Sicilian Channel, operating without escort or navigational aids, in waters which had been previously mined and which were patrolled by enemy submarines, "E"-boats and aircraft. In February, the minelaying programme was increased by the employment of Motor Torpedo Boats from Bone carrying American mines which were laid close in shore off Bizerta.

/The

1. On page 474 supra.
2. The actual figures claimed were:-

	<u>Destroyed</u>	<u>Probables</u>	<u>Damaged</u>
Eastern Air Command	255	55	160
12th. U.S.A.A.F.	384	127	166
Totals	639	182	326

Comments based on 3. Intelligence sources confirmed the correctness of this estimate.

Genl. Eisenhower's  
Despatch from notes  
by A.C.A.S.(I) and  
D.of Ops.(A.D.):  
A.M. C/30435/46

4. A few hours later the Quentin was sunk by an aircraft torpedo and the Quiberon was damaged by a near miss. (Five days earlier - 28 November - these two destroyers had sunk a German U-boat, north of Bone, following upon a report from a fighter aircraft).

The primary task of the Navy was, however, to protect supplies for the British First Army. Convoys escorted by destroyers and other Naval vessels sailed eastwards from Algiers to Bone once every fortnight: these convoys had to be protected from air and, on occasion, U-boat attacks. The greater risk which would have been incurred by using large ships for the movement of personnel was circumvented by the employment of four cross-Channel steamers which ran a shuttle service between Algiers and Bone and carried over 3,000 troops on each journey. Other small ships transported guns, tanks, M.T., oil, and military personnel from Oran to Phillipville and Bone. On 7th January, one of these vessels the Tasajara - was damaged by a torpedo from an enemy aircraft;<sup>(1)</sup> during all their operations these small ships were liable to enemy air attack and, occasionally, to attacks by U-boats. As a counter to air attacks at Bougie and Bone, all available French anti-aircraft guns were concentrated at these two ports, while aircraft of No. 325 Wing, R.A.F., provided night-fighter protection.

#### OPERATIONS OF THE N.A.A.F.

The air/sea warfare of the North-west African Air Forces was carried out by the N.A. Coastal and Strategic Air Forces. The Coastal Air Force was responsible for the defence of all Allied ports and shipping, shipping sweeps and anti-submarine operations, while attacks on enemy ports and convoys were the primary tasks of the Strategic Air Force. These two formations did not, however, operate in "water-tight" compartments: their commitments (and - to a lesser degree - those of the N.A. Tactical Air Force) often over-lapped, and squadrons of the different formations co-operated as necessary. The fundamental aim of the N.A.A.F. was the creation of a flexible "all-round" air force, the guiding principle being the selection of the most appropriate aircraft for whatever task was in hand.

#### Attacks on Enemy Shipping

A.H.Q., N.A.A.F.  
Intell: Reports.  
(AHB.II.J/15/8);  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merch't) Vol. 5;  
List from Enemy  
sources of  
Italian merchant  
ships sunk.

Several successful attacks were made by the Strategic Air Force on enemy shipping during March. These included an attack on the morning of 7th March when six U.S. Mitchells, escorted by fourteen Lightnings, sighted and bombed a convoy comprising the Italian merchantmen Ines Corrado (6,200 tons) and Balzac (1,947 tons) and one 2,000-ton merchant ship, with some six escort vessels, between Sicily and Tunis. The Mitchells dropped 35 x 500 lb. bombs from 200 feet which sank the Ines Corrado and the Balzac and set the third merchant ship and one of the escort vessels on fire. The Mitchells encountered intense "flak" from the convoy: barrage balloons were seen attached, one fore and one aft, to the Ines Corrado which were released as the Mitchells made their run up. The convoy was escorted by several enemy fighters and a Cant.Z.506; during the engagement one ME.109 was destroyed and one probably destroyed by the Mitchells and two JU.88's, one unidentified two-seater fighter and the Cant. were destroyed by the Lightnings.

/The

1. For account of further casualties to and losses of H.M. ships and Allied transports in the Mediterranean during the period under review, see Admiralty Preliminary Narrative, "The War at Sea", Vol. III, chapter 32 and Vol. IV, chapters 35 and 38.

485.

The success of this attack was further evidenced by the fact that a strike sent out that night from Malta to complete the convoy's destruction found only the third merchant ship burning fiercely and low in the water, and no further action appeared necessary. (1)

Ibid:

The most successful attacks during the latter half of March occurred on the 20th and 22nd. On the first occasion, fifteen escorted U.S. Mitchells attacked (at 12.05 hours) a convoy of four merchantmen and two escort vessels off Cape Bon with 24 x 500 lb. demolition bombs dropped from 750 to 150 feet. A 4,000-ton merchant ship was set on fire (2) and near misses were registered on one of the escort vessels.

On 22nd March, thirteen escorted U.S. Marauders attacked a convoy comprising the Italian troopship Ombrina (6,400 tons) the merchantman Monti (4,301 tons) and two 4,000-ton merchant ships and six escort vessels, some ten miles north-east of Zembra Island. The attack was made by 13.55 hours, 52 x 500 lb. bombs being dropped from 7,500 to 3,500 feet. Several hits were scored on the Ombrina causing an explosion and setting her on fire (3); the Monti received one direct hit and subsequently sank and two hits were scored on an escort vessel. (4) Slight and inaccurate "flak" was encountered, and the Marauders were attacked by twelve/fifteen fighters, three of which were destroyed. Before the target was reached the escorting Lightnings were attacked by some thirty fighters. F.W.190's and MA.202's, of which five were destroyed and seven probably destroyed.

Ibid:

Attacks were also made on shipping in enemy harbours. The most effective of these attacks occurred at 15.42 hours on 22nd March when twenty-two U.S. Fortresses, escorted by twenty-seven Lightnings, bombed enemy shipping in Palermo harbour, dropping 287 x 500 lb. bombs from 24,500 feet. The merchant ships Lanusei (3,713 tons), Modena (3,080 tons) Velta (1,189 tons) and three small ships (Trentino - 671 tons) Rosa - 559 tons, and the tanker Labor - 510 tons) were sunk or destroyed, (5) a large 6,000-ton merchantman was damaged (6) and one destroyer was claimed as damaged. (7) Intense and accurate "flak" was encountered over the target. During the operation the Fortresses were attacked by fifteen/twenty ME.109's, F.W.109's and RE.2001's: four ME's, and one RE. were destroyed and one RE. probably destroyed for the loss of one Fortress shot down. Over Agadi Island the escorting Lightnings were attacked by six MA.202's of which one was destroyed, one probably destroyed and one damaged. (8)

#### Position of the Land Fighting

Meanwhile, towards the end of February, Von Arnim had launched an attack in the northern sector of Tunisia, and on /4th

1. This ship was officially assessed as sunk.
2. This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
3. The Ombrina, which had been severely damaged in the attack, managed to reach Bizerta harbour where she blew up and sank on 24th March.
4. This was officially assessed as "damaged".
5. Two of these small ships were blown on to the St. Lucia pier. (The force of one of the explosions was felt by the bombers).
6. This was officially assessed as "damaged".
7. The (Air Ministry) assessment of this was "damaged".
8. These enemy fighters carried long-range tanks which they dropped before they engaged the Lightnings.

4th March his forces captured Sedjenane. By 7th March the enemy's attack had lost its momentum and the Allied forces succeeded in holding Medjez el Bab, which was still their nearest approach to Tunis. From 7th to 17th March operations were restricted to local attacks and patrols. On 28th March, the First Army made a strong attack on the enemy's positions east of Djebel Abiod, re-occupied Sedjenane on 30th March and penetrated as far as Cape Serat.

In the meantime the Eighth Army had pursued Rommel's "Afrika Korps" into Tunisia.<sup>(1)</sup> On 6th March, Rommel attacked in force at Medenine (some 20 miles south of Mareth), but the Eighth Army crushed this assault, destroying fifty of the enemy's tanks and losing none of its own. Rommel then retreated to the Mareth line which was attacked by the Eighth Army on the night of 20/21 March. During the next few days heavy fighting - supported by intense attacks of the Western Desert Air Force - took place, and the Mareth line was outflanked. On the night of 27/28 March the enemy evacuated the Mareth line and concentrated for a further stand at Oued el Akarit, and on the following day (29th March) the Eighth Army occupied Gabes.

While the Mareth battle was in progress, American forces in the southern sector had occupied Gafsa and Maknassy (23rd March). In the central sector Allied forces had advanced north-east from Sbeitla (26th March) and had occupied Fondouk, and by the end of month they were threatening Kasserine - the focal point of the road system of the central Tunisian plain. Thus, by the beginning of April, the Allies were closing in on the enemy's Tunisian forces and the campaign was about to enter its final phase.

From 1st to 5th April the Eighth Army and Rommel's forces concentrated for a renewal of the combat which had ended temporarily with the latter's evacuation of the Mareth line. Then, early in the morning of 6th April, the Eighth Army attacked the Oued el Akarit defences and by that evening Rommel's forces had begun to retreat to Enfidaville, some 150 miles to the north. During these operations squadrons of the Western Desert Air Force and U.S. bombers of the Tactical Air Force made heavy attacks on the enemy.

Meanwhile, in the central sector, the Allied forces maintained a steady pressure against the enemy in the Fondouk and Pichon area, and on 11th April the First Army's IX Corps captured Kairouan, and the same day it effected a junction with the Eighth Army's X Corps advancing from the south. In the meantime Allied forces were operating northwards of Medjaz el Bab; Chaouch was captured on 9th April and by 15th April the advance was proceeding northwards to Djebel Ang. On 10th April, Allied combined air and ground attacks had forced Rommel to evacuate the port of Sfax. The town had already been damaged by air attacks, and the enemy had blocked the harbour channel and blown up the quays at intervals of 40 yards. Sousse was occupied on 12th April: the harbour entrance of this port was found to be partially blocked by a sunken wreck.<sup>(2)</sup> During the next ten days Sousse was prepared as an advance striking base for Naval motor torpedo boats, and on 28th April these vessels made their first daylight sweep of the Tunisian coast, in the course of which they attacked and severely damaged two enemy minesweepers and two enemy aircraft (on the beach), and sank a 3,000-ton merchantman, escorted by two destroyers and fighter aircraft.

/Allied

1. A brief account of the Eighth Army's advance through Tripolitania is given in Sub-section THE EASTERN BASIN, infra.
2. For the final R.A.F. bombing attacks on these ports see page 523 infra.

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Allied Occupation of the Kerkennah IslandsIbid:

In the meantime, on 14th April, the first Axis-held territory outside Africa was occupied when a small commando force from Malta, operating in four Naval motor launches, seized the Kerkennah Islands off the east coast of Tunisia. No opposition was encountered, and after leaving gendarmes in charge the force returned to Malta on 19th April.

Further Attacks on Enemy Shipping (i)

In April, the attacks on enemy shipping by the Royal Navy and the Allied Air Forces increased in intensity and were largely successful in depriving the enemy of his supplies, especially fuel, during the critical phases of the land battle.

The aircraft of the Strategic Air Force employed in anti-shipping operations by day in the Sicilian "Narrows" and the Tyrrhenian Sea were U.S. heavy bombers and U.S. and R.A.F. fighter-bombers. U.S. Fortresses were employed against shipping in harbours and large convoys and, on occasion, against specific sea targets such as the Italian cruisers at La Maddalena.<sup>(1)</sup> High altitude bombing proved effective against ships at sea and it was estimated that the Fortresses required to drop about 28 tons of bombs to sink a merchant ship of medium size. For day shipping sweeps the U.S. Mitchells had been usually employed, but during April, U.S. Lightnings were used increasingly against ships and convoys at sea, but not generally against shipping in harbour. It also became usual for the Lightnings escorting the medium bombers to carry bombs themselves, and when these had been dropped the Lightnings then became part of the ordinary escort. In attacks on convoys each flight (consisting of six aircraft) attacked at altitude intervals of 300 to 500 feet in order to give freedom of movement for evasive action against "flak".

Sinking of the Trieste

A.H.Q.N.A.A.F.  
Intell:Reports  
(AHB.II.J/15/8)  
and  
R.A.F.Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merch't)Vol.5

At the beginning of April the Italian Navy still possessed three 10,000-ton cruisers, the Trieste, Gorizia and Bolzano.<sup>(2)</sup> Two of these cruisers, the Trieste and Gorizia, were observed at La Maddalena (Sardinia) Naval Base by aircraft of the N.A. Photo: Reconnaissance Wing, and on 10th April eighty-four U.S. Fortresses<sup>(3)</sup> attacked them. At 13.37 hours the first wave (comprising twenty-four Fortresses) dropped 144 x 1,000 lb. (.1 and .025 seconds delay) bombs on the Trieste from 18,750 feet, and six minutes later a second wave (of thirty-six Fortresses) dropped 216 x 1,000 (.1 and .025 seconds delay) bombs on the Gorizia from 18,000 feet. At 14.00 hours a third wave (comprising twenty-four Fortresses) attacked the submarine base and harbour installations with 287 x 500 lb. (delay) bombs dropped from 18,000 feet. The Trieste and the Gorizia both received several hits and near misses which sank the Trieste and damaged the Gorizia.

Three days later (13th April) three U.S. Lightning-bombers attacked the Gorizia dropping three 1,000 lb. (delay) bombs from 3,000 feet: a hit was scored on the cruiser's stern and two

/near

1. See the following paragraph.
2. The Bolzano had been damaged by a torpedo attack during Operation "Pedestal" in August, 1942 (see SECTION V, page 431) and was still undergoing repairs at Spezia.
3. In this and the following attacks the aircraft were of the Strategic Air Force (unless stated otherwise).

near misses were registered. In spite of the severe damage which she had sustained from the attacks by the Fortresses and Lightnings, the Gorizia managed to steam to Spezia. After the sinking of the Trieste and the damage done to the Gorizia (and the Bolzano) the Italian fleet was left without any serviceable heavy cruisers.

#### Further Attacks on Enemy Shipping (ii)

Ibid: and  
A.H.Q.N.A.A.F.  
Op. & Intell:  
Summaries  
(A.H.B. II  
J/15/10)

During April, aircraft of the N.A.A.F. made nine attacks on enemy shipping in the Tunis area and also carried out some sixteen effective shipping sweeps. The majority of the attacks made by the U.S. Fortresses were effective as these aircraft were sent to attack selected convoys or ships whose locations had been determined by reconnaissance, in addition to shipping in harbours. On the other hand, only about 50% of the sorties made in shipping sweeps by the U.S. Mitchells and Lightning-bombers resulted in attacks: this was generally due to lack of sightings or to the return of escorting fighter-bombers owing to jettisoning their long-range tanks. On several occasions, however, when no shipping sightings were made, formations of escorted Mitchells successfully attacked enemy aircraft flying to Tunis; casualties were also inflicted on enemy aircraft escorting convoys.

Of the successful attacks on enemy shipping during April the following were the most conspicuous.

Ibid: and  
List from Enemy  
sources of  
Italian  
merchant ships  
sunk.

On 4th April, thirty-eight U.S. Fortresses bombed shipping in the harbour at Naples, dropping 456 x 500 lb. (.1 and .025 seconds delay) bombs from 23,500 feet.<sup>(1)</sup> The 9,646-ton merchant ship Sicilia was set on fire and sunk, a tanker was reported to have been hit and near misses were registered on a small 500-ton ship. One RE.2001, one ME.110 and three MA.202's attacked the bombers over the target; one of these enemy fighters was probably destroyed and one other was damaged.

Two days later (6th April) two formations of U.S. Fortresses and one of U.S. Mitchells attacked enemy convoys. The most successful of these attacks was made at 16.25 hours by twenty-two Fortresses on a convoy comprising the 8,564-ton merchantman Roverta,<sup>(2)</sup> two other large merchant ships and three escort vessels, some 5 miles off, and heading for Biserta. The Fortresses dropped 262 x 500 lb. (delay) bombs from 10,000 feet which blew up the Roverta and set one of the other merchantmen on fire.<sup>(3)</sup> Intense and accurate "flak" was encountered and some twenty enemy fighters attacked the bombers over the target. Fifteen ME.109's were claimed as destroyed and three others damaged; two of the Fortresses were severely damaged and ten other slightly damaged.

On 17th April, forty-four U.S. Fortresses, escorted by thirty-six Lightnings, attacked shipping in Palermo harbour at 12.42 hours, dropping 522 x 500 (delay) bombs from 24,000 feet. Several ships were hit including the 5,457-ton Chieti and the 1,068-ton Lentini,<sup>(4)</sup> which were both /sunk

1. Two other formations of Fortresses bombed the harbour and dock areas (see Sub-section PORT BOMBING, page 523 *infra*.)
2. The Roverta was the ex-French ship Yalou.
3. This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
4. The Chieti and Lentini were the ex-French ships Arizona and Herma.

SECRET

sunk, and considerable damage was done to the dock area. Very heavy "flak" was encountered and fourteen of the Fortresses were damaged. The Fortresses were attacked by a formation of about forty fighters and JU.88's, of which five ME.110's and seven ME.210's were claimed as destroyed, three probably destroyed and several others damaged: one Lightning was shot down.

The following day (18th April), eighteen U.S. Mitchells, escorted by thirty-four Lightnings, attacked shipping in the harbour of Porto Torres (Sardinia), dropping 108 x 500 lb. (delay) bombs from 9,500 to 8,500 feet at 13.55 hours. Direct hits were scored on the merchant ship Liv (3,068 tons) which sank, and the 1,333-ton ship Tiziano was set on fire<sup>(1)</sup>. There were no encounters with enemy fighters during this operation.<sup>(2)</sup>

Towards the end of April, formations of R.A.F. Kittyhawks and U.S. Warhawk fighter-bombers of the Western Desert Air Force made several successful shipping sweeps in the Gulf of Tunis. These included an attack on 26th April by a striking force of Kittyhawks on two motor cargo vessels (one of 2,000 tons), off Cape Bon, which had been located by Spitfires on shipping reconnaissance. The Kittyhawks attacked with 500 lb. (delay) bombs: one of the vessels blew up<sup>(3)</sup> and the other was believed to have been damaged.<sup>(4)</sup>

On 29th April, a large force of Kittyhawks bombed four enemy landing craft, escorted by two naval auxiliary vessels, near Cape Bon, which were heading for Tunis. One of the landing craft was blown up and two others (believed to be carrying petrol) were set on fire.<sup>(5)</sup> Later, the Kittyhawks sighted and attacked the merchant ship Terramo<sup>(6)</sup> (1,599 tons) which was left blazing and was subsequently beached. On the same day eighteen U.S. Mitchells, escorted by nineteen Lightnings, attacked two unescorted merchantmen (of 3,000 and 2,000 tons respectively) in the Gulf of Tunis, dropping 94 x 500 lb. (delay) bombs. The larger vessel was hit on the stern and left stationary and in flames.<sup>(7)</sup> Meanwhile, four of the Lightnings (which were carrying 500 lb. bombs) attacked the smaller ship, claiming one hit amidships and another hit aft<sup>(8)</sup>. Some twelve enemy fighters attacked the Lightnings which accounted for four ME.102's, one MA.202 and one unidentified aircraft, and one other aircraft damaged.

/During

1. The Tiziano was subsequently sunk in a bombing attack at Leghorn on 28th May.
2. The absence of enemy fighters on this occasion, and the presence of JU.88's with formations of fighters on other occasions (described above) would seem to indicate the enemy was experiencing a shortage of fighter aircraft at this stage of the campaign.
3. This was officially assessed as sunk.
4. This was officially assessed under Category IV.
5. These were officially assessed as sunk.
6. The Terramo was the ex-French ship Marie-Thérèse Le Bergne.
7. It appears that this ship was located in the early hours of the following morning by some Wellingtons on an offensive reconnaissance. One of the Wellingtons thereupon attacked it, a 500 lb. bomb striking the vessel amidships and blowing it up. (This was officially assessed as sunk).
8. This was officially assessed as sunk.



During 29th April a very considerable amount of enemy shipping activity was reported by N.A.A.F. reconnaissance aircraft, especially in the Sicilian Straits and off the Tunisian coast. In consequence, several shipping sweeps were made next day (30th April) by Kittyhawks, U.S. Warhawks, Marauders and Mitchells which resulted in the sinking of an enemy destroyer, an escort vessel, a large launch, a Siebel ferry and "E"-boat and an "F"-boat; and damage to a cruiser, a destroyers, a 1,500-ton merchant ship and small cargo vessel (all in the Gulf of Tunis); a small merchant ship was also attacked in the Sicilian Straits (by two U.S. Lightnings) but no damage was observed.

A.H.Q. M.A.C.  
AOC/52  
(Corresp: with  
CAS., Etc.,)  
48A

These operations were what Air Chief-Marshal Tedder described as "the opening round of operations against enemy shipping of all classes, similar to recent operations against his air transport"(1). The Air Chief-Marshal stressed that the importance of these anti-shipping operations was not only their effect on current land battles and of interrupting enemy supplies but also an indication of the Allied air prospects in preventing the enemy from staging a "Dunkirk" (in other words of successfully evacuating his forces from Tunisia during the last stages of the campaign, which, it was apparent, were fast approaching.)

#### Attacks on Enemy Airfields and Transport Aircraft - Operation "Flax".

The enemy's employment of air transport to Tunisia from Italy via Sicily (which had increased considerably in January) became still more in evidence during the following weeks. By the end of March the traffic of the JU. 52's - augmented by "giant" ME. 323 transports(2) - was reaching its peak, in spite of heavy raids on enemy airfields and attacks on transport aircraft in the air, and it was estimated that daily average of at least a hundred transport aircraft were arriving in Tunisia during the last days of that month.

A.H.Q. N.A.A.F.  
Intell: Reports  
(AHB.II J15/8:  
& Op. & Intell:  
Summaries  
(AHB.II J15/10);  
and Op. Bulletin  
No. 1 (AHB.II  
J15/6).

Early in February a plan (known as Operation "Flax") had been formulated which was intended to effect a complete dislocation of the enemy's air transport system; but its execution was held in abeyance, partly to obtain further intelligence on which to gauge the position of enemy transport aircraft at given times, but more especially so that the operation could be staged at a time most critical to the enemy. The essential information necessary for the planning of "Flax" included the size of the enemy's transport formations and escorts, their airports of arrival, departure, and intermediate stopping places, the time-tables and routes to be followed, and the scale of enemy fighter cover from Tunisia.

The original plan included the following elements:-

- (a) a Lightning sweep in the Sicilian Straits to intercept enemy air transport planes flying to Tunisia (part of this force was to engage enemy fighter cover and part to destroy transports).
- (b) a fighter sweep of Spitfires to patrol the Gulf of Tunis and destroy transport units escaping from the Lightning sweep (a) and to engage any enemy fighters which might be sent from Tunisia.

/(c)

1. i.e. Operation "Flax" and subsidiary operations, vide infra.  
2. The JU.52's carried loads of about 2½ tons and the ME.323's of 10 tons.



- (c) an additional Spitfire formation to give fighter protection to formations of Fortresses which were to bomb the Tunisian airfields where the enemy transport aircraft would land
- (d) medium bombers (Mitchells), escorted by long-range fighters, to bomb enemy staging airfields in Western Sicily
- (e) a shipping sweep by Mitchells, with fighter escort, to be carried out in conjunction with the fighter sweep (b).<sup>(1)</sup>

Owing to increases in fighter strength of the Strategic Air Forces and changes in enemy strength, dispositions and transport schedules, the "Flax" plan was revised several times. At length, on 5th April - the first day when weather and other relevant conditions were favourable - the plan was put into action.

The operation began at 06.30 hours when twenty-six U.S. Lightnings were sent out on an independent fighter sweep over the Sicilian Straits. At 08.00 hours they intercepted a formation of fifty-seventy JU.52's and six JU.87's escorted by twenty ME. 109's, four F.W. 190's and one F.W. 187 flying towards Tunisia. (Some of these fighters were, apparently, escorting a convoy of twelve medium and small cargo ships). The Lightnings attacked the enemy formation, destroying eleven JU. 52's, two ME. 109's, two JU.87's and the F.W. 187: two Lightnings were missing. About the same time eighteen U.S. Mitchells, escorted by thirty-two Lightnings, took off to bomb an enemy (sea) convoy of three large merchantmen, six Siebel Ferries and three barges, escorted by three destroyers. Two of the Mitchells and six Lightnings returned early while the remainder attacked the convoy, dropping 70 x 500 lb. (delay) bombs from 6,000 and 100 feet. Two of the merchantmen and two barges were hit and one of the destroyers was reported as blown up<sup>(2)</sup>; one of the Lightnings was shot down by "flak". At 08.05 hours the escorting Lightnings encountered a large formation of JU.52's and four JU.87's, escorted by sixteen ME.109's and 110's and one ME.210, north of Cape Bon. The Lightnings shot down seven JU.52's, three JU.87's, three ME.109's, one ME.110 and the ME. 210 for the loss of four of themselves.

Soon after this, U.S. Fortresses attacked the main enemy airfields in the Bizerta and Tunis areas; one formation of eighteen Fortresses dropped 2,448 x 20 lb. fragmentation bombs from 22,500 feet on Sidi Ahmed (Bizerta), and another formation of twenty-three Fortresses dropped 3,312 x 20 lb. fragmentation bombs from 20,500 feet on El Aouina (Tunis). In the latter attack, bombs fell among some thirty aircraft, mostly transport, which were parked on the airfield. During both these attacks R.A.F. Spitfires gave fighter protection to the Fortresses.

Meanwhile, U.S. Fortresses and Mitchells attacked Sicilian airfields. Eighteen Fortresses dropped 2,448 x 20 lb. fragmentation bombs from 22,500 feet on over a hundred aircraft at

/Boca

1. It had also been intended to ask the U.S. 9th Air Force (Middle East Command) to send a bombing mission of Liberators to Naples, as the enemy air transport formations generally originated at that place before leaving for Sicily and thence across the Straits to Tunisia.
2. The two merchantmen were officially assessed under Category IV, and the two barges and one destroyer as sunk.

Boca di Falco airfield, starting large fires, and destroying two ME. 109's and one MA.200 in air combats without loss to themselves. At Milo (a transport intermediate landing-ground near Trapani) twenty-six U.S. Fortresses, escorted by Lightnings, dropped 3,696 x 20 lb. fragmentation bombs from 13,000 feet on seventy/eighty large aircraft on the ground, destroying some fifty transports and bombers and setting a hangar on fire. A formation of thirty-four U.S. Mitchells, escorted by fifteen Lightnings, attacked Bo Rizzo airfield dropping 2,442 x 20 lb. fragmentation bombs from 10,000 to 8,000 feet among some eighty poorly dispersed transport, fighter and multi-engined aircraft. The airfield was well covered with bursts and hits were also made on some buildings. In combats with enemy fighters six ME. 109's were shot down; two of the Mitchells were also shot down but they made good landings in the sea. On the same afternoon two formations of U.S. Lightnings covered the Sicilian Straits but no enemy aircraft were sighted.

The casualties to enemy aircraft during Operation "Flax" were estimated to be forty shot down by fighters and bombers and one hundred and sixty-one destroyed on the ground, making a total of two hundred and one all told.<sup>(1)</sup>

Operation "Flax" was repeated on a smaller scale on the morning of 10th April by a sweep in the Sicilian Straits carried out by twenty U.S. Mitchells in two flights, twelve aircraft flying very low and eight at 1,000 feet. A formation of about fifty JU.52's, escorted by some fifteen MA.200's and F.W.190's, was encountered flying towards Tunis about 20 miles north-north-east of Cape Bon. The lower flight of Mitchells destroyed twenty of the JU.52's and the upper flight accounted for eight of the fighters. On the same day, shortly after noon, eighteen U.S. Mitchells, escorted by twenty-one Lightnings on a shipping sweep 10 miles north of Cape Bon, intercepted a formation of twenty-five JU.52's escorted by a number of JU.87's and 88's and ME.109's and 110's. The Mitchells shot down ten JU.52's and two JU.88's, and the Lightnings destroyed ten more JU.52's, one JU.88, one ME.109 and one ME.110. One Lightning was lost in collision with an ME.110. Most of the enemy transport aircraft attacked burst into flames and exploded, indicating that they were carrying oil and petrol (which was so urgently needed by the Axis forces then engaged in the battle of Oued el Akarit). On the same day twenty-five R.A.F. Spitfires of the Tactical Air Force - engaged on a fighter sweep in the Tunis-Bizerta area - shot down four JU.52's and damaged one other, for the loss of two of themselves.

On the following morning (11th April), nineteen U.S. Lightnings, while carrying out a fighter sweep over the Sicilian Straits, encountered off Cape Bon a formation of some twenty JU. 52's and an unidentified transport aircraft, with a miscellaneous escort of fighters, flying towards Tunis: all the twenty-one enemy transport and five other aircraft were destroyed by the Lightnings. Later the same morning another U.S. Lightning formation intercepted twenty-five/thirty unescorted JU.52's, 10 miles south of Marettimo Island, and destroyed five of them.

/Meanwhile,

1. The tabulation of aircraft destroyed on the ground was made after reconnaissance aircraft had photographed the airfields which had been attacked, the photos being carefully checked by experienced photo.-interpretation officers.

A.H.Q. M.A.,  
A.C.C/52  
(Corresp.with  
C.A.S. etc.)  
45A.

A.H.Q. N.A.A.F.  
Intell: Reports  
(AHB.II J15/8)  
& Op. & Intell:  
Summaries  
(AHB.II J15/10)  
and  
Op. Bulletin  
No. 1  
(AHB.II J15/6)

Meanwhile, the Eighth Army had continued its pursuit of Rommel's forces in their retreat to Enfidaville. The Eighth Army's advance made it possible for the Western Desert Air Force to operate further forward and this gave added scope for attacks on the enemy's air transport. Since the enemy's transport convoys were concentrated and heavily escorted with fighters, it was considered that success was only possible if a large Allied fighter force were to be concentrated at the right time and place. The enemy's methods were therefore carefully studied by observation of intercepted enemy W/T. signals and this gave an approximate period during which Allied chances of interception were relatively good. As a result, it was arranged to cover a period of one and a quarter hours by means of five patrols of fifteen minutes each, overlapping by a few minutes and in average strength, of three Kittyhawk/Warhawk squadrons with one squadron of R.A.F. Spitfires flying as top cover; this method used the whole of the Western Desert Air Force. On 18th April, the last of the five patrols (comprising forty-six Warhawks), while flying over the Gulf of Tunis, was fortunate enough to be "in the right place at the right time" and intercepted about a hundred JU.52's, with a strong escort of fighters, flying northwards at sea level. The Warhawks attacked and destroyed fifty-eight JU.52's, fourteen ME.109's and two ME. 110's, and damaged nineteen JU.52's, nine ME.109's and one ME.110. The Allied losses in this operation were six Warhawks and one Spitfire.

On the next day (19th April), strong formations of Kittyhawks and Spitfires of the Tactical Air Force, flying over the Gulf of Tunis, intercepted and attacked several formations of JU.52's and other enemy aircraft. In all, twelve JU.52's, two SM. 79's, two RE. 2001's, one JU.88, one JU.87 towing a glider, and two ME.109's were destroyed: three Kittyhawks and five Spitfires were lost.

These heavy losses to the enemy's transport aircraft resulted in an almost complete cessation of transport flying for the next two days, but on 22nd April the enemy made a further attempt to send over supplies and reinforcements to Tunisia in "giant" ME.323's. A formation of twenty-one of these aircraft, with a strong fighter escort; was intercepted by five squadrons of Kittyhawks and two and a half squadrons of Spitfires (all of the Tactical Air Force) over the Gulf of Tunis. All the ME.323's were claimed as destroyed besides eight ME.109's, one ME.202 and seven RE. 2001's: four Kittyhawks were lost.<sup>(1)</sup>

Operation "Flax" and its subsidiary operations described above were probably unique in the history of aerial warfare. They caused a great disruption of the enemy's air transport system over the Mediterranean at a critical period of the campaign, and their contribution to the Allied victory in Tunisia can hardly be over-estimated.<sup>(2)</sup>

/The

A.H.Q. M.A.C.  
AOC/52 47A

1. The total enemy air transport losses from 5th April to 22nd April (inclusive) were estimated at 232 JU.52's and 21 ME.323's destroyed, 5 JU.52's probably destroyed, and 27 JU.52's damaged.
2. In a signal of 24th April to A.M.M. Tedder, the Prime Minister said "I congratulate you all on the brilliant series of operations....."

THE N.A. COASTAL AIR FORCE(1) General Outline.

H.Q. N.A.C.A.F.  
O.R.B. Feb: '43.

The Headquarters of the Coastal Air Force were located in the Standard Oil Company's building at Algiers. Its functions included shipping strikes, anti-submarine operations, the protection of Allied port and land installations from Casablanca to Bone, and the protection of all Allied and friendly shipping in the Western Mediterranean from longitude 3° west as far as Bone. This latter task necessitated additional fighter strength,<sup>(1)</sup> and accordingly No. 81 Fighter Group of the U.S. XII Air Support Command<sup>(2)</sup> was transferred from the N.A. Tactical Air Force to the Coastal Air Force. Other reinforcements included the transfer of No. 14 squadron, R.A.F. (Marauders) from No. 201 Group, Nos. 820 and 826 squadrons of the Fleet Air Arm (Albacores), - which were incorporated into No. 325 Wing, R.A.F., - and No. 958 balloon squadron.

H.Q. M.A.C.  
O.R.B. March,  
Appx. 24

(a) Anti-Submarine Precautions

H.Q. N.A.C.A.F.  
O.R.B. March/  
Apl; Appx -  
(unnumbered)

In order to develop the technique of anti-submarine warfare, a system of extensive training was instituted during April (in close liaison with the Royal Navy) at the principal ports by the employment of targets towed on the water. Meanwhile, the Hudsons of Nos. 500 and 608 G.R. squadrons, R.A.F.,<sup>(3)</sup> were converted to rocket propulsion armament: this necessitated additional training of their crews, photographic exercises against land targets for the extenuation of range and angle of dive, and firing at targets towed by Naval units.<sup>(4)</sup>

Ibid: and  
"Their Victory"  
(History of N.A.  
C.A.F. March-  
30 Sept: '43  
by A. V-M Lloyd)

(b) Fighter Defence - Radar

The dividing line of fighter defence responsibilities of the Tactical and Coastal Air Forces was defined as being 50 miles behind the front line, but as the Tactical Air Force had no night-fighter squadrons the Coastal Air Force was called upon for night-fighter operations in the battle area.

It was the responsibility of the Coastal Air Force to safeguard the transport of supplies in and between the ports of Oran, Algiers, Djidjelli, Phillipville and Bone. This meant that the Radar problem was two-fold, namely,

- (i) the provision of adequate protection against hostile air attack by the employment of ground Radar for warnings and for the control of Allied fighters,
- (ii) The employment of A.I. fighters for night interception work in conjunction with Radar control.

/Eastern

1. For the initial strength of the N.A.C.A.F. see page 476 supra
2. See page 475 supra
3. Of No. 328 Wing
4. In addition to the training of crews of Nos. 500 and 608 sqns: four crews from G.R. sqns: from Gibraltar were also trained at the N.A.A.F. Training Centre at Blida.

Eastern Air Command had established a chain of Radar stations along the coast from Oran to the east of Bone.. These stations were, however, of various types e.g. MRU., LW., GCI., and COL., the MRU's and LW. sets being for warning purposes only and the GCI/COL. for the control of fighters. The COL. stations (which were originally designed only for warning and information) were later provided with VHF. and control personnel, and were sited along the coast for the protection of Allied convoys against low flying attacks. The GCI's, with their higher cover, were used mainly for the defence of the ports of Oran, Algiers, Djidjelli, Philippeville and Bone. Soon after the formation of the Coastal Air Force a network of Radar coverage was installed and connected with the various operations and filter rooms situated along the coast. Air Formation Signals were responsible for the installation of land lines and if these should break down W/T. facilities were available. During the Tunisian campaign American Radar equipment arrived in North Africa and this was substituted in the western area for British Radar units which then became available for use elsewhere as the area for which the Coastal Air Force was responsible gradually extended.

Ibid.

The protection of convoys and ports in the daytime was effected by the employment of single-engined fighters either directly under Radar control or vectored as a result of Radar information. To co-operate at night, but without ground Radar, the three Beaufighter squadrons (Nos. 153, 255 and 600 of No. 325 Wing, R.A.F.) were available, which were equipped with Mark IV. A.I. One of these squadrons was based at Maison Blanche with the responsibility of the defence of shipping in the Algiers area and westward to Oran; the other two squadrons were based at Setif and operated their aircraft on forward aerodromes for the defence of shipping and the ports of Philippeville and Bone. Meanwhile the defence of Casablanca was made the responsibility of the squadrons of the U.S. 81st Fighter Group.

At the beginning of the period the enemy's attacks on Allied ports and shipping had been by high and medium bombing which had been countered effectively by the use of the Mark IV. A.I. Beaufighters, but as a result of increasing casualties to his aircraft the enemy changed his tactics by adopting low level attacks. For the bombing of Allied-occupied ports the enemy aircraft climbed to the necessary height as close in as possible, thus shortening the period of warning, and for attacks on shipping he employed torpedo bombers.

The R.A.F. - in conjunction with the Royal Navy - established that the enemy's low level attacks on shipping were being delivered from altitudes of about 200 feet. All COL. stations along the coast were therefore tested for their ability to pick up aircraft at that altitude at ranges of 45 miles. Furthermore, a training school was established at Algiers, and practice interceptions at low altitudes under COL. control were carried out with Mark VII A.I. Beaufighters which had been made available from the U.K. The experience thus obtained was then employed operationally and the enemy's losses became as great in either form of attack. Thereafter the Mark VII A.I. equipment was reserved for the protection of shipping routes, Mark IV A.I. being used for the higher forms of defence which was necessary for countering attacks on ports. Towards the end of the Tunisian campaign (after the Allied occupation of Bizerta and before the surrender of the Cape Bon area) Mark IV A.I. aircraft, controlled from the area north of Tunis, intercepted enemy aircraft leaving Cape Bon. This was effected directly under GCI/COL. control, as although it was known that the enemy aircraft were flying low, no Mark VII A.I. aircraft were then available.

The enemy casualties resulting from the Coastal Air Force' **fighter** defence system during the first two weeks of April were five aircraft destroyed, and during the latter half of that month twenty-one enemy aircraft were shot down.

Ibid:

(c) Reconnaissance and Shipping Strikes

The Coastal Air Force was deficient in long-range reconnaissance aircraft and shipping strike squadrons: this enabled the enemy to send numbers of large ships, routed well to the north-west of Sicily, into Tunis and Bizerta. Although No. 14 squadron, R.A.F., was equipped with torpedo-carrying Marauders, this squadron was greatly overworked as it had to carry out its own reconnaissance. It was therefore, decided to abandon the torpedoes and to change the Marauders into proper reconnaissance aircraft. To make good the deficiency of shipping strike forces, two squadrons of U.S. Fortresses were allocated daily from the Strategic Air Force, to the Coastal Air Force to follow up any ship sightings which might be made. Short-range offensive reconnaissances of the approaches to Bizerta were carried out by one of the Fleet Air Arm Albacore squadrons which was therefore based as far to the east as possible.

Ibid:

(d) Aerodromes

The Coastal Air Force's anti- shipping operations were also hampered by the lack of aerodrome space and the scarcity of all-weather aerodromes. Bone aerodrome was not yet completed and could not be used by No. 14 squadron's reconnaissance Marauders which had, therefore, to operate from Blida. For the same reason the Hudsons of Nos. 500 and 608 squadrons, R.A.F., were unable to carry out night reconnaissances of the Sicilian "Narrows". The preparation of all-weather aerodromes and landing-grounds was, therefore, one of the first tasks with which the Coastal Air Force was faced.

(2) Operations

(a) General

A.H.Q. N.A.A.F.  
Intell: Reports  
(AHB.II J15/8)&  
Op: & Intell:  
Summaries  
(AHB.J15/10)

The work of the Coastal Air Force squadrons ensured that Allied and friendly shipping was adequately escorted, that Allied-occupied ports, harbours and land communications were protected against enemy air attacks and that the submarine menace was kept in check. In addition to these tasks air/sea rescue work was also undertaken.

During the daytime, Hurricanes and Spitfires, and at night Beaufighters, carried out continuous patrols on local defence and convoy escort duties. On the offensive side, Marauders and Beaufighters by day and Hudsons and Albacores by night watched the enemy's shipping lanes. The two Hudson squadrons (Nos. 500 and 608, R.A.F.) and the Swordfish (of No. 813 squadron, F.A.A.) - all fitted with Mark III A.S.V. - kept up their unceasing patrols and searches against U-boats. On several occasions enemy submarines were attacked, but results could in general only be conjectured. A successful attack was made on 4th March by a Hudson (of No. 500 squadron) which sighted a fully surfaced U-boat at 10.05 hours about 80 miles north-east of Oran and attacked it with three 100 lb. anti-submarine bombs dropped from 1,500 feet. The U-boat remained on the surface and the Hudson then attacked it with machine-gun fire and subsequently with three 250 lb. depth-charges

No. 500 sqn.  
O.R.B. March

/ (dropped

497.

(dropped from 75 feet) two of which exploded on each side of the conning tower. White smoke, oil and bubbles were seen as the U-boat began to sink. The Hudson remained in the vicinity for an hour and a half by which time the U-boat had disappeared and about twenty-five bodies of its crew were observed in the sea. (1)

(b) Hurricane and Beaufighter Operations

No.255 Sqn.  
O.R.B. April.

Although the enemy possessed convenient bases in Sardinia for attacks on Allied coast-wise convoys, only a few such attacks - which were made at dusk - were launched. On 5th April, an attempted dusk attack on an Allied convoy near Bone by four S.M. 79 torpedo-bombers was intercepted by five Hurricanes (of No. 253 squadron) all the S.M.'s being destroyed. On 13th April, twelve German torpedo-bombers in Southern Sardinia took off to make a dusk attack on a convoy sailing from Gibraltar towards Algiers. The probability of such an attack had been anticipated by the Coastal Air Force, and nine Beaufighters (of No.255 squadron) were sent to patrol the route which it was expected that the enemy aircraft would take, south-west of Sardinia and more than 200 miles from the convoy. The Beaufighters intercepted the enemy aircraft at 18.00 hours and destroyed one JU.88 and one DO.217, probably destroyed another JU. 88, and damaged two other Ju.88's and one HE.111, for the loss of one of themselves. Meanwhile the remainder of the enemy aircraft jettisoned their torpedoes and fled.

In the early morning of 21st April an attack was made on an Allied convoy off Algiers by fifteen JU.88's. The attack was intercepted by Beaufighters and the convoy escaped unharmed. The JU's then approached Djidjelli and dropped bombs, scoring a hit on a landing craft which caught fire, but the enemy aircraft were again intercepted by Beaufighters and four JU's were claimed as destroyed.

The effectiveness of the Coastal Air Force's protection of Allied shipping was reflected by the safe passage of two large escorted convoys without loss or air attack through the Sicilian "Narrows" en route to the Middle East in May: these successful voyages demonstrated that at long last the Mediterranean route to the East was once again open to Allied sea traffic. (2)

No.153 Sqn.  
O.R.B. April

The work of the Beaufighters included the defence of Allied ports. On the evening of 18th April, four Beaufighters (of No.153 squadron) made a successful interception of some fifteen/eighteen JU.88's which attacked Algiers: three of the JU's were reported as destroyed and one probably destroyed.

During the last week of April the enemy began to make use of his air bases in Sardinia as intermediate landing-grounds for his transport aircraft in an attempt to minimise the danger of interception by Allied fighters, following upon the heavy casualties which had had sustained in Operation "Flax" and its

/subsidiary

A.M.C.O. 12/1946

1. The U-boat was officially assessed as sunk (Final Assessment of Enemy Submarine Casualties)  
(The crew of the Hudson were Sgts. Jackimov, Joy, Blair and Sherriffs).
2. Occasional enemy attacks on convoys were, however, still made, notably on 26th June when over 100 enemy aircraft attacked the "Tedworth" convoy sailing from Gibraltar to Tripoli. This convoy was protected by the N.A.C.A.F. and no major damage was sustained by any of the ships.



subsidiary operations.<sup>(1)</sup> The enemy's tactics were to fly small formations of transport aircraft from these Sardinian air bases to Northern Tunisia at dawn, but the Beaufighters kept watch for them. At about 05.00 hours on the morning of 30th April, a Mark VII A.I. Beaufighter (attached to No.153 squadron), operating from Bone, was vectored on to a formation of JU 52's flying north some 30 miles south of Cagliari. The Beaufighter destroyed five of the JU.52's, all of which caught fire and crashed into the sea. The Beaufighter was slightly damaged by the JU's return fire.<sup>(2)</sup>

(c) Shipping Sweeps by Albacores

During April, the Albacores made several night shipping sweeps; these included the following operations:- On the night of 10/11 April, one torpedo and two bomber Albacores<sup>(3)</sup> attacked a beached merchant ship south of Cape Garina: the torpedo attack failed but three near misses were scored with bombs. Six nights later (16/17 April) four Albacores carried out a shipping sweep over the Sicilian Channel. At 00.46 hours they sighted one 7,000-ton merchantman, one 5/6,000-ton tanker and several "E" or "F"-boats. The Albacores attacked with torpedoes and bombs, near misses being registered on the merchantman and one torpedo hit on the tanker which was left stationary.<sup>(4)</sup> On the night of 22/23 April, four Albacores made a sweep over the Bizerta area. At 01.15 hours they sighted and attacked a 2,000-ton motor vessel and a number of Siebel ferries, off Cape Zebib. The attack was made with bombs, near misses being registered on the motor vessel.

(To illustrate the varied daily operations of the Coastal Air Force, the entries in the North-west African Air Force Operational Summary (No.56) - N.A.C.A.F. section for 16/17 April) are given in Appendix "(R)".

OPERATIONS OF THE R.A.F. MALTA

During the period January to May (1943)<sup>(5)</sup> the main activities of the R.A.F. Malta, were as follows:-

- (a) reconnaissance of enemy ports and shipping routes for the purpose of obtaining information on which to base strikes, and to watch the movements of the Italian fleet
- (b) reconnaissance of airfields in Sicily and Italy so as to observe any concentrations of aircraft and to discover the best places for attack
- (c) strikes on enemy shipping wherever it could be found
- (d) intruder operations over enemy airfields: these frequently coincided with shipping strikes and were designed to disrupt enemy night-flying activity

/(e)

1. See pages 488 to 492 supra.
2. The Beaufighter was manned by F/Sgt. Downing (Captain) and Sgt. Lyons: they belonged to No.600 Sqn. (The five JU's destroyed were probably loaded with petrol).
3. In this and the subsequent attacks recorded above the Albacores were of No.826 sqn., F.A.A.
4. This was officially assessed as "Damaged".
5. See A.H.B. Narrative - Malta.



- (e) attacks on railways in Sicily, Italy and North Africa
- (f) protective patrols over Allied and friendly shipping
- (g) bombing attacks on ports, bases and airfields and road traffic in Tripolitania and Tunisia, in co-operation with the "Torch" (and, later, the N.A.A.F.) squadrons, and squadrons from the Middle East Command. (1)

#### Reconnaissance

A.H.Q. Med:  
(Malta), O.R.B.  
Feb: Appx: "E"

Photographic reconnaissance in February showed that the Italians had abandoned Messina as a cruiser base; this was, presumably, due to Allied air attacks on that port. For the same reason shipping activity at Palermo showed a marked decrease. On the other hand, Trapani was still used for destroyers and escort vessels accompanying merchant ships across the Sicilian "Narrows", while its inferior facilities for handling merchant shipping were overcome to some extent by an increasing use of "F"-boats and Siebel ferries which could be loaded with guns and M.T. without recourse to cranes. The ease with which these vessels could be loaded and their comparative immunity while at sea from submarine or air attack were doubtless the main reason for their employment in transporting supplies from Italy to Tunisia.

On the night of 31 January/1 February, Malta reconnaissance aircraft found that the three Italian 6-inch cruisers which had been lying at Messina had been dispersed in the face of heavy daylight bombing attacks by the U.S.A.A.F. aircraft. One of these cruisers was located soon afterwards at Naples and the other two at Taranto where they joined the two Cavour-class Battleships, Duilio and Doria, which had been there since September (1942). A fourth 6-inch cruiser (which had been undergoing repairs at Castellamare di Stabia) arrived at Naples on 18th February.

Ibid:

Valuable photographs were taken by a No. 69 squadron Balitmore on 20th February which showed the 10,000 ton tanker Thorsheimer (2) (previously seen loading fuel at Naples) with a dummy funnel amidships intended to disguise her as an ordinary merchant vessel. But neither this camouflage nor an escort of an armed merchant cruiser and several destroyers saved this tanker from an attack on the following night by four Beauforts which torpedoed and sank her.

A.H.Q., Malta.  
O.R.B.'s Feb:  
March & April.

During February, several submarines believed to be French were observed at Naples and Taranto. Other French ships which were identified included at least one large tanker in Naples which had been seen in Marseilles when the Germans occupied that port. The Axis gain in merchant shipping as a result of the occupation of France was greater than that of naval units, the majority of which had been scuttled at Toulon in November, although several submarines believed to be French arrived at Naples and Taranto, while three French torpedo-boats and two escort vessels, which had been at Bizerta when the Germans landed in Tunisia, were seen in the harbour at Spezia.

/In March

1. Bombing attacks on ports are reviewed in the sub-section "PORT BOMBING". infra.
2. The Thorsheimer was an ex-Norwegian ship: an account of her sinking is given on page 502 infra.

In March, Taranto, Palermo and Naples were the principal ports covered by (Spitfire) photographic reconnaissance. Taranto, which had formerly been an important supply base for Tripoli and Benghazi, was used almost exclusively as a naval base. Palermo was used chiefly by munition ships and small vessels, while Naples remained the chief supply base for Tunisia. Following the policy of dispersal begun in February, merchant ships loaded in Naples were moved to the small adjacent ports of Torre Annunciata, Torre del Greco and Pozzuoli before proceeding south in convoy. Most of the large merchantmen were routed from Naples towards Sardinia and thence in a southerly direction to avoid getting within range of Malta's torpedo aircraft.

During the final weeks of the campaign, photographic reconnaissance showed that, while an increasing number of enemy supplies were sent to Sardinia and Sicily, only a few convoys attempted the passage to Tunisia. This was apparently due to the dangers of the crossing in the Sicilian "Narrows" and also to the enemy's increasing lack of suitable merchant vessels. Towards the end of April this shortage was partly remedied by the employment of some large tankers and transports taken over from the French which arrived at Naples from Genoa and Spezia. Apart from these arrivals there was only slight activity at Naples, the few vessels using that port being dispersed as heretofore in the small adjoining harbours. Further south, shipping activity was similarly on a small scale: the harbour at Palermo had become choked with wrecks (the effects of Allied air bombing), and Trapani was almost deserted by vessels of any size.

Meanwhile, the visual reconnaissance by the Baltimores covered the enemy's convoy routes in the Naples and Taranto areas. These reconnaissances were rewarded with several successful shipping strikes by the Malta squadrons.

Systematic checks were also made by Malta Reconnaissance aircraft of the enemy airfields of Sicily and Southern Italy. The most significant feature was the great increase in the number of transport aircraft. During February, 131 transport aircraft were photographed on the north-west Sicilian airfields, and convoys of as many as 50 JU.52's were seen flying to Tunisia where 100 transport aircraft were reported to have landed in one day. In March, more than 300 aircraft were employed in ferrying men and supplies to Tunisia, and for their protection and that of the sea convoys some 650 aircraft were based in Sicily.

A.H.Q. Malta,  
O.R.B. March,  
Appx. "A"

#### Shipping Strikes

During January, the squadrons operating under No.248 (N.C.) Wing<sup>(1)</sup> against enemy shipping on the Naples-Palermo-North African route achieved several successes. These included an attack on the night of 18/19 January by three Wellingtons and a Beaufort on four enemy merchant vessels off Marettimo Island. The largest of these vessels (8,000 tons) was hit by a torpedo from one of the Wellingtons<sup>(2)</sup> and left partially submerged after an explosion on the starboard bow<sup>(3)</sup>, while a 5,000 ton vessel was torpedoed by another Wellington, a red glow and flash

A.H.Q. Med:  
(Malta)  
ORB's Jan:  
Apl; A.H.Q.  
M.E. Op.  
Summaries;  
ORB's of sqns.  
concerned;  
R.A.F. Anti-

/resulting

1. Transferred from No.201 Group. (see page 472 supra).
2. Of No.69 sqn., captained by Fg.Off. Douglas. (The torpedo was fired from 50/60 feet at a range of 1,000 yards).

SECRET

shipping Ops.  
(Merchant)  
Vols.4 & 5;  
List from  
Enemy sources  
of Italian  
merchant ships  
sunk.

resulting.(1) Other results could not be observed, but a 4,000 ton ship was subsequently seen moving at a reduced speed. On the following night four Albacores (of No.821 squadron,F.A.A.) bombed and torpedoed two north-bound Italian vessels of 5,000 and 2,000 tons respectively off Cape Turguenne. The smaller ship blew up and sank,(2) and an escorting destroyer was damaged. On the same night two Wellingtons torpedoed a small merchant vessel north of Djerba.(3)

Ibid:

On the night of 23/24 January, six Wellingtons and six Beauforts attacked a south-bound convoy north-north-west of Ustica, comprising the Italian S.S. Verona (4,459 tons) and Pistoia (2,448 tons), escorted by two destroyers, which had been previously sighted by a reconnaissance Baltimore. Both these merchantmen were torpedoed and set on fire (the Verona breaking in two)(4) and sunk, while one of the destroyers was bombed by the Beauforts and hit. A week later (on the night of 31st January/1st February) Wellingtons, which were sent to attack an east-bound 5,000 ton merchantman,(5) escorted by two destroyers and three M.T.B's, off the west coast of Sicily, found the convoy obscured by a heavy smoke screen. A torpedo attack on the merchantman by one of the Wellingtons was followed by an orange flash and a large column of smoke, and the vessel was seen to list heavily and was abandoned by her crew: she subsequently sank.

Ibid:

In February, the enemy's intensified effort to run supplies to Tunisia provided good targets for the Malta squadrons on the Naples-Tunisia shipping route. Eighteen strikes were made during the month of which the most successful were the following: On the night of 15/16 February, Wellingtons, Beauforts and Albacores were sent to attack a convoy of merchantmen, escorted by destroyers, which had been sighted on the previous morning by a reconnaissance Baltimore outside Palermo harbour. One Wellington(6) sighted the Italian tanker Capo Orsa (3,149 tons) south of Marettimo Island, and scored a torpedo hit amidships, which set the ship on fire from stem to stern and sank her.(7) Another Wellington and two Beauforts and two Albacores found and attacked three other merchantmen in the convoy but results could not be observed owing to poor visibility. Meanwhile another Wellington bombed two destroyers but only obtained near misses.(8)

Ibid:

On the night of 17/18 February, three Wellingtons (of No.221 squadron) attacked the east-bound Italian motor vessel Col di Lana (5,891 tons) which had been sighted by a reconnaissance aircraft north of Trapani. At 05.00 hours one of the Wellingtons scored a direct hit on this vessel which burst into flames and sank by the stern(9). The most outstanding strike during this month was made on the Italian (ex-Norwegian) tanker

/Thorsheimer

List from  
Enemy sources  
of Italian  
merchant ships  
sunk.

1. This was officially assessed as "damaged".
2. The 2,000-ton ship was officially assessed as sunk and the 5,000-ton ship as "severely damaged". (The torpedoes were fired from 50 feet at a range of 500 yards.)
3. This was, probably, the 654 ton tanker Alfredo stated to have been sunk by "aircraft torpedo" 36,000 No.24<sup>0</sup> 46 E., on 20th January.
4. The Verona was torpedoed by a Wellington captained by F/Sgt. Horning (No.221 sqn.).
5. This was, apparently, the Italian S.S. Pozzuoli (5,345 tons) which is stated in the List from Enemy sources to have been sunk off Cape St. Vito (Sicily) on 1st Feb: (The torpedo which sank her was fired from 80 feet at a range of 1,000 yds)
6. Of no.221 sqn., captained by Sgt. Fraser.
7. The torpedo was fired from 75 feet at a range of 600 yds.
8. All these were officially assessed under Category IV.
9. The Wellington was captained by Wg.Cdr.Hutton (The torpedo was fired from 80 feet at a range of 800 yards).

Thorsheimer (9,955 tons) which was first sighted in a convoy by a reconnaissance Baltimore at 08.12 hours on 20th February, south of Naples. The same night, Wellingtons, Beauforts and Albacores were sent to the attack and located the tanker some 40 miles north of Trapani. Several torpedoes were fired, and probably owing to damage which it sustained the tanker delayed its attempt to cross to Tunisia until the next night (21/22 February) when it was located at 20.10 hours about mid-way between Trapani and Cape Bon. Four Beauforts<sup>(1)</sup> attacked it with torpedoes, obtaining three direct hits which set the tanker on fire and several explosions occurred. A fourth torpedo hit the vessel amidships and sank it.

Ibid:

Three nights later (24/25 February), the Wellingtons and Beauforts attacked a west-bound convoy comprising the Italian S.S. Alcamo (6,987 tons) and another merchantman (of 5,000 tons) with three escorting destroyers, south of Marettimo Island, which had been previously sighted by a reconnaissance Wellington. Two of the Beauforts fired their torpedoes, one of which hit the Alcamo amidships and sank her,<sup>(2)</sup> while a Wellington bombed the smaller vessel and scored a hit which caused an explosion. Meanwhile another Beaufort torpedoed one of the destroyers, a large mushroom of smoke being observed.<sup>(3)</sup> Considerable "flak" was encountered and two Beauforts and one Wellington were missing from this operation.

Ibid:

During March, the Wellington, Beaufort and Albacore squadrons operating under No. 248 Wing continued their attacks against enemy shipping with considerable success. The outstanding attack of the month occurred on 17th March in the Gulf of Taranto. At 0705 hours that morning a reconnaissance Baltimore sighted an enemy southbound convoy, and at 13.30 hours a strike of nine Beauforts (of No. 39 squadron), escorted by nine Beaufighters (of No. 272 squadron), located this convoy off Point Stilo. The convoy consisted of one 8,000-ton tanker (disguised as a merchantman) and one 5,000-ton merchant ship, escorted by three destroyers and about fifteen ME.110's and JU.88's. The Beaufighters drove off the enemy aircraft while the Beauforts attacked and torpedoed the tanker, a large column of smoke being seen at the stern.<sup>(4)</sup> Later on, a Baltimore sent to photograph the results found one JU.88 and a twin-engined flying-boat circling over a large patch of oil. The flying-boat climbed into the cloud on seeing the Baltimore, stalled and crashed into the sea. Meanwhile the Beauforts had attacked the merchant ship but with no visible results.<sup>(5)</sup> A marked feature of this strike was the accuracy of the Beauforts' return fire against the attacking enemy aircraft, which together with the attacks by the Beaufighters accounted for one ME.110 destroyed, two ME's probably destroyed, and several ME's damaged. The Beaufighters also damaged a DO. 217 and a JU.52

/in

1. Of No. 39 Sqn. captained by Capt. Tilley (S.A.A.F. attached to No. 39 sqn), P/O Feast, and F/Sgts. Gillies and Deacon. (The Wellington which gave the coup de grace was P/O Feast's).
2. The Two Beauforts (No. 39 sqn.) were captained by F/O's Cartwright and Muller-Rowland.
3. The smaller vessel and the destroyer were both officially assessed as "damaged".
4. This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
5. This was officially assessed under Category IV.

SECRET

in the strike area.

Ibid.

In April and the early part of May there was a marked decrease in the number of enemy convoys to Tunis and Bizerta, but nevertheless several successful shipping strikes were made in spite of bad weather conditions. On the night of 11/12 April, six torpedo Wellingtons (of No.458 squadron) made searches for enemy shipping between Marsala, Marettimo Island, Cape Galo and northwards. At 02.55 hours one Wellington<sup>(1)</sup> sighted the Italian S.S. Fabiano<sup>(2)</sup> (2,343 tons) north-west of Palermo accompanied by one (presumed) escort vessel. The Wellington released its torpedo which struck the Fabiano just aft the bridge, the ship immediately blowing up and sinking in ten minutes. Some hours later, Albacores searching off Marettimo Island sighted a number of "F"-boats en route to Tunisia and attacked them with bombs and machine-gun fire: four of these vessels were damaged.

Another successful strike occurred on the night of 23/24 April; the 5,079-ton Italian S.S. Aquino<sup>(3)</sup> had been bombed and left burning north of Marettimo Island by U.S.A. Fortresses of the N.A.A.F., during 23rd April, and on receipt of this information at Malta a striking force of Beauforts (of No.39 squadron) was sent to destroy her. At 21.45 hours one of the Beauforts<sup>(4)</sup> torpedoed the Aquino amidships, an explosion and flashes resulting and the vessel listing to starboard. At 00.35 hours another Beaufort<sup>(5)</sup> torpedoed the vessel amidships and sank her.

Intruder Operations and Attacks on Railways over Sicily, Italy and North Africa

(later A.H.Q.  
Med.Malta),  
O.R.B's Jan:-  
Apl: and  
A.H.Q.,M.E.  
Op.Summaries

During January, Spitfire-bombers (carrying two 250 lb.bombs), escorted by fighter Spitfires, made almost daily sweeps against enemy ground targets in Southern Sicily and shipping north of Malta. The chemical factory at Marsemi was put out of action, the power station at Cassibele was bombed, and hits were obtained on warehouses at Ipsica and on the aerodromes at Gela and Comiso. Mosquitoes (of No.23 squadron) and Beaufighters (of No.89 squadron) carried out several intruder operations over Sicily and they also attacked suitable land targets, particularly railway locomotives. Towards the end of the month the Mosquitoes extended their offensive patrols to cover the "toe" of Italy, with considerable success. This activity increased in importance and efficiency as the campaign progressed. The enemy relied largely on his railways to carry material to Sicily where it could be loaded onto small craft bound for Tunisia. From both Naples and Taranto the railway followed the coast southwards, the two tracks meeting opposite the Messina train ferry from which point the railway led westward along the north coast of Sicily to Palermo. All these lines were targets for the Mosquitoes, Spitfires and Beaufighters, the Mosquitoes especially proving to be ideal "train-busters". Similar operations were carried out over enemy territory in North Africa, and considerable damage was done to both road and rail traffic with 250 lb. bombs, cannon and machine-gun fire. The attacks were usually made at night time, but the Spitfire bombers and fighters also operated in daylight against railways, stations, bridges and sidings. The combined results of these attacks were gratifying, fourteen locomotives being destroyed or severely damaged during the month.

/In

1. Captained by F/O Hailstone, R.C.A.F.
2. Formerly the French S.S. Mayenne.
3. Formerly the French S.S. El Kantara.
4. Captained by F/Lt. Muller-Rowland.
5. Captained by P.O. Balkwill.

Ibid:

In February, Mosquito intruder patrols were generally concentrated over the Comiso-Catania and Castellavetrano-Trapani groups of aerodromes. Poor weather conditions limited the Mosquitoes' programme to only 18 nights during which 87 sorties were made. Five enemy aircraft were destroyed in these sorties and others were attacked and probably damaged, but results could not be observed owing to the violent evasive action which the aircraft were forced to employ due to the enemy's ground defences.

Ibid:

The attacks on the Italian and North African railways were increased in February, thirty locomotives being destroyed or seriously damaged. The majority of these results were achieved by cannon fire but a few were obtained by the Beaufighters' 250 lb. bombs. Attacks by the Beaufighters included the bombing of the railway bridge, track and sidings at Termini, and a bridge and railway buildings at Cefalu (Sicily), and on the railway junctions at Nicastro and Marina di Gioiosa (Italy).

Meanwhile, the Spitfire bombers and fighters continued their offensive against Sicilian targets. They also made attacks on the aerodromes at Lampedusa Island and Comiso, numerous hits being scored in the dispersal areas. On the return journey from one of these operations a U-boat was sighted and attacked five miles east of Avola, considerable damage being done to the hull, superstructure and conning tower. Other Spitfire operations included a bombing attack (on 27th February) on Syracuse when a seaplane hangar was destroyed and hits were scored on the railway yards and buildings.

During March, the Spitfires made numerous sweeps and patrols over Lampedusa and Linosa Islands and Southern Sicily; seventy sorties were made over Sicilian aerodromes during which two enemy aircraft were destroyed, one was probably destroyed, and two others were damaged. As a result of these intruder sorties the enemy's anti-aircraft defences apparently developed bad attacks of "nerves", violent "flak" barrages being aimed over the aerodromes at their own fighters while patrolling Mosquitoes - having withdrawn some miles distant - were interested spectators of these fratricidal displays. Meanwhile, the attacks on enemy railways were continued during the month with greater successes and intensity. Mosquitoes operating at night and the Spitfires in the day time. The effect of these operations on the enemy's morale was very pronounced, the Italian Press complaining bitterly of the "barbarity of the British attacks" and announcing the award of a posthumous decoration to an engine-driver who had remained at the controls on his foot-plate during one of these attacks. In all, the Malta aircraft accounted for seventy-four locomotives during March, besides setting on fire two petrol-carrying trains. Furthermore, considerable damage was caused to the electrified railway down the west coast of Italy, as evidenced by the vivid and continuous flashes which frequently followed attacks on the railway tracks and buildings. On one of these occasions a Mosquito patrolling this line almost reached the environs of Rome; during this patrol it "strafed" four trains between Cisterna and Sezze.

These operations against the enemy's already over-burdened railway system proved to be a severe handicap to his supply and transport service, and were no doubt a considerable factor to the ultimate elimination of the Axis forces in Tunisia.

Ibid:

The Spitfire operations during April were carried out on an even larger scale than those of the preceding months, a total of 191 sorties being flown by Spitfire-bombers which were directed against the aerodromes on Lampedusa and Pantellaria

SECRET

Islands and aerodromes and industrial objectives in Sicily. These operations included attacks on the power station and factory buildings at Porto Empedocle, and the oil tanks at Ragusa and Augusta, and on the submarine and "E"-boat base and berths at the latter place. The aerodromes at Biscari and Comiso were also attacked when bomb bursts were seen in the target areas and among dispersed aircraft.

The Spitfires also made offensive sweeps and patrols over Southern and Eastern Sicily, and (when fitted with long-range tanks) as far as the Sicilian "Narrows" and to the north of Messina. In the Messina area, two of these long-range Spitfires engaged and destroyed two JU. 52's, which brought the total of enemy aircraft destroyed by the R.A.F. Malta since the beginning of the war to 1,001. Other casualties to enemy aircraft in the air were six JU. 88's, six JU. 52's and one Caproni 313 destroyed, one ME. 109 probably destroyed, and one JU.88, three ME.202's, one FW. 190 and one G. 50 damaged.

Ibid:

During April the Mosquitoes made a total of 124 sorties of which 106 were on intruder patrols, 6 on attacks against ground targets and 12 in co-operation with shipping strikes. As a counter to the intruder attacks the enemy adopted decoy tactics to entice the Mosquitoes within range of his ground defences. These decoys consisted of lights being shown and pyro-technics fired from otherwise inactive aerodromes, and searchlights and flare-path illuminations which were used in attempts to encourage the Mosquitoes to place themselves in suitable positions as targets for the enemy's anti-aircraft batteries.

The attacks against the enemy's rail traffic in Sicily and the "toe" of Italy were continued as heretofore, ten locomotives being accounted for, and one electric train being set on fire, while rolling-stock, station buildings and goods-yards were "strafed" and damaged. A factory near Taranto was set on fire, and road traffic was attacked on several occasions. Although enemy bombers and transport aircraft were less active by night than in the previous months, the Mosquitoes destroyed two JU.88's, one JU.52 and one unidentified aircraft, and damaged four others during their intruder operations over Sicilian aerodromes and Pantellaria Island.

R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vol.5.

In the course of this month (April) the Mosquitoes flew twelve sorties in the Cape Bon-Marettimo area to protect Allied shipping, but no enemy fighters were encountered. During these patrols the Mosquitoes made several attacks on enemy shipping which resulted in one M.T.B. blown up, damage to one 5,000-ton and one 2,000-ton merchant ships and to three small vessels.

#### Enemy Air Activity over Malta

A.H.Q., Med:  
(later Malta)  
ORB's. Dec:  
'42 - May '43

After the "blitz" on Malta in October<sup>(1)</sup> there was little enemy activity against the island for some weeks. One heavy night attack was made in December but no serious daylight bombing attacks occurred. In January, enemy raiders approached the island on several occasions, but few attempted to cross the coast and no bombs were dropped. During February, raids on Malta were, no doubt, precluded by the enemy's great efforts to get supplies by air to Tunisia, and in March his aircraft made only a few reconnaissance and high-flying sweeps over the island, but no bombs were dropped. Similar tactics were employed in April, and during that month there were seven "Alerts" but again no bombs were dropped on or near Malta.

/In

1. See SECTION V, Sub-section "THE CENTRAL BASIN".



In May, towards the end of the campaign, enemy aircraft were withdrawn from Tunisia to Sicily before the final collapse of the Axis, and this resulted in an increase of air activity against Malta. Enemy fighters crossed the coast eleven times during the month and on two occasions bombs were dropped.

#### THE EASTERN BASIN

While the events reviewed above were in progress in the Western and Central Basins, the squadrons of No.201 (Naval Co-operation) Group, R.A.F., and bomber units of the 9th U.S. Air Force, Middle East, were continuing their operations in the Eastern Basin.<sup>(1)</sup>

#### Advance of the Eighth Army

Admiralty  
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Meanwhile, on 4th November, the British Eighth Army had begun its advance from Alamein in pursuit of Rommel's retreating "Afrika Korps". Tobruk was re-occupied on 13th November: the enemy had evidently left the place hurriedly as there was little demolition, the jetties being intact except those that had been damaged by Allied bombing. There were, however, a hundred sunken wrecks in the harbour - a further mute testimony of the work of the R.A.F. and U.S. Air Force bombers. The work of clearing the harbour was undertaken by the Royal Navy, and by 16th November the port was open to Allied shipping. On that day British troops occupied Derna, and on 21st November their forward units entered Benghazi. The damage at this port was considerable; eighty-six wrecks, varying from lighters to merchantmen and warships, lay in the harbour and the enemy had breached the moles. By 29th November the Royal Navy had completed mine-sweeping of the approaches, and in the meantime the first two supply ships had arrived on 26th November. Thereafter Benghazi became the main base for the Eighth Army's supplies through which convoys delivered personnel, tanks, petrol, ammunition and stores. By the end of December the daily discharge of cargo had reached an average of 5,000 tons.

The Eighth Army's advance continued to the El Agheila line where Rommel made a stand but was defeated on 15th December. The Eighth Army pressed on to Sirte which it occupied on 25th December, and on 15th January General Montgomery attacked Rommel's strongly-held Buerat line and forced him to evacuate it. Misurata fell on 18th January, Homs was occupied on the following day, and on 23rd January the Eighth Army entered Tripoli.

The first convoy for Tripoli (comprising four merchantmen and Naval escort) sailed from Alexandria on 21st January and reached Tripoli on 26th January. The ships had to anchor

/outside

No.201 Grp.  
ORB's. Oct:  
& Nov: and  
A.H.Q., M.E.  
Tables of Ops.

1. For the composition of No.201 Grp. at the beginning of the period (i.e. 4th November 1942) see SECTION V, page 442 with the addition of No.14 (light-medium bomber) sqn., (Bostons and Marauders) - formerly under No.3 Wing of the Western Desert Air Force - and No.46 (fighter) sqn. (Beaufighter V's) - formerly under No.250 Wing, A.H.Q. Egypt - which came under control of No.201 Grp. at the end of October and early in November respectively. (No.14 sqn. was incorporated into No.248 (Naval Co-op:) Wing of No. 201 Grp.)



outside the harbour which had been completely blocked by the enemy with eight sunken ships. The Royal Navy contrived to make a large gap in the obstructions through which the first store ship passed on 2 February; thereafter the work of clearing the harbour was continued, and in a short time the Mediterranean Fleet had a port capable of supplying the Eighth Army commensurate with the task which lay ahead.

#### Bombardment of Zuara

Ibid:

Meanwhile, on 22 January, H.M.S. Cleopatra and Euryalus of the 15th, Cruiser Squadron, with four destroyers of Force "K", left Malta to bombard Zuara. The bombardment took place between 00.30 and 01.30 hours on 23 January, causing fires and explosions. One R.A.F. Mosquito from Malta co-operated with the Naval force and one Sunderland provided anti-submarine protection.

Ibid: and  
A.H.Q. M.E.  
Op. Summaries  
and R.A.F.  
anti-shipping  
Ops. (Merch't)  
Vol. 4.

In order to delay the departure of enemy shipping from Zuara before the Naval attack, a force of fifty-six Kittyhawks escorted by eight Spitfires<sup>1</sup> made three bombing attacks on the harbour and jetty on the night of 21/22 January. The Kittyhawks carried 40 lb. bombs; several hits were made on the wharves and jetty and hits were claimed on a 4,000-ton merchant ship.<sup>2</sup> The Kittyhawks also machine-gunned a U-boat and some lighters in the harbour, and railway trucks, supply dumps, M.T. and troops in the dock area. During the third attack, five ME.109's circled the harbour: three of them were shot down and the other two were damaged.

#### Further Advance of the Eighth Army

The enemy evacuated Zuara on the night of 30/31 January and the Eighth Army occupied the place next day. During the ensuing twelve days the Eighth Army's advance was slowed up considerably owing to very heavy rains and the mining of the coastal road by the enemy. On 20 February the Eighth Army occupied Medenine, and engaged the enemy's armoured units at Metameur. This engagement resulted in the accelerated withdrawal of the enemy's 15th Armoured Division and by the following day (21 February) it had taken up its position on the Mareth line where Rommel proceeded to concentrate his remaining forces. For the next two weeks Rommel was occupied in strengthening the Mareth line while the Eighth Army was preparing for its assault.<sup>3</sup>

#### Re-organisation of Fighter Defence for Allied Naval Forces and Merchant Shipping.

Meanwhile, towards the end of November, it had been decided to re-organise the fighter defence for Allied Naval forces and merchant shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean. The responsibility for this fighter defence was shared by No. 201 (N.C.) Group (Alexandria) and Air Headquarters, Egypt, (Cairo), and thenceforward the responsibilities of these two Commands in this respect were, briefly, as follows:-

/ No. 201

1. The Kittyhawks were of No. 239 Wing and the Spitfires were of No. 244 Wing, Western Desert Air Force.
2. This was officially assessed under Category IV.
3. For the attack on the Mareth line, see page 486 supra.

A.H.Q. Egypt, No.201 (N.C.) Group was responsible to the Naval C.-in-C. for the direction of all air operations conducted from Egypt in co-operation with the Fleet, with the exception of short-range fighter defence of Naval forces and merchant shipping.

O.R.B. Nov., Appx. "A" and Dec.; Appx. "F"  
Air Headquarters, Egypt, was responsible for the fighter defence of all Naval forces and merchant shipping within forty miles of the Egyptian (and, after the end of December, of the Cyrenaican and Levantine) coast(s), No.201 (N.C.) Group being responsible for such defence outside these limits. Air Headquarters, Egypt, was also responsible for the co-ordination of air defence by fighters, A.A. guns, searchlights and balloons of all Naval bases, shore establishments and ports in Egypt (excepting Alexandria which remained under the Rear-Admiral as Fortress Commander). From the end of December the same responsibility applied to Cyrenaica and the Levant (except that control of A.A. defences was to be retained by the Eighth and Ninth Armies respectively).

#### Expansion of Air Headquarters, Egypt.

A.H.Q. Egypt, O.R.B. Dec. Appx. "C"; No.209 Grp. O.R.B. Dec.  
In December, the area of Air Headquarters, Egypt's command was extended to include Cyrenaica (as far as Benghazi) and also the Levant, and two new fighter Groups were formed:-

(i) No.209 (with its H.Q. at Ramleh) which took over operational control of all units for the static defence of Cyprus, Syria, Palestine and Transjordan; (in April the H.Q. of this Group were moved to Haifa) and

Ibid: Appx. "A" and No. 219 Grp. O.R.B. Dec.  
(ii) No.219 (with its H.Q. at Alexandria) which was responsible for the air defence of Egypt including the protection of ports and coastal shipping from the Libya/Egypt frontier to the Egypt/Palestine frontier, including the Delta and Suez Canal zone.

A.H.Q. Egypt, O.R.B. Nov. Appx. "B" and No.212 Grp. O.R.B. Dec.  
Meanwhile No.212 Group was re-formed with its H.Q. at Benina, its role including the control of fighter squadrons for the defence of the lines of communication in Cyrenaica and the protection from air attack of Allied coastal shipping sailing between Sollum and Benghazi.

A.H.Q. Egypt O.R.B. Jan: Appx. "A"  
Ibid: Appx. "H"  
In January, following upon the Eighth Army's occupation of Tripoli, No.243 Wing (Western Desert Air Force) was transferred to No.212 Group and was made responsible for the defence of the ports of Tripoli and Misurata and the protection of Allied convoys and shipping routed within forty miles of the coast in that area. In February, a further new fighter Group - No.210 - was formed with its H.Q. at Tripoli to take the place of No.243 Wing. The area of No.210 Group's command was from the Cyrenaican/Tripolitanian boundary to longitude 13° east, the latter boundary to move westwards as the Western Desert Air

/ Force

Force moved up into Tunisia with the Eighth Army.<sup>1</sup>

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Tables of Ops.

A.H.Q. Egypt,  
O.R.B. Feb;  
Appx. "H".

Air Headquarters, Egypt, also controlled (inter alia) No. 260 (balloon) Wing, with its H.Q. at Ismailia. This Wing comprised five (later seven) balloon squadrons for the defence of ports and bases. Of these squadrons, No. 976 was established at Tripoli and in February it passed under the full operational control of No. 210 Group<sup>2</sup>.

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Tables of  
Ops.

1. At the end of March the sqns. and locations of Nos. 209, 210, 212 and 219 Grps. were:-

No. 209 Grp.	<u>Ranleh (later Haifa)</u>	
No. 127 Sqn.	St. Jean Dets. at Beirut & Nicosia (Cyprus)	Hurricane IIB/ Spitfire VB/C(V.H.F.)
No. 973 "	Beirut; Det. at Tripoli (Levant)	Balloons(Under admin: control of A.H.Q. Levant)
No. 210 Grp.	<u>Tripoli (Cyrenaica)</u>	
No. 89 Sqn.	Castel Benito	Beaufighter FI/VI (Night fighter)
No. 213 "	Misurata West	Hurricane IIC(V.H.F.)
No. 274 "	Mellaha (Tripolitania)	Hurricane IIC(V.H.F.)
No. 474 "	Mellaha, Det. at Ben (R.C.A.F.) Gardane	Spitfire VB/VC
No. 212 Grp.	<u>Benina</u>	
No. 7 Sqn.	(S.A.A.F.) Bersis	Hurricane IIC
No. 33 "	Bersis	Hurricane IIC/Spitfire VB(V.H.F.)
No. 46 "	Det. Bu Amud	Beaufighter IC/VI (V.H.F. Night Fighter)
No. 80 "	Bu Amud	Hurricane IIC(V.H.F.)
No. 94 "	Cyrene	Hurricane IIC
No. 178 "	Hosc Ruai	Liberator II(under Op. control of 9th. U.S. Bomber Command)
No. 219 Grp.	<u>Alexandria</u>	
No. 46 Sqn.	Edku, Det. Abu Sueir	Beaufighter IC/VI (V.H.F.)
No. 108 "	Shandur	Beaufighter
No. 134 "	L.G. 121, Det. Matariya	Hurricane IIB/IIC
No. 237 "	(Rhodesian) L.G. 106 (Delta)	Hurricane IIC
No. 238 "	Port Said	Hurricane IIC/ Spitfire VC (V.H.F.)
No. 335 "	(Hellenic) L.G. 8	Hurricane IIB (V.H.F.)
No. 451 "	(R.A.A.F.) Edku	Hurricane IIC/ Spitfire VC & Various

A.H.Q. M.E.  
Tables of Ops.

2. By the end of March No. 260 Wing's (balloon) sqns. were as follows:-

No. 971 Sqn.	Alexandria
No. 972 "	Haifa
No. 973 "	Beirut, Det. at Tripoli (Syria) Under admin: control of A.H.Q. Levant
No. 974 "	Geneifa
No. 975 "	El Firdan
No. 976 "	Tripoli (Libya) Controlled by No. 210 Grp.
No. 977 "	Benghazi, Det. at Tobruk. Under admin: control of No. 212 Grp.

A.H.Q. Egypt  
(Air Defence H.Q.  
East: Med:)  
O.R.B. March,  
Appx. "B".

On 1 March, the title of Air Headquarters, Egypt, was changed to Air Defence Headquarters, Eastern Mediterranean. As the Eighth Army advanced into Tunisia, the area of Air Defence H.Q. Eastern Mediterranean's command was extended further westward, and by April its responsibility for the safety of Allied land and sea communications extended from the Levant to Tunisia.

#### Operations of No. 201 (N.C.) Group

The squadrons of No. 201 (N.C.) Group -- in co-operation with the Royal Navy -- kept a constant watch for enemy shipping and submarines. As the Axis forces were driven further west by the Eighth Army's advance, the main stream of the enemy's shipping came increasingly more within the sphere of operations of the Malta squadrons and these of the Eastern Air Command of Operation "Torch" (and, later, the North-west African Air Forces), and the offensive sorties of No. 201 Group's aircraft decreased correspondingly. Meanwhile No. 201 Group's bombers, and bombers of the 9th U.S. Air Force based in Egypt,<sup>1</sup> carried out shipping strikes and the bombing of enemy ports.<sup>2</sup> With regard to shipping strikes, Marauders (of No. 14 squadron), Baltimores (of No. 203 squadron) and A.S.V. Wellingtons (of No. 221 squadron) made frequent reconnaissances for enemy shipping and convoys.

In addition to the above operations, anti-U-boat and "close cover" sorties over Allied shipping were carried out by Wellingtons, Sunderlands, Baltimores, Blenheims, Marauders, Bisleys, Wellesleys, Beauforts, Hudsons and Beaufighters,<sup>3</sup> and Walrus and Swordfish aircraft of the F.A.A. squadrons.

/Shipping

- 1 A.H.Q. 9th U.S. Air Force was at Cairo.
- 2 The bombing of enemy ports is reviewed in Sub-section "PORT BOMBING", *infra*.
- 3 These aircraft were of the following squadrons of No. 201 Group.

Wellingtons, Nos. 38, 221 and 458  
Sunderlands, No. 230  
Baltimores, No. 203  
Blenheims, No. 13 (Hellenic)  
Marauders, No. 14  
Bisleys, No. 15 S.A.A.F.  
Wellesleys, No. 47 air echelon  
Beauforts, No. 47  
Hudsons, No. 459  
Beaufighters, Nos. 46 and 252

SECRET

Shipping protection was afforded by Hurricanes <sup>1</sup> and Beaufighters, <sup>2</sup> and minelaying was carried out by Wellingtons, <sup>3</sup> Beauforts <sup>4</sup> and Marauders. <sup>5</sup> Sea Rescue operations were carried out by Wellingtons and other aircraft of the Sea Rescue Flight, and several successful rescues were made.

No. 201 Grp:  
O.R.B. Appcs.  
(Resumes of Ops.)

By the end of November units of No. 201 Group were operating along the coast from Latakia (Levant) to Benghazi. No. 701 squadron, F.A.A., (based on Beirut with a detachment at Haifa) was responsible for anti-submarine operations along the Levant coast to Cyprus. No. 247 (N.C.) Wing at Shallufa operated Nos. 14, 38, 47, 221 and 458 squadrons; No. 15 squadron, S.A.A.F., (Bisleys) operated from Maryut, No. 230 squadron (Sunderlands) operated from Aboukir, and No. 203 squadron (Baltimores and Marylands), No. 459 squadron (Hudsons) and No. 13 (Hellenic) squadron (Blenheims) from Giannacelis. No. 235 (N.C.) Wing was established at Gambut with a detachment at Mersa Matrul where No. 815 squadron, F.A.A., (Swordfish) was also based at an adjacent aerodrome. No. 247 (N.C.) Wing was established at Berka. As already stated, aircraft from several units of the Group had been detached to the R.A.F., Malta.

#### Reconnaissance and Anti-Submarine Operations and Patrols

No. 201 Grp:  
O.R.B. Nov:

Reconnaissance and shipping searches over the Eastern Mediterranean were carried out by Baltimores and Marylands of No. 203 squadron. Towards the end of November a new patrol (known as "Creek") was instituted with a view to harassing and destroying enemy submarines along the coastal route to Tobruk. The "Creek" patrol was carried out by aircraft of Nos. 235, 247 and 248 Wings.

No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Appcs.  
(Resumes of Ops.)  
Nov. '42 - Feb.  
'43)

By the beginning of December the enemy had ceased routeing his supply ships for Tripolitania via Malta and he was using the shore route off Tunisia instead. His convoys were therefore out of range of No. 201 Group's aircraft for the greater part of their voyages. Meanwhile Marauders (of No. 14 squadron) carried out offensive reconnaissances off the Tunisian coast. Towards the end of January, (after the Eighth Army's occupation of Tripoli) the task of harassing enemy shipping became mainly the responsibility of the R.A.F., Malta. With the final Allied occupation of Tripolitania the organisation of No. 201 Group's mobile Wings (under which advanced detachments of day and night reconnaissance and striking forces and anti-submarine forces and fighter escorts had operated since the end of 1941) had fulfilled its function. Thenceforward the main

/activity

- 1 (Hurricanes) of Nos. 238 and 417 R.A.A.F. sqns. (No. 201 Grp:) (and also of Nos. 33, 80, 94, 127 and 355 (Hellenic) sqns. of A.H.Q., Egypt, and Nos. 213 and 274 sqns. of A.H.Q., Western Desert)
- 2 (Beaufighters) of Nos. 46 and 252 sqns. (No. 201 Grp:) (and also of No. 89 sqn. of A.H.Q., Egypt)
- 3 (Wellingtons) of Nos. 38 and 458 sqns. (No. 201 Grp:)
- 4 (Beauforts) of No. 47 sqn. (No. 201 Grp:)
- 5 (Marauders) of No. 14 sqn. (No. 201 Grp:)

activity of No. 201 Group was the protection of Allied shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean. This necessitated the establishment of several permanent operational Headquarters located at intervals along the whole coastline from Tripolitania to Syria.

Ibid:

Meanwhile, during December, the Allies' shipping route from Port Said and Alexandria had become very busy as convoys and supplies for the forward areas of the Eighth Army increased in number. Aircraft of No. 201 Group made constant patrols of this route for enemy submarines, and many Allied convoys were supplied with close cover escorts. In all, 283 separate day and night sorties (of which 198 were as close cover for convoys) were made in December, in addition to 150 sorties made by aircraft proceeding to and from bases between Benghazi and the Delta area which kept a constant look-out for enemy U-boats during these flights.

Ibid:

By the end of January, the shipping routes patrolled by No. 201 Group's aircraft against enemy submarines (which included those in the Levant and Cyprus and from Port Said to Benghazi) were extended a further 430 miles westward to Tripoli. A total of 360 anti-submarine sorties were made in January during which four U-boats were sighted. One attack resulting from these sightings was made by a Beaufort in the Appolonia area with four depth-charges, but no results were observed.

In February, anti-submarine sorties rose to 427 (i.e. 288 by day and 139 by night). Of these, 16 day and 16 night sorties were carried out in direct co-operation with R.N. surface forces in special offensive combined operations against U-boats which had been located previously. The U-boats were most active off the Cyrenaican "bulge" and - to a lesser degree - between Cyprus and the Levant coast. Three sightings were made, two of which resulted in effective attacks by R.N. surface units co-operating with aircraft, as follows:-

No. 201  
O.R.B., Feb:  
and  
Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative, "The  
War at Sea",  
Vol. IV

(i) At 10.45 hours on 17 February, a Bisley (of No. 15 squadron, S.A.A.F.), while providing anti-submarine cover for a convoy with other aircraft, north-west of Derna, saw an escorting destroyer (H.M.S. Paladin) suddenly make a reverse sweep and drop depth-charges. Immediately afterwards the conning-tower of a U-boat appeared on the surface, and the Bisley at once attacked with two depth-charges, but results were not observed. As the crew of the U-boat attempted to leave the conning-tower the Bisley attacked them with machine-gun fire. At a signal from the Paladin the Bisley withdrew out of range and the Paladin then pressed home the attack. The U-boat was later abandoned by its crew and was taken in tow by destroyers but at 16.40 hours it foundered.

Ibid: and  
No. 38 Sqn.  
O.R.B. Feb:

(ii) On the night of 19/20 February, a Wellington (of No. 38 Squadron)<sup>1</sup>, while giving protection with five other Wellingtons of the same squadron to a convoy, west of Ras el Hamama (Cyrenaica), sighted a U-boat but lost contact with it while manoeuvring to attack. The Wellington directed escorting destroyers (H.M.S. Isis and Hursley) and resumed its patrol. The search for the U-boat was continued by three other Wellingtons and later the destroyers contacted the U-boat and sank it with depth-charges.

/In

<sup>1</sup> The Wellington was captained by F.O. Butler, A.F.C.

SECRET

No. 201 Grp.  
C.R.B. Appcs.  
(Resumé of  
Ops., March)

In March, there were only two sightings of U-boats by aircraft of No. 201 Group. The first was so close to an area in which an R.N. submarine was known to be operating that the captain of the aircraft decided not to attack it. The second U-boat was sighted on the surface north of Cape Amer, but it crash-dived before the aircraft could get to its position. During that month combined Naval and aircraft hunts were made on five occasions but no aircraft observed any results although Naval surface forces were seen to make attacks.

Ibid:

No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B. Apl.

During the month of April the increase in Allied shipping convoys in the Eastern Mediterranean resulted in a large number of sorties by No. 201 Group's aircraft. A total of 122 convoys were given anti-submarine protection as against 94 convoys during March. Only one U-boat was sighted during these operations when, on 19 April, a Hudson (of No. 459 Squadron) sighted a submerged U-boat ahead of a convoy, 3 miles south-south-east of Ras el Tin. The Hudson dropped only one depth-charge owing to the difficulty in estimating when the aircraft was over the target. However, the convoy was warned and took avoiding action. Meanwhile one of the escorting destroyers attacked the U-boat with depth-charges but no results were visible.

No. 201 Group.  
O.R.B. Appcs.  
(Resumé of  
Ops., Apl.)

A total of 218 independent anti-submarine patrols and area patrols were flown by aircraft of No. 201 Group during April, in addition to 25 sorties on combined R.N. and R.A.F. hunts for U-boats. During an independent patrol on 29 April a Baltimore (of No. 52 Squadron) sighted a U-boat with part of its conning-tower awash, but the vessel crash-dived before the Baltimore could attack it.

#### Shipping Strikes

No. 201 Grp.  
O.R.B's: and  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merchant),  
Vols. 4 and 5.

During November and December, only a few shipping sightings were made and these led to disappointing results. The most successful attacks were made by the Marauders of No. 14 Squadron. On 17 December, two of these aircraft on an offensive reconnaissance of the Tripolitanian coast sighted nine enemy barges proceeding at 14 knots. One Marauder attacked with five 100 lb. bombs and cannon fire, claiming two bomb hits and a near miss.<sup>1</sup> On 20 January, two torpedo-carrying Marauders on an offensive reconnaissance in the Aegean Sea sighted a 1,500-ton cargo vessel, 27 miles east of Melos Island, escorted by one Arado 196. The Marauders launched their torpedoes and obtained a direct hit on the bows of the vessel which exploded and sank almost immediately.<sup>2</sup> During the attack the enemy aircraft engaged the Marauders but the latter sustained no damage.

Another successful attack occurred on 21 February when six bomber and three torpedo-Marauders made a daylight shipping raid on Melos harbour. The German cargo ship Artemis Pitta (1,433 tons) and another cargo vessel and a smaller ship lying in the harbour were attacked with

/torpedoes

- 1 Two barges were officially assessed (Air Min: assessment) as sunk.
- 2 This was officially confirmed as sunk. (The successful torpedo was fired from 90 feet at a range of 600 yards.).

torpedoes and 500 lb. bombs. The Artemis Pitta was struck by a torpedo and blew up and sank, the second ship set on fire and the smaller vessel was straddled with four 500 lb. bombs but results were not observed.<sup>1</sup>

Ibid:

During April, Beaufighters (of No. 227 Squadron) made several successful attacks on small vessels. These included the sinking of a 250-ton schooner off the west coast of Greece by two Beaufighters with cannon fire on 24 April, and two days later the sinking of a schooner and a sailing vessel (of 250 tons each) off the east coast of Greece by four Beaufighters with bombs and cannon fire. One Beaufighter struck the mast of one of the vessels and force-landed in the sea. On the following day (27 April) two Beaufighters on a sweep over the Aegean Sea, sighted and attacked with cannon fire a 125-ton caïque, north-west of Rhodes. The vessel was left drifting with a heavy list to port and with smoke pouring from it.<sup>2</sup> The next successful attack by the Beaufighters occurred on 1 May when three of these aircraft attacked and set on fire a 150-ton steamer, off Siphnos Island, with cannon fire and bombs.<sup>3</sup>

#### Operations of No. 1 G.R. Unit, Ismailia

A.H.Q. Egypt,  
O.R.B's;  
No. 1 G.R. Unit  
O.R.B's.

After the battle of Alamein and the Eighth Army's advance into Tripolitania, enemy air activity over the Delta area virtually ceased, only a few reconnaissance raids being made over Port Said in November and December and one over Alexandria in December.

The headquarters of No. 1 G.R. Unit remained at Ismailia, but a detachment of two of its D.W.I. Wellingtons was sent to Giannacalis on 9 November to sweep for mines in the channel and harbour of Mersa Matruh. No mines were exploded at that port, and on 14 November the detachment moved to Gambut and began sweeping the approaches and harbour at Tobruk.<sup>4</sup> One mine was exploded in the harbour on that day and another was exploded on 16 November. No further mines were encountered at Tobruk, and on 1 December the detachment returned to Ismailia. Thereafter sweeps were made of the approaches to Port Said and over the Great Bitter Lake, Suez Canal, where some mines were still thought to be located, but none were encountered.

On 20 January, two D.W.I. Wellingtons were sent to Gambut satellite aerodrome to sweep for mines at Tripoli harbour and its approaches. These operations were continued for three days; one mine was exploded.

Ibid:

During February and March further sweeps were made over the Suez Canal. On 11 April a detachment of two D.W.I.

/Wellingtons

- 1 These two ships were officially assessed under Category IV.
- 2 This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
- 3 This was officially assessed as sunk.
- 4 Tobruk was occupied by the Eighth Army on 13 November.



SECRET

Wellingtons was sent to sweep the harbours at Sfax and Sousse,<sup>1</sup> but only negative results were obtained at these ports.<sup>2</sup>

Operations of Air Headquarters, Egypt (later Air Defence Headquarters, Eastern Mediterranean)

A.H.Q. Egypt,  
O.R.B. Nov.

As already stated, enemy air activity over the Delta area virtually ceased from November (1942). There was, however, some enemy activity over the Arab's Gulf (west of Alexandria) on the night of 9/10 November when two unidentified enemy aircraft reconnoitred the Gulf, dropping flares, while one other dropped bombs near Burg el Arab. On the night of 15 November, a JU. 88 approached the Daba area and dropped four bombs which damaged a fixed petrol tank, and on the night of 21 November an unidentified enemy aircraft dropped three H.E. bombs north of El Hamman, but no damage was caused. Fighters from Edku were scrambled but failed to intercept the raiders.

Ibid: Dec.

With the extension of A.H.Q.'s Egypt's command in<sup>3</sup> December 75% of its fighter sorties (viz. 1,120 out of a total of 1,551) were convoy patrols during that month. Enemy air activity was very small; a few raids were made on Benghazi, Benina and Tobruk but little damage was effected and several of the raiders were destroyed by No. 212 Group's fighters. In January, operations were again mainly confined to shipping protection, 1,580 out of 1,956 fighter sorties being on convoy patrols. Of the four fighter Groups in the Command, No. 212 was the most busy, seven enemy night bomber raids being made in the Benghazi area and five in the Tobruk area. On 8 January, a Malta convoy was attacked by five HE. 111's and JU 88's but no damage resulted to any of the ships: Beaufighters (of No. 89 Squadron) destroyed one of the HE's and one of the JU's.

Ibid: Jan:

Ibid: Feb:

During February, a few enemy raids were made on Benghazi and Tobruk but no damage resulted. A few enemy raiders approached the coast of Egypt but only five crossed the coast line. There was marked activity over Cyprus and the Levant coast which necessitated 259 fighter sorties from No. 209 Group's fighters. During the month a total of thirteen enemy aircraft were destroyed and seven damaged throughout the whole of A.H.Q. Egypt's command; half of these were accounted for by No. 89 Squadron based at Castel Benito (Cyrenaica).

Ibid: March

In March, a total of 3,298 fighter sorties were flown by the Command of which 1,812 were convoy patrols. The protection of Tripoli harbour (No. 210 Group) accounted for 21% of the total number of sorties, several night raids

/being

Ibid:

- 1 These two ports were occupied by the Eighth Army on 10 and 12 April respectively.
- 2 The part which No. 1 G.R. Unit had played in assisting the Royal Navy to clear the North African ports of mines during the advance of the Eighth Army was acknowledged in an address to the Unit's personnel by the Secretary of State for Air when he visited Ismailia on 22 June.
- 3 See page 507 supra.

Ibid: and  
Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea", Vol.IV

being made over Tripoli. Two of these were serious, one (on 7 March) destroying No.880 A.E.M.S. and the other (on the night of 19 March) when some twelve enemy aircraft made a bombing and circling torpedo attack and sank the British ammunition ship Ocean Voyage (7,174 tons), the Greek ship Varvara (1,354 tons) and damaged the destroyer Derwent. This attack was made at low level in heavy rain - with 10/10 cloud obscuration - which prevented R.A.F. fighters from carrying out patrols.

Enemy reconnaissance raids over Egypt somewhat increased during March, although few came within fighter range. On 27 March, a few Italian aircraft made a raid over Cyprus and Syria during which eleven bombs were dropped outside Tripoli (Levant) but no damage ensued. The number of enemy aircraft destroyed for the month throughout the Command was seven in addition to three others damaged.

Air Defence  
H.Q. East:  
Med: O.R.B.  
Apl.

During April, there was little enemy night activity. Three enemy reconnaissances were made over Alexandria, six over Tripoli, four over Cyprus, four over areas in the Levant, and nine over Cyrenaica. Tripoli harbour was raided only once (on 13 April) when thirteen JU. 88's and HE. 111's attacked with bombs, circling torpedoes and parachute mines, from heights of 10,000' to 3,000 feet, but no casualties and only slight damage occurred. A few Italian aircraft raided over the Levant, notably on 24 April when Beaufighters destroyed one C2.1007 and damaged one other. In all, 2,643 fighter sorties were flown throughout the Command during the month of which 1,265 were convoy patrols and 696 were standing patrols over Tripoli harbour. Casualties to enemy aircraft were four destroyed and three others damaged.

Ibid: May  
and  
Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea", Vol.IV

There was only one major enemy air attack on a convoy during May, which occurred on the first of the month when a large Allied convoy (comprising three personnel ships, eleven store ships and a tanker for Tripoli, and fourteen store ships, two tankers and one personnel ship for Malta) was attacked north-west of Benghazi at 20.00 hours by two JU. 88's, both of which were shot down. At 20.50 hours twelve plus HE. 111's attacked the convoy: four of them were shot down by fighters and one by A.A. fire from the ships. The British S.S. Erinpura (5,143 tons)<sup>1</sup> and the tanker British Trust were sunk. The convoy reached Tripoli and Malta on 3 and 4 May respectively without further loss.

/PORT

1 The Erinpura was the Commodore of the convoy's ship: she carried 1,000 Army personnel (mostly of the Pioneer Corps) of whom 464 were rescued.

PORT BOMBING

The Allied air attacks on enemy ports and bases during the period under review were carried out contemporaneously by aircraft operating in the Western, Central and Eastern Basins. In the Western and Central Basins these attacks were made by the squadrons of the "Torch" Eastern Air Command and 12th. U.S.A. Air Force (until their absorption, in February, into the newly-formed North-west African Air Forces)<sup>1</sup>, and also from Malta. The attacks by aircraft operating in the Eastern Basin were made by the bomber squadrons of No. 205 Group and the Bomber Command of the 9th U.S.A. Air Force based at Cairo.

A. WESTERN AND CENTRAL BASINS(i) "Torch" Squadrons (Eastern Air Command and 12th U.S.A.A.F.)

A.H.Q. East:  
Air Command,  
Op. Summaries.

The attacks by the Wellingtons (of Nos. 142 and 150 squadrons) of the Eastern Air Command on Tunisian ports and bases which had been begun early in January<sup>2</sup> were continued during the latter half of that month. On the night of 14/15 January and on four of the five following nights, the Wellingtons made seventy effective sorties over Bizerta harbour and caused wide-spread damage in the dock area. The bombs which they dropped included a number of 4,000 and 1,000 pounders in addition to 500 lb. and 250 lb. bombs and great numbers of incendiaries, which caused explosions and large fires. The Wellingtons also attacked the docks at Ferryville, notably on 18 January when two 4,000 lb. and 54 x 500 lb. bombs, and incendiaries, were dropped over the town and the dock area starting fires which were visible for 40 miles on the aircraft's return journey. Meanwhile the U.S. Fortresses made several daylight attacks on Bizerta and Ferryville which totalled some 100 effective sorties. In addition to starting fires in the docks some direct hits were scored on enemy shipping in the harbour. On 30 January, twenty-seven U.S. Fortresses, escorted by Lightnings, bombed enemy shipping in Bizerta docks and sank the 3,168-ton S.S. Noto (ex-French Djebel Nador). This attack was repeated next day (31 January) by twenty-six escorted U.S. Fortresses which resulted in the sinking of the S.S. Spolete (ex-French Caledonien) of 7,960 tons. During the attacks on Bizerta and Ferryville a considerable number of enemy fighters were shot down -- not only by the escorting Lightnings but also on occasion by the concentrated fire of the Fortresses. The U.S. Fortresses also bombed Tunis, the attacks including the power-house, military camps and the railway marshalling yards as well as the dock areas.

A.H.Q. 12th.  
U.S.A.A.F. Intell:  
Summaries; A.H.B.  
II.J15/8 R.A.F.  
Anti-shipping  
Ops. (Merch't)  
Vol. 4; List from  
Enemy sources of  
Italian merchant  
ships sunk.

A.H.Q. E.A.C.  
Op. Summaries

The chief objective of the Wellingtons was Bizerta which was bombed on several occasions. The most effective attacks were made on the nights of 3/4 and 15/16 February by eleven and twelve Wellingtons respectively. In the first of these attacks 4 x 1,000 lb., 59 x 500 lb. and 4 x 250 lb. bombs and incendiaries were dropped, many bursts being seen along the dock quay and in the town. In the attack of 15/16 February, 86 x 500 lb. bombs and incendiaries were dropped in the harbour and town

/areas.

1 See page 476 *supra*.

2 See A.H.B. Narrative of "Operations in North Africa" Volume 1.

A.M. C.S. 17572,  
186 A.  
(A.C.A.S. Ops.) to  
A.M. Welsh.  
12.2.43.

H.Q. 12th U.S.  
A.A.F. Intell:  
Summaries  
(A.H.B.II.J15/8)  
and R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.  
(Merch't)  
Vol. 4.

areas. During this operation a JU. 88 attacked one of the Wellingtons and in the ensuing combat the JU. was probably destroyed. In the opinion of the Air Ministry the Wellingtons had "put up a most creditable performance" and had "paid a good dividend".

In addition to the frequent attacks made by the Wellingtons, thirty-two escorted U.S. Fortresses made a heavy attack on Bizerta on 25 February when many hits were scored in the dock area and near misses on ships in the outer harbour. Meanwhile, on 1 February, nineteen escorted U.S. Fortresses had bombed the harbour at Tunis, dropping 60 x 1,000 lb. and 166 x 500 lb. bombs from 23,000 feet on the docks and shipping. Fires were started along the harbour and hits were scored on a 5,000-ton and a 3,000-ton ship lying in the docks.<sup>1</sup> During the bomb run enemy fighters attacked the Fortresses which, with the escorting Lightnings, accounted for nine aircraft destroyed, two probables and four damaged. One Fortress was lost by being rammed head-on by a F.W. 190, the pilot of which had, apparently, been killed.

Ibid:

Attacks were also made on the docks and shipping at Sousse. On 8 February, forty-two escorted U.S. Fortresses dropped 186 x 1,000 lb. bombs from 22,000 feet; many bursts were seen on buildings and jetties, the north dock and seaplane base being especially well covered with bursts: two small ships in the harbour were hit.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile bombing attacks had been carried out on Sicilian and Sardinian ports. On the nights of 31 January/1 February, and 9/10 February, thirteen and ten Wellingtons attacked Trapani with 500 lb. bombs, bursts being observed in the dock area and on the gas works on each occasion. Palermo was also attacked, notably on 15 February when eighteen (unescorted) U.S. Fortresses bombed the port and harbour, setting an oil tank on fire and hitting an 8,000-ton ship which was left burning in the harbour.<sup>3</sup>

In the southern sector of the combat area U.S. Fortresses, Mitchells and Marauders made attacks on the port of Sfax. The heaviest of these attacks occurred on 28 January when twenty-seven Fortresses, with an escort of eighteen Lightnings, bombed the docks at 14.20 hours with 319 x 500 lb. G.P. bombs. Six ME. 109's attacked the formation, three of which were destroyed and one damaged. At 14.30 hours a second attack was made by eighteen Mitchells escorted by eleven Lightnings; 136 x 300 lb. bombs were dropped from 10,000 to 8,000 feet and hits were seen at 50 foot intervals along the whole length of the railway yards and also on rolling-stock and a barracks. At 14.50 hours a third attack was made, this time by fifteen escorted Marauders which dropped 273 x 100 lb. bombs from 9,000 feet in the warehouse area from which large columns of smoke were seen. Twelve F.W. 109's attacked the Marauders, one F.W. 109 being shot down.<sup>4</sup>

(ii) North-west

- 1 The larger ship was officially assessed as "damaged" and the smaller ship (which was set on fire) as "severely damaged".
- 2 These were officially assessed under Category IV.
- 3 This was officially assessed as "severely damaged".
- 4 The U.S. losses in these attacks were one Mitchell and one Lightning.

SECRET

(A.H.B. II  
J/15/8)(ii) North-west African Air Forces

A.H.Q.  
N.A.A.F. Air  
Intell:  
Reports R.A.F.  
Anti-shiping  
Ops. (Merch't)  
Vol. 4; List  
from Enemy  
Sources of  
Italian  
merchant ships  
sunk.

Towards the end of February (after the absorption into the N.A.A.F. of the Eastern Air Command and 12th. U.S.A.A.F. squadrons) the newly-formed Strategic Air Force of the N.A.A.F. made heavy attacks on Cagliari, the chief port of Sardinia. On 26th February, nineteen U.S. Fortresses bombed the docks, railway yards and the industrial area of the town. Two days later (28th February) forty-six U.S. Fortresses, escorted by thirty-nine Lightnings, bombed Cagliari starting large fires in the docks and in the town and sinking the 5,000-ton S.S. Santa Rita and the 3,825-ton S.S. Paolo. Moderate but inaccurate "flak" was encountered over the target, and during the operation nine ME. 109's and MA. 200's were engaged by the Lightnings, two ME's and one MA. being damaged: all the U.S. aircraft returned to base.

Ibid.

On 1st March a heavy attack was made on Palermo when thirty-eight U.S. Fortresses, escorted by Lightnings, dropped 40 x 1,000 lb. and 213 x 500 lb. bombs which fell on the docks and ship-building areas in the town. One large merchant ship and several smaller vessels were hit, five of which were claimed as set on fire.<sup>(1)</sup> For the next three weeks the U.S. Fortresses were chiefly engaged on shipping patrols varied by the bombing of the aerodromes at Tunis and Bizerta, and other enemy aerodromes and landing grounds. During the last week of March the Fortresses switched their attacks to the enemy's ports of off-loading. On 23rd March, twenty-two U.S. Fortresses, escorted by twenty Lightnings, bombed the port of Bizerta, bursts being seen on both sides of the channel and on quays and in the town, and one near miss being registered on a ship in the harbour. During the operation the Lightnings engaged a number of enemy fighters of which three ME. 109's were destroyed for the loss of one Lightning.

On 24th March, twenty-one U.S. Fortresses bombed Ferryville harbour, dropping 250 x 500 lb. bombs which caused several fires and explosions and hitting or near-missing three cargo ships.<sup>(2)</sup> On the following day twenty-two U.S. Fortresses, escorted by Lightnings, attacked Sousse harbour, scoring hits on the jetties and on a large ship at the south quay and on one small ship in the harbour.<sup>(3)</sup> On 31st March the U.S. Fortresses re-visited Cagliari, twenty-four of these aircraft (without escort) bombing the docks and shipping with 500 lb. (delay) bombs from 23,000 feet. Bursts were seen all over the dock area and a large explosion occurred in the north-west corner of the harbour. The 2,811-ton S.S. Cap Figalo was hit and sunk and photographs taken by the bombers showed that another merchant ship was set on fire, hits were scored on three other merchant ships and a coaster, and damaging near misses were scored on nineteen small craft.

Ibid:

In April, heavy attacks were made by Wellingtons of the Strategic Air Force on the docks and marshalling yards at Tunis, a total of 117 tons of bombs being dropped in fifty effective sorties during these attacks. The Wellingtons also made two successful attacks on Bizerta, dropping over 50 tons of bombs. Medium bomber attacks were also delivered, chiefly in the moonless period of the month, the targets being illuminated by "pathfinder" aircraft which marked the targets by dropping incendiary bombs while the remaining aircraft dropped their bomb loads including several 4,000 and 1,000 pounders. The most effective attacks by the U.S. Fortresses on Tunis and Bizerta were made in the second week of the month, eighteen effective sorties being flown against Tunis and twenty-seven against Bizerta.

/(iii)

1. These were officially assessed under Category IV
2. These were officially assessed under Category IV
3. These were officially assessed under Category IV

(iii) Malta

A.H.Q. M.E.,  
Tables of Ops.

During the first half of January<sup>(1)</sup> the Malta bomber aircraft<sup>(2)</sup> were engaged in mine-laying off the Kerkennah Islands and La Goulette (Tunis) harbour and in attacks on Sfax and Sousse harbours. The attacks were then switched to Tripoli, which was raided on the night of 16/17 January and the three following nights by Wellingtons and Albacores. The heaviest of these attacks was made on the night of 17/18 January when seven Wellingtons dropped 52 x 500 lb. bombs from 10,000 to 7,000 feet on the railway station and military stores dumps, starting several fires and causing explosions. Meanwhile the Spitbombers (carrying 250 lb. bombs and incendiaries) made several attacks on the power station at Avola and Porto Empedocle.

Ibid:

In the first two weeks of February, Beauforts and Albacores were employed in mine-laying off Columbia Island, the Kerkennah Channel, and the harbours of Sfax and Trapani, while the Spitbombers made attacks on Sicilian targets including the power station at Cassibile, the chemical factory at Marzamini-Pachino and the railway area at Pozzallo. During the latter part of the month no medium bombing took place, although the Spitfires continued their attacks on Marzamini and Pozzallo, and raided the railway area at Scicli and the power station and harbour at Syracuse.<sup>(3)</sup> These attacks were continued during March, the factory and railway station at Ragusa and the factory at Samaeri also being raided. Moreover, the Spitbombers varied their operations by raiding the Sicilian airfields and the airfield on Lampedusa Island.

Ibid:

During the first week of April, the Beauforts and Albacores laid mines at the harbour entrance of Trapani, and the Wellingtons and Albacores made attacks on the harbours of Marsala, Port Empedocle and at Lampedusa. Meanwhile, the Spitbombers continued their raids on Sicilian ports and bases which included an attack on the "E"-boat and sea-plane base at Syracuse on 4th April when six Spitbombers dropped 12 x 250 lb. bombs, eight of which fell among seven sea-planes and two near the "E"-boat base. On 26th April, six Spitbombers attacked the U-boat and "E"-boat bases at Augusta, scoring several hits with 250 lb. bombs on these targets, and on the following night they attacked the same targets and also the oil tanks (from 8,000 feet), several bombs dropping over these targets and also over the town. Two days later (28th April) twelve Spitbombers attacked the "E"-boat base, wharves and power house at Syracuse, bursts being observed on all these targets.

#### B. EASTERN BASIN

From the time that Rommel established his forces on the Buerat line late in November (1942), the R.A.F. Wellingtons<sup>(4)</sup> Halifaxes<sup>(5)</sup> and Liberators<sup>(6)</sup> of No.205 Group and the U.S. Liberators of the Bomber Command of the 9th U.S. Air Force (based at Cairo) made heavy attacks on the Axis supply ports in Tripolitania, Tunisia, southern Italy and Sicily. A considerable

/number

1. See A.H.B. Narrative - Malta.
2. Comprising Wellingtons (of Nos.40, 104 and 162 sqns. Albacores (of No.821 sqn., F.A.A.) Beauforts of No.39 sqn. detcht:) and Spitbombers (of Nos. and 249 sqn. and No.1435 flight).
3. These bombing raids were generally made from heights of either 10,000 or 2,000 feet.
4. The Liberators were of No.160 sqn. which was under operational control of the 9th. U.S.A.A.F.
5. Cf No.462 sqn., R.A.A.F.
6. Of Nos.37, 40, 70, 104 and 108 sqns.

SECRET

A.H.Q. M.E. number of the attacks made by the U.S. bombers were directed  
 Op. Summaries against enemy shipping in harbour and several successes were  
 and Tables of obtained. These included the sinking of the 6,424-ton tanker  
 Ops: R.A.F. Portofino(1) in Benghazi harbour by a force of twenty-one U.S.  
 Anti-shipping Liberators on 6th November, and the sinking of the 2,153-ton  
 Ops. (Merch't) Etiopia by five U.S. Fortresses in Tobruk harbour on the same day.  
 Vols. 4 & 5.  
 List from Enemy  
 Sources of  
 Italian merchant  
 ships sunk.

During November and December, bombing attacks were made against Tripoli and enemy shipping in Tripoli harbour, and in November the R.A.F. Liberators also attacked Naples and Benghazi, the attacks on the latter port being supported by the Wellingtons. On the night of 10/11 November, Wellingtons and Halifaxes made several sorties against Tobruk preparatory to its re-occupation by the Eighth Army two days later.

Ibid:

Towards the end of December, U.S. and R.A.F. Liberators made four attacks (with 1,000 lb. bombs) on enemy shipping in Sousse harbour which resulted in the sinking of the S.S. Anna Maria (1,205 tons) by the R.A.F. Liberators on the night of 27/28 December and the S.S. Armando (1,541 tons) and Giuseppe Lava (1,430 tons) on 28th and 29th December respectively by the U.S. Liberators.(2)

The attacks on Tripoli harbour were re-commenced on 15th January by U.S. Liberators and were continued for the next six days. In this week of bombing the Liberators made over seventy effective sorties and dropped 364 x 1,000 lb. bombs on shipping in the harbour and on the port installations. During these operations the 8,329-ton motor vessel Agostino Bertani was sunk (15th January), and damage was caused to other shipping. On two occasions the Liberators encountered heavy A.A. fire and three of them were damaged. Moreover, ME. 109's and MA. 200's attacked the Liberators which demonstrated the effectiveness of their fire by shooting down one ME. and one MA. and damaging several others without loss to themselves.

As the Eighth Army neared Tripoli the Italians sailed all their sea-worthy ships from that port. Five other ships (including the 8,289-ton Hospital ship Tevere and the 5,628-ton S.S. San Giovanni Batista) were sunk in the harbour by the Italians in an attempt to block the entrance. Two days later (23rd January) armoured units of the Eighth Army entered the town which the enemy had already evacuated.

Ibid:

Meanwhile, in Tunisia, the R.A.F. and U.S. Liberators were making heavy bombing attacks on Sousse and Tunis, and during the first three weeks of January they bombed the Axis supply bases at Naples and Palermo. On 11th January, eight U.S. Liberators dropped 40 x 1,000 lb. bombs on the harbour installations at Naples; observation of results was obscured by low cloud, but a fire was seen to have been started in the town. Two of the Liberators were damaged by A.A. fire, and two others were shot down by ME. 109's, one of which was destroyed.

/Low

1. The Portofino had already been attacked in a convoy of two merchantmen and escorting destroyers, by Egypt and Malta-based Wellingtons and U.S. Liberators off Benghazi on the night of 3/4 November. During this attack the Portofino and the two merchantmen had been hit; the latter were both officially assessed as "severely damaged".
2. A fourth ship was officially assessed as sunk on 27th December by U.S. Liberators (but it is not mentioned in the List from Enemy Sources).



Low clouds over Naples hampered the bombers' efforts during February, but at dusk on 15th February twenty U.S. Liberators successfully attacked shipping in Naples harbour, sinking the 1,956-ton S.S. Lecce (ex-French Guerka) and scoring direct hits on another medium-sized merchantman.<sup>(1)</sup> The attacks on Naples were continued during March by the U.S. Liberators and also by R.A.F. Liberators<sup>(2)</sup> which raided Naples on three nights. As in the previous month, adverse weather conditions limited the scale of these attacks, but considerable damage was caused to the port installations and shipping in the harbour.

In the meantime the success of the Allied air attacks on his shipping by the North-west African Air Forces and the R.A.F., Malta, resulted in the enemy ceasing his efforts to supply Bizerta and Tunis direct from Naples. Instead, the enemy made increasing use of Sicily as an advanced dumping base and sent his ships under cover of darkness from Palermo and other Sicilian harbours to the northern Tunisian ports. This had the result of greatly increased road and rail traffic down the Italian coast and across the train ferry at Messina, which gave an excellent opportunity for the Malta squadrons to attack these road and rail communications.<sup>(3)</sup> As the Sicilian ports and the railway terminus at Messina became increasingly important to the Axis in the above respect, the Middle East bombers correspondingly increased their attacks both in scale and in frequency on Palermo and Messina.

Ibid:

During January, the U.S. Liberators made twenty-two effective sorties against Palermo and a similar number against Messina. In February, the majority of their attacks were concentrated on Messina while the R.A.F. Wellingtons and Halifaxes made Palermo their chief objective, but the weather considerably curtailed their efforts. The heaviest attack on Palermo was made by thirty Wellingtons and five Halifaxes on the night of 22/23 February, which resulted in the explosion and eight fires in the harbour and town areas and bomb bursts across the naval jetties and the dry dock.<sup>(4)</sup> Intense A.A. fire was encountered and one Wellington failed to return.

The most effective attack on Messina during February was carried out by two formations comprising sixteen U.S. Liberators on 23rd February. Hits were scored on the train ferry terminus and the railway sidings to the south of the harbour, and several fires and explosions occurred. One bomb burst on or near a vessel at the ferry terminus.<sup>(5)</sup> Both formations of the Liberators were attacked by enemy fighters of which one ME.109 was shot down: one Liberator was slightly damaged by A.A. fire.

During the first half of March, four attacks were made on Palermo by R.A.F. Wellingtons and Halifaxes, but low cloud prevented full observation of results. Messina was bombed several times, the heaviest attack being on 24th March when nineteen U.S. Liberators dropped 42 tons of bombs scoring hits on the northern arm of the harbour near the naval fuel storage

/tanks

1. This was officially assessed as "severely damaged". (Photos taken on the next day showed that this vessel's stern was submerged)
2. Of No.178 (formerly No.160) sqn.
3. See page 503 supra.
4. The Halifaxes attacked from 13,000 to 10,000 feet with 1,000 and 500 lb. bombs, and the Wellingtons from 16,000 to 6,600 feet with 500 lb. bombs (and a few 250 lbs.)
5. This was officially assessed under Category IV.



tanks where fires were started, and on railway sidings south of the terminus. About ten ME. 109's and one ME.110 attacked the Liberators which destroyed two ME.109's. That night, six R.A.F. Liberators followed up this attack by dropping 48 x 1,000 lb. bombs on the ferry docks.

These attacks on the Italian and Sicilian ports of loading during the first three months of 1943 proved to be a valuable contribution towards hampering the enemy's efforts to supply his forces in Tunisia.

Early in April, while the Eighth Army was engaging Rommel's forces at Oued el Akarit,<sup>(1)</sup> the Middle East R.A.F. bombers made several attacks on Sfax and Sousse. Sfax was bombed on three nights: on the night of 4/5 April, twenty-nine Wellingtons<sup>(2)</sup> dropped 235 x 500 lb. and two 4,000 lb. bombs (from 12,00 to 6,500 feet) while one Albacore<sup>(3)</sup> dive-bombed with 250 lb. bombs and also illuminated the target with flares. The two 4,000 lb. bombs burst near the railway station and in the factory area and hits were scored on barrack buildings and factories north of the town. This attack was repeated on the night of 6/7 April by twenty-one Wellingtons (when the phosphate quay and stores depot were hit), and again on the night of 7/8 April when five Halifaxes<sup>(4)</sup> and four Wellingtons dropped 36 x 1,000 lb. and 27 x 500 lb. bombs respectively (from 11,000 to 7,500 feet): large fires were seen in the barracks area.

On the following night (8/9 April) four Halifaxes and seven Wellingtons attacked Sousse, dropping two 4,000 lb., 37 x 1,000 lb. and 52 x 500 lb. bombs. Bursts were observed among buildings in the town and near the railway station.

#### C. JOINT ATTACKS BY N.A.A.F. AND MIDDLE EAST SQUADRONS ON AXIS PORTS OF LOADING

Ibid: and  
N.A.A.F. Air  
Intell:  
Reports  
(AHB.II  
J.15/8)

During April, as the Tunisian campaign was drawing towards its close, the main Axis ports of on-loading were heavily attacked by North-west African and Cyrenaican-based Middle East squadrons. Apart from attacks made by the R.A.F. Liberators of No.178 squadron and a few sorties by R.A.F. Wellingtons of the N.A.A.F. Strategic Air Force, the attacks were carried out by U.S. aircraft of the N.A.A.F. and of the Bomber Command of the 9th. U.S. Air Force (Middle East).

The main Axis supply port of Naples became the chief objective of the Allied bombers in April. More than eighty effective sorties were flown against that port by Liberators of the 9th.U.S. Air Force, over sixty by U.S. Fortresses of the Strategic Air Forces, and sixteen by No.178 squadron's Liberators. The sorties by the U.S. Fortresses were all carried out on the morning of 4th April when ninety-one aircraft in three waves dropped over 100 tons of bombs on the port facilities and shipping, and some 55 tons on the marshalling yards. The power and gas plants, barracks and docks were all hit and damaged, the S.S. Sicilia (9,646 tons) was sunk<sup>(5)</sup> and other damage was inflicted on shipping in the harbour. During the evening of the same day nine U.S. Liberators of the 9th. U. S. Air Force attacked Naples harbour, dropping 81 x 500 lb. bombs from 25,000 to 23,000 feet, bursts being observed on two

/of

1. See page 486 supra.
2. Of Nos. 40 and 104 sqns.
3. Of No.821 sqn., F.A.A. two Albacores were sent but one returned early owing to excessive vibration.
4. Of No.462 sqn., R.A.A.F.
5. See page 488 supra.

of the moles. Heavy A.A. fire was encountered and all the Liberators were hit. These attacks were repeated on 10th and 11th April by Liberators of the 9th. U.S. Air Force which bombed the harbour moles and quays and obtained hits or near misses on shipping in the harbour. During these attacks three enemy fighters were shot down and seven others were probably destroyed for the loss of one Liberator.

Palermo was attacked on eight occasions during April, three times by Strategic Air Force aircraft of the N.A.A.F. and five times by squadrons from the Middle East. The attacks by the Strategic Air Force were made on 16th, 17th and 18th April: that of the 16th. resulted in the sinking of the 4,638-ton merchant ship Giacomo, and that of the 17th. in the sinking of the S.S. Chieti (5,457 tons) and Lentini (1,068 tons).<sup>(1)</sup> During these attacks the power station and marshalling yards were hit. Most of the attacks by Middle East U.S. and R.A.F. Liberators were intended primarily to inflict damage to the quays and moles, and many direct hits were scored which started several fires. On 5th April a force of nineteen (Middle East) U.S. Liberators, while bombing the harbour and quays, sank the 4,999-ton S.S. Todi (ex-French Rabelais) and also damaged a large lighter.

Six attacks were made during April on Messina by Middle East aircraft, seventy-one effective sorties being made by U.S. Liberators and thirteen by R.A.F. Liberators. During these attacks considerable damage was caused to the train ferry berths and on the building housing the operating gear, and also to the railway sidings south of the terminus.

Meanwhile, Trapani was attacked on three occasions from north-west Africa; twice by U.S. Fortresses and once by R.A.F. Wellingtons. The attacks by the U.S. Fortresses were made primarily against shipping in the harbour; in an attack by eighteen of these aircraft (on 6th April) a medium-sized vessel was sunk<sup>(2)</sup> and bursts were seen among several vessels in the southern dock and on the north side of the harbour.

Towards the middle of April it was ascertained that there was increased enemy shipping activity at Catania, and accordingly several attacks were made on that port by Middle East U.S. and R.A.F. Liberators.<sup>(3)</sup> On 15th April, thirteen U.S. Liberators attacked Catania, bombs bursting close to a tanker and on the mole and dockside. This attack was repeated by fifteen U.S. Liberators on the following day when hits were scored on the tanker<sup>(4)</sup> and on the main harbour mole, while bomb bursts were seen near the oil storage tanks and the port railway station. The U.S. Liberators made further attacks on Catania on 17th and 18th April, causing further damage to shipping and starting fires near the oil depot. Meanwhile on the night of 17/18 April, six R.A.F. Liberators bombed the harbour and mole (with 500 lb. bombs from 17,000 to 13,500 feet) but although bombs burst in the target area results could not be observed.

In addition to all these attacks on the ports of on-loading the Middle East heavy bombers made a few sorties against the smaller Italian ports of Bari, Reggio di Calabria, Crotone, Cosenza and Pizzo. Bombers of the N.A.A.F. Strategic Air Force attacked port facilities at Carloforte and Maddalena (Sardinia) and the Sicilian port of Marsala on a few occasions during the month.

/ALLIED

1. See page 489 supra.
2. This ship was probably the S.S. Scottoss (1,465 tons)
3. Of No.178 Sqn.
4. This was officially assessed as sunk (but it does not appear in the List from Enemy sources).

Ibid: and  
N.A.A.F. Op:  
and Intell:  
Summaries  
(A.H.B.II  
J.15/10)

ALLIED OCCUPATION OF TUNISIAPosition of the Land Fighting

Meanwhile, during the second week of April, the Eighth Army was pursuing Rommel's forces which had retreated from Oued el Akarit to Enfidaville.<sup>(1)</sup> On the night of 19/20 April it attacked Rommel at Enfidaville and occupied that place on 22nd April after severe fighting. While these operations were in progress the first Army advancing from Medjez-el-Bab was attacked by a German armoured division in the Goubellat plain on the night of 20/21 April. A counter-attack was launched on the following day in the area between Goubellat and Bu Arada, good progress being made in the north of this sector although strong enemy resistance was encountered in the south.

On 23rd April, Allied ground forces operating east of Medjez advanced along the Medjerda valley and occupied Crich el Oued; two days later they captured Heidous (north of Medjez). Meanwhile, American forces were advancing along the axis of the Beja-Mateur road, while on the Eighth Army's left flank Free French troops advanced (on 24th April) with little resistance from the enemy who retreated towards Pont du Fahs. These operations were greatly assisted by heavy attacks on the enemy troops and positions from the Tactical and Western Desert Air Forces.

During the last week of April the Allied armies made further progress and early in May they were ready to begin their final assaults which broke the enemy's resistance in Tunisia.

Attacks on Enemy Shipping and Ports by N.A.A.F. and Middle East Squadrons

During the first week of May, while the Allied land forces were preparing for their advance on Tunis and Bizerta, the enemy made great efforts to get further supplies through to the ports of Northern Tunisia. These efforts succeeded to a limited extent, but towards the end of the week the enemy's traffic was greatly disrupted by Allied air attacks on his ports and shipping.

<p>A.H.B.M.E. Op. Summaries and Tables of Ops; N.A.A.F. Op. &amp; Intell: Summaries (A.H.B. II J.15/10):RAF Anti-shipping Ops.(Merchant) Vol.5; List from Enemy Sources of Italian merchant ships sunk.</p>	<p>In the earlier part of the week the N.A.A.F. U.S. Mitchells, Lightnings and Marauders carried out several shipping sweeps but bad weather and consequent poor visibility precluded sightings being made. An attack by U.S. Fortresses on Bizerta was largely ineffectual by adverse weather conditions. However, on 5th May the Strategic Air Force took advantage of an improvement in the weather to make several shipping sweeps. Twenty-seven U.S. Fortresses, escorted by twenty-one Lightnings, covered the Sicilian Straits as far as Palermo. Off Cape St. Vito they attacked a 6,000-ton merchant ship (probably carrying munitions) escorted by two naval vessels, dropping 312 x 500 lb. (delay action) bombs from 15,000 feet. A tremendous explosion followed, a column of smoke and flames being seen for 60 miles on the return journey, and the ship disintegrated and sank.<sup>(2)</sup> On the same day six U.S. Mitchells, escorted by fourteen Lightnings (four of which were bombers), attacked an unescorted convoy of one medium and two small merchant ships west of Marettimo Island. The Mitchells attacked with 500 lb. (4 seconds delay) bombs from 200 to 100 feet, sinking one small vessel, setting another ship on fire and damaging the third.<sup>(3)</sup> Another sweep was made on the same day by eighteen U.S. escorted Marauders which bombed</p>
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/a

1. See page 486 supra.
2. This was officially assessed as sunk (It does not appear in the List from Enemy Sources).
3. The official assessment was one ship sunk and two "damaged".

a beached merchant ship east of Cape Zebib.<sup>(1)</sup> Meanwhile, formations of twenty-eight and twenty-nine U.S. Fortresses had bombed Tunis and La Goulette harbours, causing several fires and obtaining near misses on a large merchant vessel and several small boats: 2,000 pamphlets (in German) were dropped at Tunis. While all these operations were in progress a large formation of U.S. Warhawks escorted by Spitfires (of the Western Desert Air Force) carried out shipping sweeps over the Gulf of Tunis and bombed two 1,000-ton merchant ships, one of which was set on fire;<sup>(2)</sup> two ME. 109's were destroyed in combat.

On the next day (6th May) squadrons of the Strategic Air Force continued their successes. U.S. Lightning-bombers attacked a convoy of Siebel ferries and small boats loaded with personnel, 30 miles west of Marettimo heading for Sicily. The Lightning-bombers sank three Siebel ferries and four of the small boats (with 500 lb. bombs from 3,000 feet). A few minutes later U.S. Marauders attacked a similar convoy, 45 miles south of Marettimo (also heading for Sicily), sinking three Siebel ferries with 300 lb. (delay) bombs from 8,000 feet.<sup>(3)</sup> Later the same morning U.S. Mitchells blew up another Siebel ferry and damaged one other, west of Marettimo, which were heading for Tunis.<sup>(4)</sup> Meanwhile, attacks were made on Marsala, Trapani and Farignana whence shallow-draft vessels were attempting to cross to northern Tunisia. At Marsala, twenty-one escorted U.S. Fortresses scored hits and near misses on six Siebel ferries and four medium-sized merchantmen, one of which was left on fire and one severely damaged; 33,000 pamphlets (in Italian) were dropped in the target area. At Farignana, thirty-six escorted U.S. Mitchells obtained near misses on two merchant ships and hits were scored on the dock installations. At Trapani, twenty-eight escorted U.S. Fortresses bombed the docks, the naval base, the oil storage area and railway marshalling yards, the entire target being left burning with volumes of black smoke. During the same day two beached ships at Cape Zebib were bombed by a formation of thirty-one escorted U.S. Marauders which dropped 25 x 500 lb. and 144 x 300 lb. (delay) bombs from 8,400 feet.<sup>(5)</sup> A beached vessel was also bombed by twenty-four U.S. Warhawks, 5 miles east of Cape Fortass, near misses being registered. On the same day U.S. Warhawks carried out shipping sweeps over the Gulf of Tunis: during the last sweep (in the evening) they sighted and attacked two enemy destroyers heading north-east of La Goulette. One destroyer received three hits and blew up and the other was set on fire but was later seen proceeding on its course.<sup>(6)</sup> That night (6/7 May) thirteen Strategic Air Force Wellingtons bombed the docks and shipping at Trapani as a diversion for a mine-laying operation by Malta-based aircraft. Considerable "flak" was encountered and one Wellington was lost. Meanwhile, a formation of fifty-one Middle East U.S. Liberators had attacked the harbour and shipping at Reggio di Calabria (with 500 lb. bombs from 23,500 feet) sinking the French S.S. St. Saveur (1,394 tons), the steam transport Villa (932 tons) and the S.S. Giuseppina (735 tons), and starting large fires and causing explosions in the harbour area.<sup>(7)</sup>

/On

1. This was officially assessed under Category IV.
2. These were officially assessed as "damaged".
3. All these claims were officially confirmed as sunk.
4. These were officially confirmed as sunk and "damaged" respectively.
5. These were officially assessed under Category IV.
6. These were officially assessed (Air Min. Assessment) as sunk and "damaged" respectively.
7. On the previous night (5/6 May), six R.A.F. Liberators (of No. 178 sqn.) had also bombed Reggio di Calabria, causing an explosion and starting two fires: two of the Liberators dropped leaflets.

On the following day (7th May) the weather deteriorated and the Allied shipping strikes were hampered in consequence. Nevertheless the 4,299-ton Belluno (ex-French Fort de France) was sunk in the Gulf of Tunis during a bombing attack by Western Desert U.S. Warhawks, and two motor-boats and a 150-foot yacht were sunk by another formation of Warhawks.

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative "The  
War at Sea",  
Vol.IV: List  
from Enemy  
Sources of  
Italian  
Merchant Ships  
sunk.

While these operations by the Allied air forces were in progress the Royal Navy was also taking toll of enemy shipping. On the night of 3/4 May three destroyers sank the 3,566-ton Campo Basso (ex-French Bonifacio, reported to be carrying munitions) and an escorting destroyer, off Kelibia<sup>(1)</sup>; Albacores from Malta provided illumination for this operation.

#### Capture of Tunis and Bizerta

Meanwhile the Allied ground forces had been closing in on the north-west corner of Tunisia, and during the first five days of May they took up their positions for the final attacks. On 3rd May, U.S. forces captured Mateur and next day they occupied the Achkel ridge some 15 miles south-west of Bizerta. In the Medjez-el-Bab sector preparations were being made by the First and Eighth Armies for the break-through to Tunis, while the Free French were continuing their advance south of Pont du Fahs.

At dawn on 6th May the Allies' main attack on Tunis was launched along the Medjez-Tunis road, and next day their armoured vehicles entered Tunis. In the meantime the U.S. 2nd Corps was approaching Bizerta, and having outflanked the enemy's positions east of Mateur, its forces entered Ferryville on the afternoon of 7th May, and a few hours later they occupied Bizerta.

#### Operation "Retribution" - Abortive "Dunkirk"

C.-in-C.Med:'s  
Despatch  
"Control of  
the Sicilian  
Straits during  
the Final  
Stages of the  
N.African  
Campaign".  
(A.M. C.32026)

After the capture of Tunis and Bizerta the enemy's attempts to run supplies practically ceased, although a few small vessels made crossings in a last effort to bring in certain supplies and to evacuate personnel. It had long been foreseen that the enemy might attempt a full-scale evacuation, and to meet such a contingency orders had been issued (under the code name of "Retribution") for the concentration of naval light forces in the Sicilian "Narrows". As the Allied ground forces began to close in on Tunis and Bizerta, night destroyer and motor-boat patrols in the "Narrows" were intensified, while the air forces undertook the task of destroying any enemy shipping which might escape the submarine patrols and offensive minefields.

Ibid:

On 9th May, by arrangement with the Air C-in-C., daylight patrols by destroyers were instituted. It was arranged that the Air Forces should continue to attack enemy shipping and small craft within five miles of the Tunisian coast<sup>(2)</sup>, and that surface forces should have complete freedom of action elsewhere. By night, the inshore area was occupied by motor gun-boats and torpedo-boats of the Royal and U.S. Navies.

/Meanwhile

Air Staff  
Comments to  
C.-in-C.Med:'s  
Despatch  
(A.M. C.32026)

1. Situated approx: 18 miles south of Cape Bon.
2. The reason for this was because enemy shore-based batteries could prevent naval craft closing the shore by day.

Air Staff  
Comments to  
C.-in-C.  
Med:'s  
Despatch  
(A.M. C. 32026)

Admiralty  
Preliminary  
Narrative  
"The War at  
Sea", Vol. IV

Meanwhile, naval minesweepers had been concentrated at Bone when the fall of Bizerta was imminent, and by 11th May they had swept a channel through to Bizerta. The R.A.F. fighters gave protection to the minesweepers which, being unmanoeuvrable owing to the nature of their operations, provided excellent targets for air attack. As a result of this fighter protection the minesweepers were virtually free from enemy interference.

The combined naval and air operations (as detailed above) made it impossible for the enemy to stage a "Dunkirk", and only a small number of craft endeavoured to run the gauntlet. The naval patrols resulted in the capture of some 700 prisoners, and included the torpedoing of a ship which blew up and of a barge full of men, ammunition and oil, on the night of 8/9 May. By midnight of 9/10 May it was reported that there was practically no enemy shipping left on the Tunisian coast between Cap Zebib and west of Cape Bon.<sup>(1)</sup> Meanwhile the Italian fleet had made no effort to intervene for the purpose of supporting an evacuation. Its strategic situation for such a move was extremely favourable, but - as had happened on other occasions - it showed no desire to engage with the Allied Navies.

#### Attacks on Enemy Air Bases and Italian Ports

Just before the capture of Tunis and Bizerta the enemy withdrew as many of his aircraft as he could from the Tunisian airfields. This resulted in more aircraft being located on the Sicilian and Sardinian airfields and also on Panellaria Island. There was also a larger number of enemy bombers in Sardinia which could be used to attack the Allies' Algerian ports and shipping. Accordingly, during the last week of the Tunisian campaign, the N.A.A.F. and Middle East squadrons made heavy attacks on Pantellaria and the Sardinian airfields.

AHQ: M.E. Op.  
Summaries and  
Tables of Ops;  
N.A.A.F. Op.  
& Intell:  
Summaries  
(AHB.II J15/10)  
R.A.F. Anti-  
shipping Ops.,  
(Merchant),  
Vol. 5; List  
from Enemy  
Sources of  
Italian merchant  
ships sunk.

Meanwhile, air reconnaissance of the enemy's Mediterranean ports showed greatly increased shipping activity in the Sardinian and western Italian harbours. It was therefore decided to attack these bases as part of the necessary preparations for the assault on the southern strongholds of the Axis European "fortress" which was soon to take place.

On 10th May, strong formations of R.A.F. and S.A.A.F. light bombers and U.S. Mitchells (of the Western Desert Air Force) attacked shipping in Pantellaria harbour. Meanwhile the Middle East heavy bombers concentrated their attacks on Messina, Augusta and Catania. At Messina two attacks were made on the train ferry by seven R.A.F. and thirty-three U.S. Liberators respectively. During the U.S. Liberator attack (on 9th May) hits were scored on the ferry slips and railway yards, bombs fell near the naval and commercial fuel storage tanks, and the motor transport Scilla (2,807 tons) was set on fire and sunk at the ferry terminus. On 11th May, forty-eight U.S. Liberators, escorted by Malta-based Spitfires, bombed Catania harbour starting

/large

1. On 10th May one small craft was sunk off Cape Bon by naval units, and a number of small boats were attacked in Kelibia anchorage, but results were not observed.

SECRET

large fires among the oil installations and sinking the 4,425-ton S.S. Martinico (ex-French Tlemcen) and setting two ships on fire, one of which left the harbour under its own steam.<sup>(1)</sup> Six of the Liberators were hit by A.A. fire and the formation was attacked by eight enemy aircraft, two of which were shot down. Two days later (13th May) fifty U.S. Liberators scored hits and near misses on several ships in Augusta harbour and bursts were seen among fifteen seaplanes. In addition, fires were started at the oil installations.

Meanwhile, the N.A.A.F. Strategic Air Force squadrons carried out heavy attacks on the Sicilian ports of Palermo, Marsala and Cagliari. On 9th May, Palermo was attacked by one hundred and twenty-two U.S. Fortresses and again by eighty-nine U.S. Mitchells and Marauders, escorted by Lightnings, the attacks being followed at night by some twenty R.A.F. Wellingtons. Large fires and explosions were caused, particularly in the dock, railway yards and army headquarters areas, and a gas holder was hit and exploded.<sup>(2)</sup> Intense and accurate A.A. fire was encountered and one Fortress was shot down and fifty-one others were damaged (most of them slightly). About twenty-five enemy fighters were encountered over the target of which fifteen were claimed as destroyed and three others damaged.

Two days later (11th May) a total of one hundred and eighty-nine U.S. Fortresses, Mitchells and Marauders, escorted by Lightnings, attacked Marsala and dropped 435 tons of bombs, the attacks being followed at night by Wellingtons. During the day attacks hits were seen on the docks, warehouses and railway yards, and fires were started in both the day and night attacks the latter being visible from the Tunisian coast. Cagliari was attacked on 13th May when one hundred and seven U.S. Fortresses and ninety-six Mitchells, followed at night by twenty-three Wellingtons, bombed the harbour and the south-eastern area of the town, starting huge fires some of which were visible for 100 miles at a height of 15,000 feet. In the night attack the Wellingtons' bombs caused a series of heavy explosions from which smoke rose to a height of 6,000 feet which was visible for 80 miles on the return flight. Several ships in the harbour were claimed as hit, one of which was thought to have exploded.<sup>(3)</sup>

In addition to the above attacks U.S. Fortresses bombed Civita Vecchia (north-west of Rome), U.S. Marauders attacked Porto Ponte Romano, U.S. Mitchells bombed Olbia (which had by then become the busiest port of Sardinia), and U.S. Lightning-bombers attacked Alghero and Porto Torres (north-west Sardinia), all on 14th May. In the attack on Civita Vecchia, twenty-three Fortresses dropped 552 x 500 lb. (.1 and .025 seconds delay) bombs from 23,000 to 19,000 feet. The entire target was covered and one 5,000-ton, one 4,000-ton and one 3,000-ton ships and four smaller vessels were sunk.<sup>(4)</sup> Moreover, large fires were started and a fuel storage area and a munition dump exploded.

/The

1. One of these ships was officially assessed as "damaged".
2. A ship in the docks was also claimed to have exploded, but it was officially assessed under Category IV.
3. This was officially assessed under Category IV.
4. These ships were:-

A S.S.	<u>Garibaldi</u>	(5,278 tons)
"	<u>Citta di Trieste</u>	(4,658 tons)
"	<u>Mira</u>	(3,615 tons)
"	<u>Cita di Benghazi</u>	(2,813 tons)
Motor vessel	<u>Verdi</u>	(2,423 tons)
S.S.	<u>Erice</u>	(2,350 tons)
"	<u>Orione</u>	(1,144 tons)



The attack on Olbia was made by fifty-four Mitchells, escorted by eighty-seven Lightnings (eleven of which carried bombs). A total of 83 tons of 500 lb. bombs were dropped many of which burst in the dock and town areas causing fires and smoke. Two ships, the Agata (2,282 tons) and the Carducci (2,028 tons) were sunk in the harbour and hits or near misses were registered on other vessels. These attacks on Civita Vecchia and the Sardinian ports were an appropriate finale to the work of the Allied air forces during the Tunisian campaign.

#### Surrender of the Axis Forces in Tunisia

Meanwhile, following upon the Allied occupation of Tunis and Bizerta, the land fighting had entered on its last phase. The Allied armies advanced, supported in great strength by the air forces; on 8th May they cleared the Marsa Peninsular (north-east of Tunis) and occupied La Goulette. This was followed by the surrender of the German forces which had fallen back to the Protville area. Allied armoured forces continued their advance from Tunis and captured Hammamet on the night of 10/11 May, and columns branched out north and south to the areas of Nabeul and Bu Ficha respectively. These movements threatened the Axis troops (Italian) from both front and rear, and on the morning of 13th May the Commander of the Italian First Army surrendered unconditionally. In the meantime, on 11th May, Rommel's "Afrika Korps" (on the west flank) had surrendered to Free French forces west of Zaghouan, and Von Arnim and his staff had been captured in the St. Marie du Zit area (east of Zaghouan) on the following day. By 14th May the last pockets of enemy resistance had been "mopped-up" and the Tunisian campaign was ended.

#### GIBRALTAR

##### Strength of the R.A.F.

In November (1942) the following units were operating at Gibraltar:-

A.H.Q. GIB:  
ORB. Appcs.

No. 202 squadron (Catalinas/Sunderlands)  
No. 210 sqn. detachment (Catalinas)  
No. 233 squadron (Hudsons)  
No. 500 squadron (Hudsons)  
No. 608 squadron (Hudsons)  
No. 179 squadron, (Leigh Light Wellingtons)  
No. 700 squadron, F.A.A. (Walrus)  
No. 813 squadron, F.A.A. (Swordfish)  
No. 1404 Met. flight (Hudsons)  
P.R.U. flight (Spitfires)  
No. 71 air/sea Rescue unit, (1)

No. 48 sqn.  
O.R.B. Dec,

In December these units were augmented by the arrival of No. 48 squadron (Hudsons) from Coastal Command. This squadron was fully operational in January, and during that month its aircraft carried out 245 sorties with a total of 1,625 flying

/hours.

1. Of these, detachments of No. 210 sqn. and Nos. 500 and 608 sqns. and Nos. 700 and 813 sqns. (F.A.A.) and a detachment of 8 aircraft of No. 179 sqn. had been sent to Gibraltar in connection with Operation "Torch". On 12th Dec. the remainder of No. 179 sqn. arrived at Gibraltar. No. 202 sqn. was occasionally reinforced by detachments of Sunderlands of No. 10 sqn. sent from Coastal Command. The detachment of No. 210 sqn. returned to the U.K. in April.



"Flying from  
the Rock"

hours.<sup>(1)</sup> Detachments from this squadron and from Nos. 179 and 233 squadrons were posted at Agadir at the end of January from whence they carried out anti-submarine duties.<sup>(2)</sup>

By the middle of December, Nos. 500 and 608 squadrons had been moved to Blida; from that date until 5th April No. 608 squadron was employed training in rocket projectile work at that base.

#### Operations

A.H.Q. Gib:  
ORB. Appcs.

After the initial stages of Operation "Torch", the R.A.F. Gibraltar was fully occupied with anti-submarine sweeps and patrols, and anti-submarine escorts for Allied convoys. During December (1942) and the Spring of 1943 there were many U-boat sightings and several attacks were made by the Hudsons and Wellingtons.

#### Special Anti-Submarine Patrols

A.H.Q. Gib.  
ORB. Jan.  
Appcs.

In January a special anti-submarine patrol was inaugurated with the object of flooding the area bounded by Cape Gata - Cape Palos (south-east Spain) - Cape Ivi<sup>(3)</sup> and the Habibas Islands<sup>(4)</sup> with A.S.V. so as to prevent U-boats in that area from surfacing and charging their batteries. In the event of U-boats being forced to surface for this purpose they would then be attacked by aircraft on the patrol. This patrol was carried out both by day and night by Hudsons and Wellingtons.

#### Attacks on Submarines

In addition to the four German U-boats sunk in November (1942)<sup>(5)</sup> aircraft of the Gibraltar squadrons sank five other German U-boats between the first week of February and the end of the Tunisian campaign. These sinkings occurred as follows:-

A.H.Q. Gib:  
ORB. Appcs;  
A.M.C.O.  
12/1946 (Final  
Assesst: of  
Enemy Sub-  
marine  
Casualties)

At 14.02 hours on 12th February, Hudson "F"<sup>(6)</sup> of No. 48 squadron while on an A.S. sweep, sighted U-boat No. 442 which was fully surfaced, about 145 miles west of Cape St. Vincent. The Hudson attacked with four 250 lb. depth-charges (released from 40 feet) as the U-boat was submerging, the first two depth-charges exploding alongside and level with the conning-tower and the other two in line ahead. On the explosion of the first two depth-charges, about 100 feet of the U-boat's stern became visible and the Hudson's rear gunner fired 300 rounds at the deck. After the attack there was a considerable swirling and a patch of oil 200 yards in diameter was observed.

Ibid: and  
No. 202 sqn.  
ORB. Feb.

On the night of 13/14 February at 23.30 hours, Catalina "J"<sup>(7)</sup> of No. 202 squadron, while on convoy escort, sighted a U-boat about 115 miles west-by-north of Lisbon. The Catalina attacked with five depth-charges which overshot the target and exploded 50/60 yards from it. The U-boat immediately submerged

/and

No. 48 sqn.  
O.R.B.

1. In Feb. this sqn. flew a total of 1,777 hours. (This was a record for Coastal Command).
2. No. 179 sqn. also had detachments at Blida, Casablanca and Port Lyautey.
3. Situated approx: 22 miles west of Oran.
4. Situated approx: 38 miles east of Arzeu.
5. See A.H.B. Narrative on Operations in North Africa.
6. Captained by F/O Mayhew
7. Captained by F/Lt. Sheardown

and after 15 minutes the Catalina returned to the convoy. About half an hour later the Catalina sighted a surfaced U-boat<sup>(1)</sup> and attacked it with its remaining depth-charge (released from 50 feet) which exploded near the stern as the U-boat was submerging in a steep dive. The Catalina also opened fire with its machine-gun, registering hits on the conning-tower. The U-boat was not seen again and the Catalina returned to the convoy.

A.H.Q.Gib:  
O.R.B.Appcs.  
A.M.C.O.  
12/1946

At 11.25 hours on 28th March, about 65 miles east of Cartagena, Hudson "L"<sup>(2)</sup> of No.48 squadron sighted the conning-tower of U-boat No.77 and attacked with four 250 lb. depth-charges (released from 20 feet) which fell 25/30 yards ahead of the swirl and straddled the U-boat's track. (The U-boat had begun to submerge before the depth-charges were released). When the explosions subsided oil and bubbles appeared. At 17.45 hours Hudson "L"<sup>(3)</sup> of No. 233 squadron intercepted a "465" message<sup>(4)</sup> and proceeded to the given position. Having sighted the U-boat (which was surfaced but down by the stern and was leaving a large oil track) the Hudson attacked with one A.S. bomb dropped from 5/600 feet which burst about 15 yards from the U-boat. The U-boat opened fire on the aircraft with one large gun and two machine-guns. About eight minutes later the Hudson again attacked, this time with four depth-charges released from 100 feet. One of these fell 30 feet from the U-boat which was by that time leaving circular patches of oil of about 30 feet in diameter. The U-boat was still on the surface when the Hudson, (which had had its aeriels shot away and its electrical equipment damaged) left the scene.

On the following morning, Hudson "W"<sup>(5)</sup> of No.48 squadron while on an anti-submarine sweep, sighted the same U-boat on the surface at 08.34 hours. The Hudson dived to attack it, firing a machine-gun burst from 300 feet, and the U-boat began to dive. The Hudson then released four depth-charges (from 20 feet), three of which appeared to drop in salvo on to the top of the periscope while one exploded a short distance astern. Nothing further was seen of the U-boat, and the oil track which it had been leaving did not continue beyond the scum from the depth-charge explosions.

Ibid:

The next U-boat (No.167) was sunk on 5th April, about 10 miles south-east of Gran Canaria. At 09.27 hours that morning Hudson "L"<sup>(6)</sup> of No.233 squadron (while on an A.S. sweep) sighted the U-boat which opened fire on the aircraft with two guns and machine-guns. The Hudson attacked it from the stern, releasing four depth-charges from 50 feet. A few minutes later two patches of bubbling oil were seen. At 16.56 hours Hudson "W"<sup>(7)</sup> of the same squadron (also on an A.S. sweep) sighted this U-boat and attacked it with four depth-charges (released from 50 feet) while it was still surfaced. The depth-charges straddled the U-boat which turned to port and submerged. The Hudson then dropped a bomb (ten seconds after the U-boat had completely submerged), and about six minutes after an oil patch 400 yards by 50 yards appeared: nothing further of the U-boat was seen.

/At

1. This was, probably, the same U-boat already attacked. (The U-boat officially assessed as sunk on this occasion was No.620).
2. Captained by F/O Harrap
3. Captained by F/O Castel
4. i.e. the official code signal reporting the sighting of a surfaced U-boat.
5. Captained by F/O Lawson
6. Captained by Sergt. Dalton.
7. Captained by F/Lt. Willets. (These two Hudsons, "L" and "W" were from No.233 sqn.'s detachment at Agadir).

Ibid:

At 18.43 hours on the evening of 7th May, Hudson "X"(1) of No.233 squadron (while on an A.S. sweep) sighted U-boat No.447 on the surface (about 180 miles south-west of Cape St. Vincent) which had been attacked by Hudson "I"(2) of the same squadron a few minutes earlier. Hudson "X" released four depth-charges (from 50/70 feet) which straddled the U-boat's track. The U-boat was lifted by the force of the explosions and then settled down by the stern. For some minutes the U-boat steered in circles, seeming to lose and regain its buoyancy, and then finally submerged stern first.

In addition to these sinkings, other attacks on German U-boats included the following:-

A.H.Q. Gib:  
O.R.B.Appos;  
Admiralty  
Anti-submarine  
Report  
(C.B.04050  
/43/8)):

A U-boat was attacked on 14th December, 130 miles north-east of Oran, by Hudson "Y" of No.233 squadron, and another U-boat was attacked on 24th February, 340 miles west of Lisbon, by Catalina "D" of No.202 squadron. In both these attacks the U-boats were officially assessed as "probably damaged (A)".

Ibid:

In December, two German U-boats were attacked and officially assessed as "probably damaged (B)". These attacks were made on 5th December by Hudson "N" of No.179 squadron, 18 miles north-north-west of Cape Tenes, and by Hudson "D" of the same squadron on 14th December, 55 miles north-by-west of Oran. In February, two German U-boats were attacked and officially assessed as "probably slightly damaged": the attacks were carried out on 4th February by Hudson "G" of No.48 squadron, about 80 miles south-east of Cape Palos, and on 8th February by Hudson "U" of No.233 squadron, about 75 miles north-by-west of Lanzarote Island. In addition to all these attacks, several other attacks were made on U-boats during the period January - May, but were not assessed as successful.

#### Combats with Enemy aircraft

No.48 sqn.  
O.R.B.Jan

Occasionally the Gibraltar aircraft on anti-submarine or convoy escort duties sighted and engaged enemy aircraft. An instance occurred on 16th January when Hudson "D" of No.48 squadron, whilst carrying out an anti-submarine sweep about 50 miles north-east of Algiers, sighted a JU.88 at 5,400 feet. The Hudson engaged the JU. which immediately replied and closed to 150 yards. Hits were estimated to have been obtained on the JU's perspex above the cockpit, whilst the JU's fire failed to hit the Hudson. The JU. dived below the Hudson and was last seen flying at 100 feet on a westerly course.

#### P.R.U. Reconnaissance

A.H.Q. Gib:  
O.R.B.Appos.

Fuehrer  
Conferences  
on Naval  
Affairs, 1942

As formerly, the P.R.U. Spitfires continued their reconnaissances over the ports and aerodromes of southern Spain (and, on occasion, as far inland as Madrid) and the Balearic Islands and Spanish Morocco. These reconnaissances were, perhaps, of greater strategic value than was realised, as in December (1942) Admiral Raeder had pressed on Hitler the importance of the Germans occupying Spain. In the opinion of both Raeder and Hitler the occupation by Germany of "the entire Iberian peninsular" would be of "the utmost strategic importance" in order

/(among

1. Captained by Sergt. Holland.
2. Captained by Sergt. McQueen.

(among other reasons) to intensify the U-boat warfare and blockade-running, and to neutralise or eliminate the Allied occupation of North Africa. Nevertheless, as at that time it was considered unwise to divert either the military or the economic forces for such an operation unless it were to become imperative, it would still be necessary for the Axis to maintain Spanish neutrality. However, both Raeder and Hitler agreed that Germany should be ready to seize Spain and Portugal in the event of the Allies attempting to occupy those countries, as an Allied occupation would, in their opinion, confront the Axis "with an extremely critical situation".

#### Transit Aircraft

"Flying from  
the Rock"

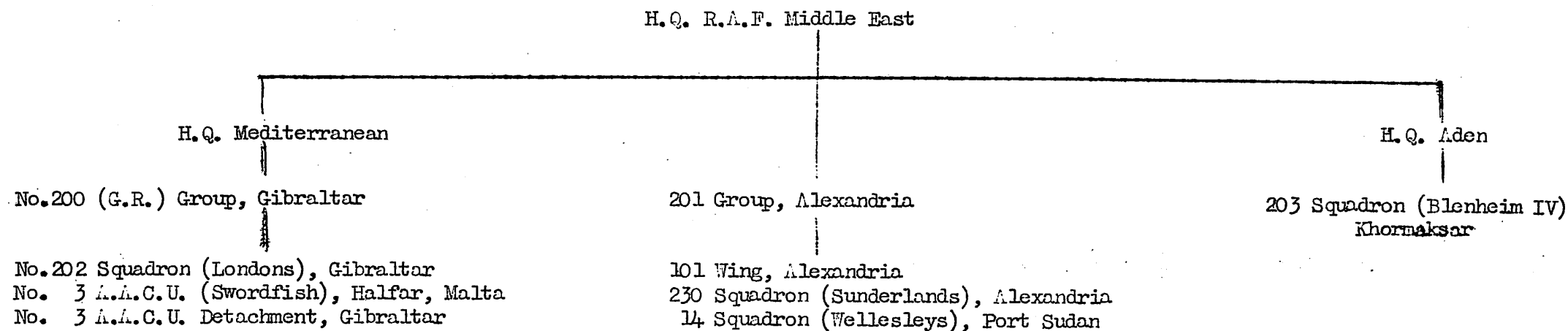
In March (1943) the final extension of the new runway at Gibraltar<sup>(1)</sup> was nearing its completion, and transit aircraft movements reached the exceptional figure of 4,292 for the month. The route to and from the U.K., which was of necessity carried far west of the coast of France, made it essential for aircraft in transit to land at Gibraltar to re-fuel, and during May the number of such aircraft rose to 5,320. The runway extension was completed to its full length of 1,800 yards in July and this enabled the transport traffic movements to reach a total of 6,386 in August.

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1. See SECTION IV, Sub-section GIBRALTAR.

## NAVAL CO-OPERATION OPERATIONAL CHART

(as at 10 June 1940)



Note: No. 228 Squadron's first echelon reinforced the Eastern Mediterranean on 11 June.

This chart gives only the R.A.F. formations specifically earmarked for naval co-operation, and does not represent the whole forces available for such work. The A.O.C.-in-C. had power to direct other squadrons to naval support as the necessity arose. The Fleet had its own carrier-borne formations.

SECRET

AIR MINISTRY INSTRUCTIONS ON AIR ACTION AGAINST  
SHIPPING AT SEA

(Issued by H.Q. M.E. 14 February 1940 and  
Amended 13 April 1940)

1. The action of aircraft against shipping at sea is to conform with the following instructions which are based on Maritime Law.

2. Aircraft must not be ordered to attack at sight and without challenge any vessels except the following:-

- (a) vessels definitely identified as enemy warships;
- (b) vessels definitely identified as enemy mine-layers, mine sweepers, patrol vessels or troopships;
- (c) any vessels other than those specified in (a) and (b) above which are definitely established by observation to form part of an enemy fleet. (Merchant ships in convoy are not repeat not part of an enemy fleet).
- (d) Any vessel in a special zone which opens fire on a British or Allied Aircraft. The attack should not be made if it involves risks to innocent ships in the vicinity. "Special Zones" will be defined from time to time in Air Ministry Admiralty Instructions.

3. Aircraft should not be ordered to challenge vessels at sea unless:-

- (a) The aircraft is engaged in contraband control operations in co-operation with H.M. ships or in conjunction with a contraband control base. In such circumstances specific orders as to the general description and probable location of vessels which may be challenged or diverted are to be issued. (For detailed procedure see paragraph 4).
- (b) The Aircraft has been ordered to search for or keep a look out for -
  - (i) An enemy vessel being used openly or under disguise for military purposes (e.g. a suspected raider.)
  - (ii) Particular enemy merchant ships. In such circumstances an aircraft may challenge and divert any ship in the area ordered to be searched which corresponds with the description of any of the vessels described in the orders. (For detailed procedure see paragraph 5).

4. The following procedure is to be followed by aircraft engaged in contraband control operations in co-operation with H.M. ships or in conjunction with a contraband control base. (See para. 3(a) above).

- (a) The aircraft is to report the position of the vessel to the co-operating warship or contraband control base.

/(b)

- (b) The aircraft is to pass on to the vessel by lamp, using the international code of signals Part I, the orders received from the co-operating warship or contraband control base.
- (c) If the vessel obeys, it is to be escorted for as long as possible or until it is taken over by the co-operating warship or the contraband control base or relieving aircraft.
- (d) If the vessel does not obey the aircraft is to repeat the orders three times and if the vessel still does not obey the orders three times and if the vessel still does not obey the aircraft is to fire a number of rounds as a warning into the sea ahead of the ship and repeat the orders.
- (e) If the ship still refuses to obey, the aircraft is to request further instructions from the co-operating warship or contraband control base.
- (f) In no circumstances is the vessel to be attacked unless the foregoing instructions have been complied with and specific orders to attack have been received from the co-operating warship or contraband control base.
- (g) If orders are received to attack the ship the aircraft is to follow the procedure set out in para.5(d), (e) and (f) below.
- (h) Even if the vessel opens fire the aircraft is not to attack it until ordered to do so by the co-operating warship or contraband control base unless the ship is within a "Special Zone" when it may be dealt with under para.2(d) above.
- (j) If the aircraft for any reason has to cease escorting the vessel before a relieving aircraft or one of H.M. ships arrives, and the vessel in the interval ceases to obey the orders given to her, the procedure described in sub-paras. (a) to (h) above must be recommenced and followed in its entirety if it is designed to regain control of the vessel.

5. An aircraft which identifies a vessel as a suspicious ship which it has been ordered to search for and challenge under para.3(b) above, is to adopt the following procedure:-

- (a) The aircraft is to report the description, position, course and speed of the ship to its base and to the nearest British or Allied warship.
- (b) Order the ship by lamp, using the international code of signals Part I, to steer a course towards the nearest British or Allied warship or a suitable port.
- (c) If the ship obeys, it is to be escorted for as long as possible, or until the aircraft is relieved.
- (d) If the ship does not obey the order is to be repeated three times. If it still does not obey the aircraft is to fire a number of rounds into the sea ahead of the ship and again repeat the signal.
- (e) If the ship still does not obey the order, it may be

/assumed

3.

assumed that she has enemy character and force may be used to secure compliance with orders given. The aircraft is to machine gun the bridge with a short burst of fire. If this has no effect the ship is to be bombed until one hit is registered. After a reasonable lapse of time if the ship still continues on her course, the aircraft is to continue bombing until the ship obeys.

- (f) If at any stage of this procedure the vessel opens fire, the aircraft may at once attack it with all the force at its command whether it is in a "Special Zone" or not.

6. Orders to aircraft are to make it clear that as all merchant ships have a right to self defence aircraft must in all circumstances be careful not to provoke an innocent merchant ship to open fire by approaching any merchant ship, whether suspect or not, in such a manner as to give the vessel reasonable grounds for apprehension that she is about to be attacked.



System of Classification of Results Adopted by Admiralty  
Shipping Losses, Assessment Committee.

Claims in attacks on shipping were assessed by the Committee on the following basis:-

H.Q. Mod. Category I. Sunk or constructive loss, i.e.  
S247/49/4/Air

- (a) Must be seen actually to sink, blow up or be burnt out.
- (b) Enemy admission after air attack.
- (c) Subsequent definite confirmatory reconnaissance, i.e. wreck or wreckage seen, boats, etc.
- (d) Hit by sufficient weight of bombs to class as constructional loss.
- (e) Captured.

Category II. Seriously damaged.

- (a) Beached.
- (b) Well on fire.
- (c) Abandoned.
- (d) Reported well down by stern, bad list, etc., not actually observed to sink.
- (e) Hits by sufficient weight of bombs to cause serious damage.

Category III. Damaged.

Seen to be hit, but not sufficiently heavily enough, or insufficient evidence to assess under Cat. II.

Category IV. - No observed result, near misses, no definite claim.

- (a) Unobserved results.
- (b) Near misses.
- (c) Believed hit.

NOTES.

Ship of 2,000 tons and below if hit in vulnerable part by one 250 lb. bomb is placed in Cat. I or II.

Ship of 2,000/4,000 tons if hit in vulnerable part by two 250 lb. bombs is placed in Cat. I or II.

Ship over 4,000 tons if hit in vulnerable part by three or more 250 lb. bombs is placed in Cat. I or II.

If 500 lb. bombs, figures should be halved. If ship is a tanker, figures should probably be doubled.

Near misses: Claims classed under Cat. III if within 15 yards with 500 lb. bomb. Ship torpedoed by one aircraft torpedo in Cat. II, unless a tanker.

No.201 Group diary of events in co-operation with Navy on March 28, 1941, preceding the night action of Cape Matapan

(Note: The identification of enemy units by aircraft, cannot in all instances be accepted as accurate).

Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events
100. C. PASSERO 84	Mar.27	1020	3 Cruisers (2 x 8", 1 x 6"), subsequently identified as 2 ZARAS and 1 COLLEONI, and 1 destroyer sighted, bearing 330°T, 5 miles away, steering 120°, speed 15 knots. Position of aircraft - 100 C. PASSERO. 84. No further information was obtained about this force until 28th March. The sighting served as a partial confirmation of reports that the Italians intended a large scale naval action against our convoys in the AEGEAN and south of CRETE, and possibly proposed to run supplies to the DODECANESE at the same time. The course of this force - for a point midway between CRETE and the coast of CYRENAICA - is significant. In anticipation of some such attempt on the part of the Italians, all shipping was withdrawn from the AEGEAN and the route from ALEXANDRIA. SCARAMANGA were instructed to pass all enemy reports from aircraft to H.Q., B.F.G. for possible bomber striking force action.
ALEXANDRIA	Mar.27	p.m.	With the object of intercepting the Italian naval force should it attempt to enter the AEGEAN on passage to RHODES, or to bombard the Naval refuelling base at SUDA BAY, patrols "X.X." and "A.A.W." were arranged for 28th, from SCARAMANGA. One aircraft of 228 Squadron from ABOUKIR was detailed to carry out a search of the SOUTHERN AEGEAN to intercept any surface forces which might have entered the AEGEAN in the night of 27th/28th March. It was considered possible that these forces might come from the west or from the DODECANESE.
ABOUKIR	Mar.28	0115 to 0900	One Sunderland of 228 Squadron left for patrol of southern AEGEAN to arrive in KASO STRAITS BY dawn.
SCARAMANGA	Mar.28	2315 to 0610	One Sunderland of 228 Squadron conveyed the RT. HON. ANTHONY EDEN from MALTA.
SCARAMANGA	Mar.28	0545 to 1650	One Sunderland of 230 Squadron carried out the line patrol "X.X." leaving Base 1½ hours after dawn. Result - NIL enemy report.
SCARAMANGA	Mar.28	0410 to 1635	One Sunderland of 230 Squadron left at dawn for patrol of area "A.A.W."
V.A.L.F.'s Positions 33°50'N 24°20'E	Mar.28	0602	V.A.L.F. reported 3 unknown ships in position 34°12'N 24°14'E. Course 090°T.
33°50'N 24°20'E	Mar.28	0612	V.A.L.F. amplified his report as 3 C.Rs, and an unknown number of D.Rs in position 34°02'N 24°17'E steering 100°T. The above ships were identified as 2 x 8" crs. and 1 x 6" Cr. with 3 D.Rs. (Signal of 0824).
33°47'N 24°23'E	Mar.28	0637	The enemy attempted to close V.A.L.F. and altered course to 160°, his position then being 34°00'N 24°37'E.
33°38'N 24°32'E	Mar.28	0721	The enemy altered course to 265° - Speed 28 knots and position 33°50'N 24°21'E. He was probably attempting to retreat as V.A.L.F. attempted to lead him towards his Admiral, to the east.
	Mar.28	0730	In view of the possible development of the situation, the aircraft on "A.A.W." patrol was ordered to search to westward of the forces reported, on completion of its area.
33°42'N 24°26'E	Mar.28	0736	The enemy altered course to 330° to retire. His position was 33°54'N 24°14'E - speed 28 knots. V.A.L.F. altered course to 310° - speed 28 knots, to close.
	Mar.28	0750	The aircraft on "A.A.W." patrol was ordered to locate and shadow the enemy reported by V.A.L.F.
33°56'N 24°02'E	Mar.28	0829	Enemy position 34°06'N 23°44'E Course 320°.
	Mar.28	0830	V.A.L.F. altered course to 300°.
34°01'N 23°50'E	Mar.28	0855	The enemy's speed slackened to 25 knots.
34°02'N 23°47'E	Mar.28	0858	V.A.L.F. reported an unknown ship in position 34°17'N 23°47'E (18 miles from him).
	Mar.28	0859	V.A.L.F. amplified the above report as 2 battleships.
33°37'N 25°08'E (C.in C's posn)	Mar.28	0900	C.-in-C. gave his position to V.A.L.F. - 73 miles to the east.
35°00'N 23°45'E (VALF's Posn)	Mar.28	0905	On sighting the battleships, V.A.L.F. altered course to the south, as the battleships were closing him on a course of 160° from position 35°16'N 23°45'E.
ALEXANDRIA	Mar.28	0910	One Sunderland of 228 Squadron was ordered to search the SOUTHERN AEGEAN west of 25°E South of 37°N, to replace the aircraft diverted from "A.A.W." patrol which had been previously ordered to cover this area after completing the "A.A.W." search.

SECRET

Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events
33°45'N 23°52'E	Mar.28	0932	V.A.L.F. informed C.-in-C. that he is still uncertain whether the second force sighted by him is accompanied by one or two battleships.
34°55'N 23°24'E	Mar.28	0935	Sunderland reported 5 C.Rs and 3 D.Rs in a position 50 miles from the first force sighted by ORION and with which she lost contact at 0858 when she sighted the battleships.
33°40'N 23°55'E	Mar.28	0945	V.A.L.F. altered course to 120°, away from the forces previously sighted and increased speed to 30 knots.
SCARAMANGA	Mar.28	0955 to 1700	The Sunderland of 228 Squadron which had been ordered to search the southern AEGEAN was sent off to assist the 230 Squadron Sunderland in location and shadowing of the enemy forces. It was unsuccessful in locating any enemy units and landed at SUDA BAY at dusk.
ALEXANDRIA	Mar.28	1000	In view of the discrepancies between the positions of the forces reported by V.A.L.F., one or two battleships in position 35°16'N 23°45'E at 1105 hours and the cruiser force (2 x 8", 1 x 6", 3 D.Rs) last seen in position 34°08'N 23°50'E at 1115 hours and the position of the new force of 2 CAVOUR Class battleships, one 8" C.R., 2 x 6" C.Rs, and 4 D.Rs, seen by the Sunderland in position 34°55'N 23°24'E at 1135 hours, the Sunderland was told to check his position by landfall. It was not immediately assumed that there were, in all probability, two quite separate enemy forces at this time.
	Mar.28	1032	The 230 Squadron Sunderland amplified his previous reports - the force sighted by him consists of 2 CAVOURS, 2 ZARAS, 1 POLA.
	Mar.28	1101	The Sunderland reported the enemy in position 34°56'N 22°32'E. There appears to be a discrepancy between this report and his last, as plotting this report shows an enemy speed of over 40 knots. The error was probably in the first sighting report as a double check was made on this second position - lat. and long. and bearing and distance from CAPE SPADA.
	Mar.28	1106	C.-in-C. requested maximum Sunderland reconnaissance south and west of CRETE to locate all the enemy forces and clarify the situation.
	Mar.28	1144	The 230 Squadron Sunderland reported the enemy battlefleet in position 35°03'N 22°26'E giving an average speed since sighting of 24½ knots. Course 300 T - speed 30 knots.
	Mar.28	1245	The Sunderland was ordered to verify the presence of a further force i.e. the battleship force seen by V.A.L.F. at 1115 hours in position 34°08'N 23°50'E, now assumed to be some 50 miles to the south east of the force being shadowed by the Sunderland.
	Mar.28	1303	The Sunderland reported the Battlefleet in position 35°25'N 21°44'E i.e. in position 75 miles west south west of the KITHERA CHANNEL.
	Mar.28	1339	In response to 201 Group's signal of 1245, the Sunderland reported 3 C.Rs and 2 D.Rs in position 34°42'N 21°47'E. This force might have been that last sighted by V.A.L.F. in position 34°08'N 23°50'E at 1115 hours. Enemy's course 325° speed 30 knots.
	Mar.28	1405	The second force reported by the Sunderland was on a line of bearing of 325° i.e. in single line ahead on a course of 325°T.
ALEXANDRIA	Mar.28	1415 to 1600	In anticipation of reconnaissance requirements for Mar.29, one Sunderland of 228 Squadron was dispatched to SUDA BAY with orders to remain there overnight and await instructions for 29th Mar.
	Mar.28	1500	The Sunderland confirmed the presence of 2 enemy forces in positions 36°01'N 20°32'E Course 300°T Speed 30 knots. (Force "A" consisting of 2 CAVOURS, 2 ZARAS and 1 POLA with 5 D.Rs) and 35°14'N 21°20'E Course 325°T Speed 30 knots. (Force "B" consisting of 2 SAVOIAS and 1 D.R.)
	Mar.28	1530	The 230 Squadron Sunderland's final report of the two forces was:- Force "A" - position 36°09'N 20°19'E Course 300°T Speed 30 knots. Force "B" - position 35°26'N 21°10'E Course 325°T Speed 30 knots. The Sunderland had insufficient daylight and petrol left to confirm the presence of battleships with Force "B". It landed at SCARAMANGA at 1700 hours.
	Mar.28	1627	WARSPITE's aircraft reported 1 battleship, 3 C.Rs and 7 D.Rs in position 35°13'N 21°21'E Course 300°
	Mar.28	1631	The above aircraft sighted a further 3 C.Rs and 7 D.Rs on a course of 170° in position 35°16'N 21°14'E i.e. 7 miles to the south west of the above force. These two reports indicated that these two forces were about to join up. This supposition is borne out by V.A.L.F.'s report of 2 unknown ships in position 35°12'N 21°20'E at 1715 hours.
	Mar.28	1655	WARSPITE's aircraft reported a total force of 1 battleship, 6 C.Rs and 11 D.Rs in five columns in position 35°01'N 21°10'E on a course of 300° - speed 14 knots.
	Mar.28	1730	V.A.L.F. reported that this force was engaging an aircraft, was concentrating and laying a smoke screen, its course being 205°T. It was with this force that the series of night engagements took place.
ALEXANDRIA	Mar.28	2158	C.-in-C. requested a search within an area centre 35°00'N 21°00'E radius 50 miles, to locate crippled ships.

\* There were frequent references in aircraft reports to Cavour class battleships, but these were erroneous. The ships are actually Garibaldi cruisers which resembled Cavour in silhouette.

SECRET



APPENDIX "E"Experiences of Pilots of No.203 (Blenheim) Squadron in Protection of Naval Convoys Evacuating Troops from Greece.

(Extracts from No.203 Squadron O.R.B.)

April 26th: First sortie escorted south-bound convoy and was fired on by one of two north-bound convoys seen, slightly damaging one aircraft. Three aircraft of second sortie returned to report that the south-bound convoy and two north-bound had been left in vicinity of 36 degs. 30 N., 24 degs. E. after an engagement with a considerable enemy force of dive-bombers and fighters. Enemy first sighted at 1100 hours L.T. approaching convoys from the north at 10,000 feet. Our three aircraft were at 8,000 feet when the first bursts of A.A. from N.E. of convoy showed a Ju.87 commencing a dive attack, and the Blenheims went into line astern and dived to attack. The main formation was then sighted, and No.2 climbed to 10,000 feet and engaged them just as they were turning to dive on the convoy, but was engaged by one Ju.87 and five Me.109s. The enemy were evaded after diving to 1,500 feet to lead them across the very heavy naval barrage. No.3 aircraft, after close engagements with eight Ju.87s, with front and rear guns firing many bursts at close range which entered their targets, saw the enemy were retreating northwards and pursued them without being able to close for some ten minutes ..... Enemy had all disappeared by 1120 hours. Owing to our aircraft and the very accurate naval barrage, no attack was carried out against the ships. All enemy aircraft seen still carried their bombs. No enemy aircraft seen brought down, but many hit. No.3 aircraft slightly damaged.

April 27th: Two sorties of three Blenheims on convoy escort. First sortie reported that in sweep to west of Hydra Island at 0749 hours a 10,000/15,000 tons passenger vessel was seen on fire in position 37 deg. 04 N., 23 degs. 12 E, with a cruiser standing by picking up survivors. Cruiser was firing and at 0800 hours an aircraft was seen heading north. Blenheim formation went in pursuit and encountered a number of enemy aircraft. A general engagement ensued, and altogether some 20 Ju. 87s. 6 Me.110s. and an unknown number of Me.109s were seen. The leader pursued and obtained three accurate bursts at close range on one aircraft, but saw no result, while he was attacked by enemy aircraft and sustained serious damage, both inner tanks being holed and starboard engine damaged. The other Blenheims chased a Me.110. One got in an effective burst, then dived steeply away and was not seen again. The leader of the formation, being out of ammunition and damaged, set course for base. The remaining Blenheim returned to the cruiser and burning ship, and from 0815 to 0905 continually chased formations of five or six aircraft as they approached. This one Blenheim was unable to prevent some attacks.

April 28th: Three Blenheims required to intercept strong naval convoy west of Melos ..... Third destroyer in line first sighted 0704 hours, and though aircraft approached with undercarriage down firing green cartridges and flashing latter at 500 feet, to pass well aft of vessel, this destroyer opened fire at  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile; and although cartridges were again fired, destroyer fired a second time. Bursts were all round aircraft. No damage noticed at the time, but after eventual recognition and when aircraft had been with convoy 55 minutes, starboard engine caught fire. Aircraft set course for base, failed to make Retimo and landed in sea  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles to north. Air gunner got rubber boat out and alongside wing immediately. Navigator was stuck under navigation table under water but managed to scramble out and then turned to help captain of aircraft who was trapped in his seat below water, and pulled him out in time. The crew paddled to Retimo and on landing were covered by rifles as the Greeks thought they were Germans. The captain of the aircraft, on hearing an uncertain but familiar accent suggesting British soldiery gave the inspired cry (after one soundless attempt) of "We're f-----g British". This convinced all of the crew's undoubtedly British character. Signal sent to A.H.Q., Crete 28.4.41:  
"Request you inform naval authorities to warn ships not to open fire on Blenheim aircraft approaching to identify themselves in manner requested. Three sorties have been fired on in this manner. One aircraft force-landed

in the sea, total loss, almost certainly due to naval I/A."

April 30th: Squadron received orders to leave for Kabrit. .... The formation of Blenheims which left Heraklion at 1550 hours sighted at 1720 hours a powerful naval force including one aircraft carrier, which took violent avoiding action, and our aircraft detoured the force. A moment later air gunner reported aircraft on port quarter, later seen to be Fulmar, then a number of other Fulmars, three of which attacked P/O. Wilson's aircraft and one bullet passed through main plane. Formation fired Versey lights and attackers desisted. Four aircraft landed Kabrit 1900 hours without further incident.

GERMAN AIR FORCE ORDER OF BATTLE  
MEDITERRANEAN AREA  
17.2.41.

Formation and Component Units	Type of aircraft.	Establishment	Believed location
Lehr I			
Gruppen I & II	Ju 88	69	Catania
Gruppen III	Ju 88	30	Taranto
K.G. 26			
Gruppen I & II	He III	60	Palermo and
Recco. Squadron	—	9	Comiso
F. 121 (Recco) Staffel 1	Ju 88	9	Sicily
K.G. 4 Gruppe I Staffel 2	He 111	9	Comiso
St. K.G. 1 Gruppe I	Ju 87	30	Libya
Lehr 1 Gruppe IV	Ju 87	30	Sicily
St. K.G. III Gruppe (?)	Ju 87	30	and Sardinia
Z.G. 26 Gruppe I	Mc 110	30	Libya
J.G. (?)	Mc 109	30	Believed Sicily

Total number of German aircraft by types  
estimated to be in Mediterranean area:

Long range bombers	168
Dive bombers	90
Reconnaissance	18
Fighters	60
Transport	180

M.E.  
S. 49949

ESTABLISHMENT STRENGTH OF ITALIAN AIR FORCE  
FEBRUARY-MARCH 1941

SECRET

	LIBYA	DODECANESE	I.E.A.	ITALY, SICILY SARDINIA AND ALBANIA	TOTAL
LAND BOMBERS					
S 81	3	12	15	20	50
S 79	37	34	28	228	327
BR 20	-	-	-	180	180
CZ 1007(b)	-	-	-	34	34
S 82	-	3	-	15	18
Total	40	49	43	477	609
DIVE BOMBERS					
Ju 87	10	-	-	-	10
COLONIAL BOMBERS					
CA 133	-	-	32	-	32
Ghibli	30	-	-	-	30
Total	30	-	32	-	62
LAND FIGHTERS					
CR 32	-	3	15	-	18
CR 42	78	12	16	159	265
MC 200	-	-	-	150	150
G 50	37	-	-	108	145
Total	115	15	31	417	578
LAND RECCO.					
RO 37	15	-	4	213	232
CA 310	15	-	-	-	15
CA 312	-	-	-	40	40
S 79	4	-	-	-	4
Total	34	-	4	253	291
SEA BOMBER					
CZ 506 (b)	-	1	-	60	61
SEA FIGHTER					
RO 44	-	7	-	20	27
RO 43	-	1	-	-	1
Total	-	8	-	20	28
SEA RECONNAIS-					
SANCE					
CZ 501	-	9	-	126	135
TOTAL	229	82	110	1,353	1,774

M.E.

S.49949

TOTAL ENEMY AIR FORCES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN  
May 24th 1941

	SICILY	LIBYA			AEGEAN	GREECE and BALKANS	TOTAL
	Sicily	German	Italian	Total	Prob. all German		
Bombers	80	10	30	40	90	30	240
Dive-Bombers	70	60	25	85	-	30	185
Fighters	60	50	165	215	50	90	415
Colonial and Reconnaissance	15	30	120	150	30	20	215
TOTAL	225	150	340	490	170	170	1,055

M.E.  
S. 49949

It was estimated that the enemy also had a strategic reserve  
of 650 aircraft

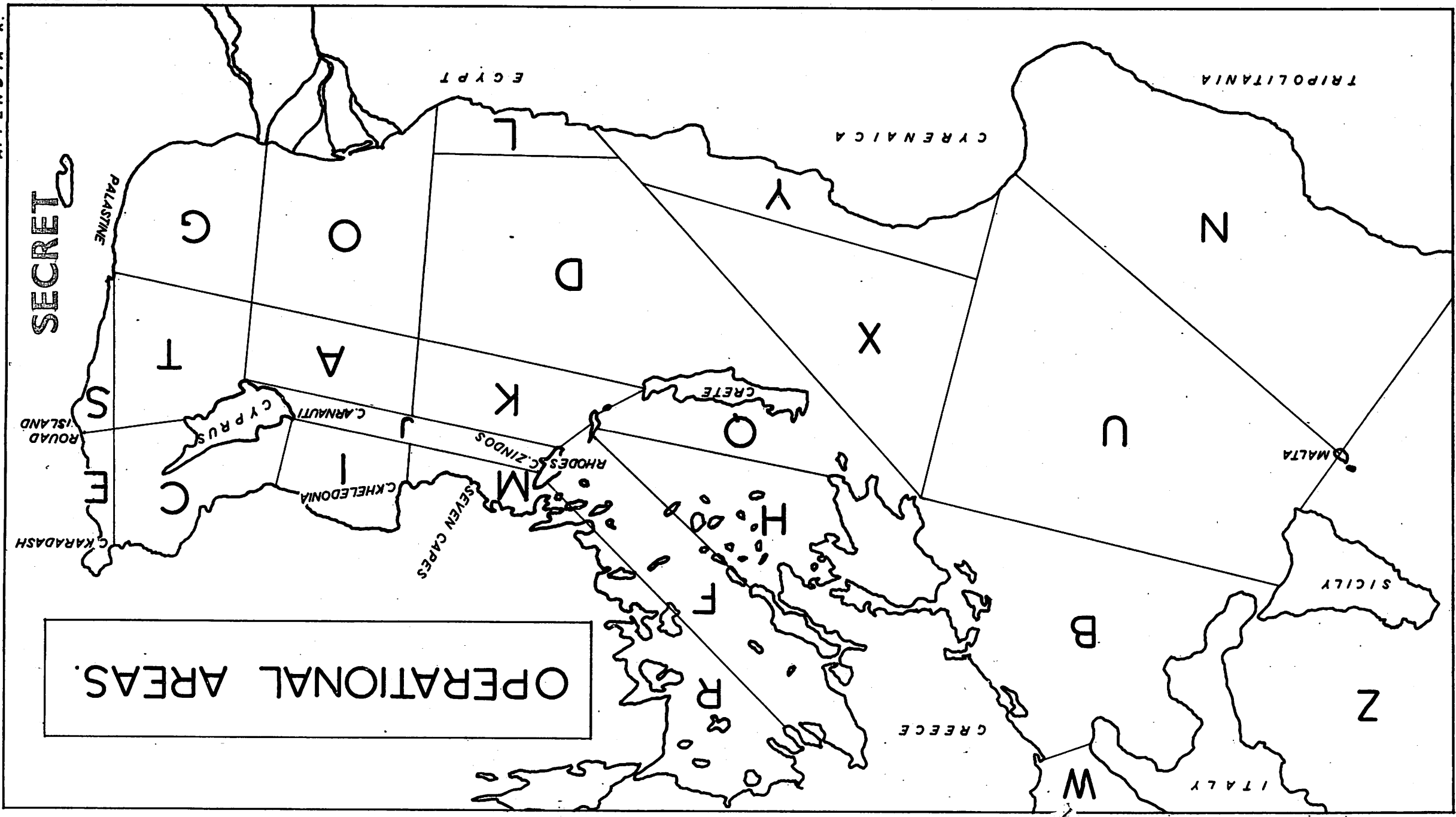
SECRET



ENTRIES OF NO. 69 SQUADRON'S O.R.B. FOR 30 SEPTEMBER 1941

APPENDIX "J"

Aircraft Type & No.	Crew	Duty	Time up	Time down	Remarks
Hurricane Z. 2332 30.9.41	Wg.Cdr. Dowland	Recce	09.45	11.45	Recce. East Sicilian Coast. 1 Seaplane at Syracuse, 1 T.B.0800 Syracuse 15' Co. 0150-20 kts.
Hurricane Z. 3053 30.9.41	Fg.Off. Weetton	Recce	09.45	11.35	Recce. South Sicilian Coast. Port Empedocle, 1 merchant vessel, 25 small craft. Accurate A.A.
M'land I B.S. 774 30.9.41	Flt.Lt. Williams Plt.Off. Wiseman Plt.Off. Berrett	Recce	10.15	13.10	Recce. East Calabrian Coast. Hospital ship 0900 C. Rassere 15' Co. 160-6kts. 1 - 600 ton schooner stationary 10' E. of Syracuse. 2 merchant vessels 2 destroyers 1300 C. Spartivento 15' Co. 045-8kts. 1 merchant vessel 2250 C Stile 10' Co. 0450 - 6 kts.
M'land I B.S. 762 30.9.41.	Fg.Off. Drew Sgt. Doran Sgt. Lawson	Recce	11.55	14.10	Recce. Tripoli, 6 destroyers, one liner, 1 tanker, 5 merchant vessels Slight A.A. and 1 CR. 42 at 3-4,000'.
M'land I B.J. 427 30.9.41	Sgt. McDonald Sgt. Hall Sgt. Cameron Sgt. Willson	Recce	13.00	16.30	Recce. East Sicilian Coast. 40-50 small craft and 4 barges in port between Syracuse and Augusta. 1 merchant vessel 1 small craft 0600 Rizzuto 15' Co. 020 - 12 kts. 2 possible E. boats near C. Spartivento, Co. W.2 Seaplanes patrolling near Coast at 2,000'
M'land I A.R. 725 30.9.41	Plt.Off. Smith Sgt. Thomas Sgt. Stripp	Recce	16.30	19.15	Search for shipping in Tripoli area. 2 stationary schooners 1 mile East of Kerkennah. 3 merchant vessels 3 destroyers 2700 Tripoli, 20' Co. 2700 - 8 kts.



SECRET

APPENDIX "L"

1.

TRANSLATION OF LEAFLETS DROPPED ON NAPLES. OCTOBER 1941

Neapolitans. We British, who have never been at war with you before, send you this message. We bombed Naples tonight. We did not want to bomb you Neapolitans. We have no quarrel with you. All we want is peace with you. But we were forced to bomb Naples because you let the Germans use your port. So long as ships continue to leave Naples with German arms and German supplies for the Germans in Libya your City will be bombed again. Tonight's bombing is only the first drop of the coming storm. Therefore if you wish to save yourselves -

1. Your dockers must refuse to load ships for the Germans.
2. Your sailors must refuse to sail ships for the Germans.
3. You must go yourselves to the docks and scream at your dockers and sailors to cease work.

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1. The above is excerpted from File A.O.C./47, Part I, No.161B.

STATEMENTS OF HIGH GERMAN OFFICERS AS TO THE CANCELLATION  
OF THE INTENDED INVASION OF MALTA IN THE SUMMER OF 1942

General Von Pohl.

As the Luftwaffe attacked and advanced in the Desert, they were by no means as fortunate as the German army in finding quantities of stores and equipment, and the British attacks on Benghazi and Tripoli were most effective in destroying their reserves. By the beginning of the Spring (1942) it was considered that Malta was sufficiently weakened by blockade and bombardment for an assault to be successful, and plans were made accordingly. The German High Command was under no illusions as to the tenacity of the defence of Malta but they believed that their air support and the known shortage of supplies on Malta, combined with ruthless attacking spirit, would achieve success. Just when, in the Spring of 1942, the moment had arrived for the decisive assault, Rommel was on the march towards the Nile and insisted that the Luftwaffe should give him the maximum support. The Supreme Command of the German Armed Forces supported Rommel in his demands and ordered the Luftwaffe to assist him, and leave Malta until later. The unexpectedly rapid fall of Tobruk (20 June) played into Rommel's hands and he was able to press his case for immediate assistance because his prospects of ultimate success seemed very good. The result was that Field-Marshal Kesselring received orders from Hitler himself to subordinate everything to Rommel's demands. In Von Pohl's opinion this was the German High Command's supreme blunder in the Mediterranean campaign.

Note by Reichs' Marshal Goering; (whose only comment on the question why there was no invasion of Malta was "You try to carry out an invasion with the Italians".) He stated that he himself was ready for this invasion. That the Italians insisted that they should be allowed to participate and, more important still, that such an operation was impossible without the effective co-operation of the Italian Government. The Germans, knowing that they could not rely on the Italian fleet, preferred to call off the whole undertaking. (Goering claimed that the Luftwaffe's effort in their attacks on Malta were not futile as it had served the purpose of eliminating the striking power of the R.A.F. based on the island.)

NOTE: The above statements were obtained from the interrogation of Generals Student and Von Kohl and Reichs' Marshal Goering. They may be compared with the following account by Vice-Admiral Weichold:-

Essay: "Once again the threatening monster of reduced supplies for  
"The War Africa loomed on the horizon. While at the front the soldiers of  
at Sea in the Afrika Korps fought and conquered, far from the decisive areas  
the Med." of the land fighting the British were systematically throttling the  
Part II supplies of the German-Italian Panzer army. We were threatened  
N.I.D. with losing the fruits of the Cyrenaican victory. Only a quick  
1/GP/21 solution of the Malta problem, by the occupation of the island,  
(AHB,1S.10) as had already been provided for in the great operational plan of  
1942, could finally remove the again impending danger. In this  
situation the Supreme Command, in agreement with the Italian  
Command, decided to postpone the execution of the Malta operation.  
This far-reaching decision was made under the impression of the  
Panzer army's success in the area of the Egyptian frontier. The  
Commanders of the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine in the Mediterranean

/were

were not parties to this alteration in the plans, whilst the influence of Field Marshal Rommel turned the scales .....

The new plan of campaign was a terrific gamble, everything was staked on one card. Everything depended upon the lightning execution of the land operations. If this expectation was not fulfilled, heavy defeat would ensue. The German Naval Command raised no objection to the postponement of the Malta plan, and informed the Naval Commander who was in charge of the coastal supplies in Africa of the alteration of the great operational plan.

Thus the die was cast in favour of the further development of the war in North Africa and the Mediterranean. Apparently the decision had been influenced by the tying-down of the German forces in the Russian war (the Summer offensive with the object of attaining a decision in the centre and southern parts of the Eastern Front in the direction of the Don, the Volga and the Caucasus) and a desire of economising in German forces set aside for the Malta operation."

RECONNAISSANCE OPERATIONS FROM EGYPT

On 25 February 1942 the reconnaissance tally for the day consisted of:-

- (1) Reconnaissances to the South-West of Greece by a Maryland and a Blenheim of No.203 Squadron.
- (ii) Patrol to the North of Alexandria by a Dornier of No.2 Squadron R.Y.S.A.F.
- (iii) Patrols of the Libyan coast by two Wellingtons of No.221 Squadron.
- (iv) Sighting of enemy submarine by an aircraft of No.203 Squadron on A/S patrol.

By 19 May the day's effort from Egypt had grown to the following:-

- (i) A/S patrol for convoy off Egyptian coast by two Wellesleys of No.47 Air Echelon, two Albacores of No.821 Squadron and two Swordfish of No.815 Squadron.
- (ii) Fighter protection for above convoy by four Beaufighters of No.252 Squadron and two Beaufighters of No.272 Squadron.
- (iii) A/S and fighter patrols round second convoy off the Western Desert coast by two Blenheims of No.13 Hellenic Squadron and two Beaufighters of No.272 Squadron.
- (iv) A/S patrols by two Blenheims of No.203 Squadron to a maximum depth of sixty miles off the Western Desert coast. One submarine was sighted and attacked.
- (v) A/S patrol by Maryland of No.203 Squadron off coast from Sidi Barrani to Burg El Arab. Unidentified aircraft sighted.
- (vi) A/S patrol of Levant coastal area between Beirut and Haifa by two Walruses of No.700 Squadron.
- (vii) Shipping search by two Wellingtons of No.221 Squadron in the Gulf of Sirte. Enemy convoy sighted.
- (viii) Photographic reconnaissance of Martuba, Derna, Ras El Hilal, Piraeus, Salamis, Heracles and Hassani.
- (ix) Search by two aircraft of the Sea Rescue Flight up to thirty miles off Crete for missing Wellington crew.

NOTE:

The above is excerpted from Appendix "A" to "R.A.F. Operations in the Western Desert and Eastern Mediterranean, 18 November 1941 to 19 May 1942" (A.H.B.IIJ1/12).

APPENDIX "O"STRENGTH OF THE GERMAN AIR FORCE IN THE  
MEDITERRANEAN ON 21 JUNE 1942.

<u>Type of Aircraft</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Long-range Recce:	49	27
S.E. Fighters	186	128
Night Fighters	33	14
T.E. Fighters	57	34
Bombers	165	105
Dive-Bombers	80	36
Coastal	44	23
	<hr/>	<hr/>
Totals	614	367

NOTE: The above has been extracted from official returns made by the Quartermaster-General's Department of the German Air Ministry.

SECRET

APPENDIX "P"

OPERATION "PEDESTAL"

R.A.F. UNITS OPERATING FROM MALTA BETWEEN 9 AND 15 AUGUST 1942

FIGHTERS

No. 185 squadron)	Spitfires
No. 126 squadron)	
No. 229 squadron)	
No. 249 squadron)	
No. 1435 squadron)	
No. 248 squadron)	Coastal Beaufighters
No. 235 squadron)	
No. 252 squadron)	
No. 89 squadron	Night Beaufighters

TORPEDO BOMBERS

No. 86 squadron)	Beauforts
No. 39 squadron)	
No. 217 squadron)	

<u>R.N.A. Squadron</u>	Albacores and Swordfish
------------------------	-------------------------

NIGHT BOMBERS

No. 38 squadron)	Wellingtons
No. 40 squadron)	
No. 159 squadron.	Liberators

DAY BOMBERS

No. 55 squadron	Baltimores
-----------------	------------

RECONNAISSANCE

No. 69 squadron	Baltimores, P.R.U. Spitfires & Wellington VIII's Marylands
No. 203 squadron	
from Middle East	2 P.R.U. Spitfires

NOTE: The above is transcribed from A-V-M. Park's Report on Operation "Pedestal"; (A.H.Q. F.C., WSD/S9).



## MEDITERRANEAN AIR COMMAND

APPENDIX "Q"

C-in-C. Air Chief Marshal Sir A. Tedder  
 Dy. C-in-C Air Vice Marshal H.E.P. Wigglesworth  
 C.O.S. Brig.-Genl. H.A. Craig  
 D.O.P. Brig.-Genl. P.W. Timberlake  
 D.M.S. Air Vice Marshal G.G. Dawson

NORTHWEST AFRICAN AIR FORCES  
 C.G. Major-Genl. Carl Spaatz  
 Dy. Air Vice Marshal J.M. Robb  
 C.O.I.S. Col. E.P. Curtis  
 A.O.A. Air Comdre: A. MacGregor

MALTA AIR COMMAND  
 A.O.C. Air Marshal Sir Keith Park

MIDDLE EAST AIR COMMAND  
 C-in-C. Air Chief Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas

N.A.A.F. STRATEGIC  
AIR FORCE

C.G. Maj: - Genl.  
J.H. Doolittle

Functions:

Plan and control air operations of all bombers and fighter escorts assigned to the command for strategic support of land and sea forces.

N.A.A.F. TACTICAL  
AIR FORCE

A.O.C. Air Marshal  
Sir A. Coningham

Functions:

Plan and control the air operations in support of the land operations in Tunisia.

N.A.A.F. COASTAL  
AIR FORCE

A.O.C. Air Vice Marshal  
Sir H.P. Lloyd

Functions:

- 1 Plan the air defence of N.W. Africa and control the operations of all units allotted to the Command.
- 2 Direct the operation of the air-ground recognition system for N.W. Africa.
- 3 Control all sea/air reconnaissance
- 4 Control all anti-submarine operations
- 5 Control air operations for the protection of shipping in agreement with Naval authorities
- 6 Control of all shipping strikes undertaken by the Command.

N.A.A.F. TRAINING  
COMMAND

C.G. Brig: - Genl.  
J.K. Cannon

Functions:

- 1 Plan and control the training or other activities of such units as may be assigned to the Command (including air co-operation with elements of the land forces located in the area).
- 2 Training and replacement of air and ground personnel of U.S. and R.A.F. air units for active operations.

N.A.A.F. SERVICE  
COMMAND

C.G. Brig: - Genl.  
D.H. Dunton

Functions:

Responsible for the supply and technical maintenance of the N.A.A.F., its U.S. and R.A.F. branches serving U.S. and R.A.F. units.

N.A.A.F. PHOTO:  
RCN: WING

C.O. Col. E.  
Roosevelt

Functions:

- 1 Plan and control the operations of all aircraft assigned to the Command in carrying out missions in accordance with priorities laid down.
- 2 Responsible for interpretation and distribution of photographs.

Note: The above is taken from M.A.C., O.R.B., February 1943, Appendix No.4.

SECRET

APPENDIX "R"

NORTH-WEST AFRICAN COASTAL AIR FORCE

(Op. Sum: Entries, N.A.A.F., 16/17 April 1943)

Day April 16

One Beaufighter 153 sqn., scrambled in Algiers area with no contact, and three Beaufighters, 153 sqn., flew defensive patrols also; six Hurricanes and one Spitfire flew defensive patrols.

Night April 16/17

Four Albacores, 826 sqn., flew shipping sweep in Sicilian Channel. One 7,000-ton M/V., one 5/6,000-ton tanker, several "E" or "F" boats and two additional vessels sighted at 00.46 hours. Ships were attacked with torpedoes and bombs. Tanker believed hit by torpedo and was left stationary.

One Hudson, 500 sqn., and two of 608 sqn., flew recce over Sicilian Channel. One was chased by twin-engined enemy fighter, but no combat took place. One Hudson, 608 sqn., and two, 500 sqn., and one Swordfish, 813 sqn., flew U-boat hunt sorties.

Four Beaufighters, 153 sqn., flew convoy escort sorties. Six Beaufighters, 600 sqn., flew defensive patrols in Bone area. Four Beaufighters, 255 sqn., intruded over Sardinia. One attacked a vehicle south of Decimomannu; vehicle extinguished his lights and appeared to leave the road.

Day April 17

Two Hudsons, 608 sqn., and six of 500 sqn., flew U-boat hunt sorties. One Hudson, 500 sqn., escorted a convoy.

One Beaufighter flew recce. along east coast of Sardinia. Nothing to report.

Three Marauders, 14 sqn., flew armed recce. of approaches to Naples.

Convoy escort sorties were flown by four Airacobras, 93 sqn., sixteen Hurricanes, 87 sqn., two Hurricanes, 32 sqn., and twenty Airacobras, 93 sqn.

Defensive patrols were flown by two Airacobras, 93 sqn., eight Spitfires, 43 sqn., four Hurricanes, 87 sqn., six Hurricanes, 32 sqn., and two Airacobras, 91 sqn.

Two Hurricanes, 87 sqn., one Spitfire, 87 sqn., and two Spitfires, 43 sqn., scrambled to intercept hostile aircraft which turned out to be friendly.