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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

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AIR OPERATIONS OF THE 5th SQUADRA AEREA  
(NORTH AFRICA), FROM 1st MARCH, 1942 to 20th JULY, 1942

Translated from Italian Air Force records.

TRANSLATED BY:-

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5th Squadra Aerea Command

Air Operations in Libya from  
1st March 1942 to 20th July 1942

From the 1st March onwards, air operations in Libya underwent a marked change, due to the military situation and the strength of forces available. 5th Squadra Aerea activities during the above period may be divided into three phases, as follows:

- 1st Phase - 1st March to 25th May - Considered as a period of organisation of Command and of the Units which had been severely tried in the preceding operations which had ended with the recapture of Cyrenaica up to the British line at Ain el Gazala. In spite of this, they carried out a number of operational sorties on the front, in the desert zones and over the sea.
- 2nd Phase - 26th May to 21st June - Attacks against the enemy defences; continuous intervention in the battle with all available material and co-operation in the capture of Bir Hacheim and Tobruk.
- 3rd Phase - 22nd June to 20th July - Exploitation of the success achieved by reaching the Alamein line. Supply difficulties were overcome in order to continue the advance. Reaction to the air offensive unleashed by the enemy with all the forces which had accumulated in the Middle East and concentrated along the new line of defence.

FIRST PHASE

ORDER OF BATTLE

On the 1st March 1942 5th Squadra Units were still feeling the effects of the speed with which they had had to move forward that part of their forces most suitable for co-operation with ground units. On the other hand, as the front was not yet sufficiently well established it did not seem a very appropriate time to put too much material on the advanced airfields. Only that which was absolutely necessary for the protection of our troops and lines of communication was maintained.

On the above date, the Units were located as follows:

EASTERN SECTOR - Benghazi Command

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1st Stormo Command                      | } Martuba,<br>where the Advanced Air Forces<br>Detachment Command had been<br>set up. |
| 6th Gruppo Mc.202                       |   |
| 150th " " 200                           |   |
| One Squadrig. Cr.42's of the 3rd Gruppo |   |

|                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 17th Gruppo Mc.202 | } Benghazi K.3. |
| 8th " " 200        |                 |
| 2nd Stormo Command |                 |

|                           |                 |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| 3rd Gruppo Cr.42          | } Benghazi K.2. |
| 269th Squadriglia Ju.87   |                 |
| 279th " S.79 Torp.        |                 |
| 284th " " "               |                 |
| 174th " " Strategic Recce |                 |

WESTERN SECTOR

|                           |             |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| 13th Stormo Command Br.20 | } Bir Dufan |
| 11th Gruppo               |             |
| 43rd Gruppo               |             |

WESTERN SECTOR (contd)

|                                      |   |               |
|--------------------------------------|---|---------------|
| 13th Gruppo Mc.200                   | } | Castel Benito |
| 12th " G.50                          |   |               |
| 145th " Transport                    |   |               |
| 175th Squadrig. S.79 Strategic Recce |   |               |
| 176th " Cant Z 1007/bis              |   |               |
| 160th Gruppo Cr.42                   | } |               |
| 158th " " Assault                    |   |               |

The following changes were subsequently made:-

- (a) The immediate transfer of the 13th Stormo Command and the 43rd Gruppo (with serviceable Br.20's of the 11th Gruppo) to Barce - carried out on the 2nd March.
- (b) Transfer of the 17th Gruppo Mc.202 to Martuba - carried out on the 16th March.
- (c) Transfer to Italy of all 13th Stormo aircraft not being used operationally - carried out on the 15th March.
- (d) 13th Gruppo Mc.200 to stop at Misurata, to escort convoys.

OPERATIONS IN THE DESERT

On the 1st March, Free-French elements coming from the Tibesti zone in a column consisting of 30 motor transports escorted by several aircraft moved towards Tegerhi and after having overpowered the garrison, advanced towards Gatum. In the days which followed, they moved on as far as to the North of Sabha, without actually touching it.

In order to reinforce the Sahara Air Force, it was arranged to send a Section consisting of three S.79's to Hon immediately and later a Section of Cr.42's. Meanwhile, the Western Sector Commander was proceeding to Hon to direct operations. The number of aircraft of the above Sections was later increased.

From the 2nd March, the Air Force assumed responsibility for dealing with all infiltrations, by attacking the enemy whilst our ground forces were moving towards them over the difficult terrain. These operations were carried out on the 12 following days with great success, especially at the fuel depots at Uigh El Chebir, and were a material factor in forcing the enemy to retreat to their starting points after having suffered considerable losses.

OPERATIONS IN THE ADVANCED SECTOR

In support of ground operations, the Units carried out the following activities:-

- (a) Hammering of the port of Tobruk
- (b) Attacks against moving mechanized columns.
- (c) Nuisance raids on enemy traffic on the Balbia road and airfields.
- (d) Fighter sorties, both free-lance and as escort to bomber aircraft.

/OPERATIONS

OPERATIONS AGAINST TOBRUK - Mainly carried out by German bombers escorted by our fighters. Spasmodic but very efficient operations were carried out by Br.20's of the 13th Stormo. Usually, the Mc.200's were used for direct escort and the Mc.202's for indirect escort.

In one of these operations there was the brilliant incident of 10 Mc.200's escorting 12 Ju.87's which were attacked by 20 P.40's. For unknown reasons, the Me.109's on indirect escort were unable to intervene; 6 Macchi 200's were lost, but the bomber formation managed to return intact, in spite of greater enemy numbers.

Cr.42's also carried out low-level attacks on the docks on moonlight nights. 50 Kg. bombs were dropped with very good results.

GROUND ATTACKS - Carried out against numerous enemy mechanized patrols which had infiltrated into our territory in the desert zone. Cr.42's and Mc.200's which took off immediately the patrols were sighted, scored considerable successes. In the course of these operations, the 150th Gruppo was particularly outstanding by the way in which they carried out the attacks at low altitudes, in spite of a heavy AA barrage.

NIGHT NUISANCE RAIDS - Carried out by Cr.42's with glider bombs which took off from Martuba and flew over the Babia Road on moonlight nights to the airfields in the Gambut zone. These operations must have been very effective, as the enemy felt the need of sending Hurricanes over on similar raids.

The main objectives were moving columns; concentrations of M/T; encampments; aircraft on airfields.

FIGHTER OPERATIONS AND ESCORT DUTIES - Carried out by Mc.202's, which were technically superior to similar types of British aircraft. Although most of the combats took place over enemy territory and therefore a long way from their bases, good results were obtained.

GROUND ATTACK AGAINST MARTUBA AIRFIELD - The enemy, apparently worried by the intense activity carried out by our advanced air Units, tried to diminish their efficiency by day and night bombardment. The large bomber formations were escorted by fighters during the day. Violent combats took place, in which Mc.202's inflicted heavy losses.

As the enemy air attacks were not very effective, land operations were attempted. On the night of the 21st March, a mechanized Brigade (about 500 A.F.V's) moved from Temrade, overpowered the German fortified position at Abier El Eleima, and pushed on to 15 Kms. South of Martuba where they placed their batteries and opened fire on the airfield. All Mc.202's, Mc.200's and Cr.42's immediately took-off to attack, and by uninterrupted machine-gunning, which lasted until sunset, forced the enemy to retreat.

AERIAL TORPEDOES - on the 22nd March, a large convoy of 20 ships going from Alexandria to Malta was attacked by the 131st Group. The following hits were scored:

1 Cruiser, with two torpedoes  
1 " " one torpedo  
1 " (light) one "  
1 Destroyer one "  
1 Merchant vessel, with one torpedo

One of the cruisers which was stationary, due to damage caused earlier on, was hit by another torpedo.

/RECONNAISSANCE

RECONNAISSANCE - Tactical recon on the front was carried out by patrols of Mo.200's. In the desert zone, it was carried out by S.79's of the 174th Squadriglia.

AIR-GROUND OPERATIONS AGAINST ENEMY LANDING STRIP - It had been noticed for some time that the British had a landing strip in the desert zone to the South of Uadi Mra which was acting as a forward base for aircraft carrying out offensives against the Sirte coast and the Balbia Road from Agheila to Aghedabia. In order to neutralize the strength of this base, a 'coup-de-main' was organised to be put into operation on the 13th April. A small expedition consisting of 60 men (airman, police, German pioneers), 5 machine-guns and an anti-tank gun took-off on two S.82's with fighter escort and landed on the enemy landing-strip. After taking security measures, the appointed men made for the fuel depots on the outskirts of the airfield and destroyed them. Then the expedition took off and returned to base.

CONVOY ESCORTS AND PORT PATROLS - As the offensive against the enemy line at Ain El Gazala was in preparation, numerous convoys were arriving in Libya. This meant exceptionally intensified air activity for the units engaged on escort duties. Patrols were also carried out whilst the merchant ships were unloading. The statistics show that more than half the number of hours flown between the 1st March and the 24th May were on these important operations, which resulted in a regular flow of reinforcements to the front.

SUMMARY OF FIRST PHASE

The operations carried out by the 5th Squadra from the 1st March to 25th May 1942 may be tabulated as follows:-

| <u>Type of operation</u>         | <u>Number of Sorties</u> | <u>Flying Hours</u> |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Fighter activity and escort      | 785                      | 891                 |
| Day attacks on ground objectives | 162                      | 204                 |
| Night " " " "                    | 47                       | 72                  |
| Day and night bombing            | 43                       | 130                 |
| Torpedo                          | 14                       | 51                  |
| Ground reconnaissance            | 480                      | 917                 |
| Naval reconnaissance             | 81                       | 295                 |
| Convoy escort                    | 1464                     | 3317                |
| Port patrols                     | 2294                     | 3631                |
| Transport (Libya)                | 143                      | 536                 |
| Air-Sea Rescue                   | 14                       | 30                  |
|                                  | <u>5527</u>              | <u>10134</u>        |
| Enemy aircraft destroyed         | 38                       |                     |
| " " probably destroyed           | 7                        |                     |
| Aircraft lost in action          | 17                       |                     |
| " " due to enemy bombing         | 9                        |                     |

SECOND PHASE

OPERATIONAL PLAN

The main points of the plan of attack against the enemy line which stretched from Ain Gazala to Bir Hacheim were the following:

1. Feint frontal attack, to begin at 1500 hrs. on X day.
2. Encircling movement, to commence before sunset on X day and to end during the night.
3. Rear and frontal attack on the British line of defence.
4. Attack against the Tobruk garrison.
5. Exploitation of successes.

The Ground Forces Command considered the first three days to be the most important of the whole operation, as they counted on the surprise gained by the speedy movements of the armoured units. The tasks of the 5th Air Squadra (following directives issued by the Armed Forces High Command) were therefore allotted as follows:

1. To obtain almost complete air supremacy during the first three days of the battle.
2. To afford full support to the ground forces.
3. To guard desert approaches and coastal strip and to protect convoy landings.

On the 20th May, operation order No. 1610OP.6-E (Appendix 1) was issued.

ORDER OF BATTLE ON THE EASTERN SECTOR  
25th MAY

|                                   |            |
|-----------------------------------|------------|
| Tactical Command (Eastern Sector) | Tmimi      |
| " " 5th Squadra                   | Derma      |
| 35th Stormo (less one Squadrig.)  | Barce      |
| One 35th Stormo Squadrig.         | El Fetejah |
| 131st Torp. Group                 | K.2.       |
| 133rd " "                         | "          |
| 150th Mc.200 "                    | "          |
| 1st Stormo Mc.202                 | Martuba 4  |
| 4th " "                           | "          |
| 2nd " Mc.200                      | Martuba 5  |
| 3rd Group Cr.42                   | "          |

The 158th Assault Group was due to arrive at El Fetejah on the 26th and the 159th Assault Group with the 50th Stormo Command on the 28th May.

ENEMY AIR FORCES

Enemy air strength was at its lowest in March but from then on had gradually increased to 1400 aircraft by the middle of May, so that the strength of the R.A.F. was greater than at the beginning of the offensive in November.

Besides the usual types of aircraft, Spitfires were present from the 14th May. The enemy air strength on the airfields which were of most importance to our ground operations was as follows:

Airfields to the West of the wire  
SINGLE-ENGINEED 213      MULTI-ENGINEED 24

Airfields to the East of the wire  
SINGLE-ENGINEED 202      MULTI-ENGINEED 170

The most important heavy bomber bases were all in the Canal Zone and operations were carried out by using Fuka zone airfields as intermediary bases. There were 160 A/C at Suez (Wellingtons and Liberators).

In view of this situation, it was decided to carry out low-level attacks against the Gambut and Gars El Arid airfields, in co-operation with the German Air Force, at dawn on X day, in order to minimise the full enemy air strength. The German Air Force would operate against Gars El Arid and the Italian against Gambut.

BEGINNING OF OPERATIONS - During the night of the 29th, nine Cr.42's carried out machine-gunning and bombing attacks on Gambut where there were about 70 British fighters. The attack, which continued all night, was carried out in order to unnerve the airfield personnel, and to prepare the way for the Mc.202's who were to carry out machine-gunning operations 'en masse' at dawn.

/At

At 0515 hrs 50 Mc.202's made a surprise attack on Gambut, after flying above the clouds for practically the whole route. An attack was immediately carried out against a formation of 24 aircraft which were wing to wing on Cuneo airfield, probably ready to take off. In the first wave, 3 aircraft were set alight and the rest were repeatedly hit; even the escorting Mc.202's flew in at low level and machine-gunned the aircraft, all of which were presumably put out of action. The raid was such a surprise to the enemy that there was no opposition.

At 1500 hrs. the land attack began, 43 Mc.202's patrolled the front until sunset and 23 aircraft carried out bombing and machine-gunning attacks against enemy columns. A total of 102 Mc.202's, 15 Cr.42's and 8 Mc.200's took part in the day's operations.

#### DEVELOPMENTS OF THE LAND OPERATIONS AND ATTACK AT BIR HACHEIM

By the 27th May our mechanised units had reached the rear of the enemy lines, but the southernmost fortified position at Bir Hacheim had resisted and was as efficient as ever; besides this, British armoured units had managed to escape every encircling movement and had concentrated to the East, endangering our left flank. Only one group of enemy vehicles had been cornered between the minefields and the Axis forces; these were soon eliminated. Meanwhile, Xth Army Corps troops were clearing roads through the minefields, in order to bring up supplies for the troops to the rear of the enemy line. The situation forced the British to concentrate on the following objectives:

- (a) Continuous hammering of Axis armoured forces from the air.
- (b) Attempts to cut off the supply lines opened up by the X Armoured Corps.
- (c) Increased resistance at Bir Hacheim.

In order to carry out the first of these tasks, small columns of fast-moving light vehicles and armoured vehicles were sent through Segnali Nord and Mteifel El Chebir in order to destroy or capture our motor-vehicles heading East. For the second task, other mobile columns were converging towards Bir Hacheim from all directions to carry arms, food and munitions.

As a result, the duties of the Air Force were as follows:

1. To keep as many fighters as possible in the air to the East of the Mine-fields.
2. To launch assault aircraft against the mobile columns which had infiltrated into our lines of communication and the approach roads towards Bir Hacheim.
3. To carry out low-level attacks on the Balbia road between Ain Gazala and Tobruk, on the Axis Road and on the main points of the enemy supply lines.
4. To hammer Tobruk and rail communications.

The Units carried out these operations brilliantly and thus played a large part in the capture of Bir Hacheim. The southern part of the British line of defence was unhinged, the left flank was bared and the enemy was forced to retreat, leaving the road free to attack Tobruk.

The following figures summarise the air activities during the 14 days from the beginning of the offensive to the fall of Bir Hacheim:-

| <u>Number of sorties</u> | <u>Type of aircraft</u> |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1093                     | Mc.202                  |
| 305                      | " 200                   |
| 174                      | Cr.42                   |
| 79                       | Cant. Z 1007/bis        |
| 7                        | S.28 (bombers)          |

|                            |                                   |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Bombs dropped              | 1054 (63694 Kgs.)                 |
| M/T vehicles destroyed     | 118                               |
| Vehicles put out of action | 489                               |
| Aircraft shot down         | 82 (53 of these over Bir Hacheim) |
| Probables                  | 30 (24 " " " " " )                |
| Aircraft lost in combat    | 17                                |

Appendix 2 gives extracts from a diary captured from a prisoner of war which show clearly the situation in the besieged garrison, as a result of the pressure brought to bear by the Italian and German air forces.

FROM BIR HACHEIM TO TOBRUK. - Following the fall of Bir Hacheim on the 11th June, the Axis forces which in the meantime had inflicted heavy tank losses on the enemy in a series of tactical encounters, headed directly for El Adem and along the Via Balbia to the West of Tobruk in an attempt to trap the enemy defending Ain Gazala. The enemy detected our plan, however, and speeded-up his retreat.

Ground attack and assault formations were immediately launched against the retreating forces. The columns were thrown into disorder and heavy losses in both men and transport material were inflicted. Meanwhile, fighters continued their protection of moving armoured units and bombers operated at night over Tobruk and lines of communication from the Libyan-Egyptian border to Tobruk. 165 sorties were flown on the 14th June, a considerable effort when it is borne in mind that the battle had already lasted twenty days, during which the air force had operated the whole time.

#### TORPEDO AIRCRAFT OPERATIONS AND ANTI-SABOTAGE MEASURES

On the 15th June, a large convoy coming from Alexandria bound for Malta, was attacked by 11 torpedo aircraft and 9 bomber-rocket aircraft, with the following results:

- 3 ships (including one medium battle-ship) hit;
- 1 Battle-ship (5000 tons) hit by two torpedoes;
- 1 7000 ton ship hit by one torpedo.

Two days before the convoy was due to pass, the enemy attempted large scale operations with saboteur elements against our airfields with the main object of putting the torpedo aircraft and bombers out of action. A large number of lorries, driven by saboteurs dressed in German uniform and coming from the desert made for the Balbia Road. During the night of the 13th they reached Martuba, El Fetejah, Barce, Benghasi K.2., Benghasi K.3. and Agedabia where our defences broke up the attacks as soon as they started. At El Fetejah, a lorry with 27 saboteurs was captured and destroyed along with large quantities of explosives, before the enemy could even enter into battle. At Barce the attempts were repelled and one policeman was killed; there was slight damage. At K.2 and K.3, the lorries, loaded with 20 men and machine-guns on each, found our fire too heavy for them and were forced to return: 2 airmen were killed, one policeman wounded and slight damage caused. At Agedabia and Martuba, the attack petered out before it had time to get started.

#### TOBRUK ATTACK

Tobruk had three lines of defence, at 15, 12 and 4 kms from the city respectively; each line was made up of small fortifications, barbed-wire, machine-gun nests and anti-tank ditches.

/There

There were a large number of batteries between the lines. The first line was entirely defended by an anti-tank ditch, which could be considered as the most serious obstruction in view of all the defences protecting it. Following the retreat of the main enemy forces towards the wire, the attack on Tobruk was arranged for the 20th June at dawn.

A large heavy bomber formation was to attack the group of small forts in the zone to the S.E. of the first circle, using 1800 and 1000 Kg. bombs. This was to take place immediately before the tank attack. The tanks were to get through the fortifications during the night. Cant.Z 1007/bis and Cr.42's were to attack the port and batteries in the rear zone and glide bombs were to be dropped on the machine-gun nests and pill-boxes in all areas. This type of close co-operation called for the most accurate synchronization of operations which was ensured by a perfect communication system between aircraft and ground units.

German Ju.87's, Cant Z's and Cr.42's were in the air simultaneously, under the protection of German and Italian fighters. Choosing their objectives, the bombers went into the attack and soon put 3 strong points out of action, thus allowing the armoured units to pass over the bridged anti-tank ditch. The attack was carried out with such violence and the defenders were so shaken, that our forces got through the first line with practically no opposition. This success exploited and the leading troops were soon driving deep wedges into the enemy. Meanwhile the heavy air bombardment was being concentrated against the strong points in the second line of defence and enemy reaction on the ground became progressively weaker.

The enemy Command lost complete control on the entire sector at the peak of the attack, so that the numerous gaps were enlarged and success was achieved much earlier than anticipated. At sunset, after about 800 aircraft had flown over Tobruk, the first white flags appeared over the port; only the S.W. part of the fortified zone was resisting. This ceased at sunrise on the 21st, when British Commanders surrendered to the XXXth Armoured Corps Command.

It is noteworthy that the enemy air force, which had been severely tried in the preceding 24 days, did not challenge our complete air supremacy during the battle.

SUMMARY OF SECOND PHASE

5th Squadra activities during the first 24 days of the operations (26th May - 20th June) were as follows:

| <u>TYPE OF OPERATION</u>      | <u>SORTIES</u> | <u>FLYING HOURS</u> |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Fighter activities and escort | 1769           | 2311                |
| Ground objectives (day)       | 652            | 897                 |
| " " (night)                   | 19             | 33                  |
| Day and night bombardments    | 119            | 348                 |
| Torpedo                       | 20             | 71                  |
| Land recce                    | 162            | 432                 |
| Naval "                       | 17             | 74                  |
| Coastal "                     | 56             | 230                 |
| Convoy escort                 | 795            | 2027                |
| Port patrols                  | 385            | 575                 |
| Transport                     | 49             | 243                 |
| Air-Sea Rescue                | 19             | 62                  |
|                               | <u>4062</u>    | <u>7303</u>         |
| Enemy aircraft destroyed      | 102            |                     |
| " " probably destroyed        | 33             |                     |
| Aircraft losses in action     | 27             |                     |
| " " due to enemy bombing      | 6              |                     |

THIRD PHASE

CHANGES IN THE ORDER OF BATTLE

Following the capture of Tobruk and the enemy retreat to their positions on the Libya-Egyptian border air activities were spasmodic, mainly for the following reasons:

- (a) The reduction in enemy air activity on the front.
- (b) The speed of our advancing armoured units (averaging 50 kms. per day) towards the East necessitated our equipment and aircraft moving with it in order to keep within flying range of the enemy.
- (c) Difficulties of communication between Commands and Units.

The British retreat was carried out in three stages:-

1. From the Ain Gazala line to the wire.
2. From the wire to Mersa Matruh.
3. From Mersa Matruh to El Alamein.

As the units based on the Martuba airfields could operate to the borders of the wire, movements towards the East were carried out in two stages, viz:-

First Stage - transfer of fighters and ground attack aircraft to the advanced zones, in order to protect the moving columns against the possibility of enemy air attacks.

Second Stage - transfer of the remaining units and heavier equipment.

The movements were carried out as follows:

- 24th June - Eastern Sector Tactical Command, from Tmimi to Gambut
- 4th Stormo Command and 9th Gruppo, from Martuba 4 to Sidi Barrani.
  - 2nd Stormo Command, 8th and 13th Gruppi, from Martuba to Ain Gazala.
  - 159th Gruppo (Cr.42), from Derna to El Adem
  - Transfer to Italy of the 1st Fighter Stormo (severely tried during 7 months of continuous battle), with the exception of one unit which was made up of the most serviceable aircraft and volunteer pilots, which continued to operate with the 4th Stormo.
- 26th June - Eastern Sector Tactical Command, from Gambut to Sidi Barrani.
- 50th Stormo Command and 158th Gruppo from Derna to Sidi Barrani.
  - 159th Gruppo (Cr.42), from El Adem to Sidi Barrani
  - 1st Stormo Reparto, from Martuba to Sidi bBarrani
- 28th June - 10th Gruppo (Mc.202), from Martuba 5 to Sidi Barrani.

Whilst the above movements were being carried out, bombers were carrying out raids on Mersa Matruh and on the road between the latter and Alexandria.

/Whilst

Whilst the main part of the enemy Air Force was retreating to airfields in the Delta, numbers of aircraft were left at the airfields around Fuka in order to cover ground movements. On 26th June, a number of air combats took place during which 12 enemy aircraft were destroyed.

Enemy air opposition became steadily weaker in the days which followed and our air activities in protecting our ground forces still moving East became more numerous.

FROM MERSA MATRUH TO EL ALAMEIN

With the fall of Mersa Matruh on the 29th June, the following movements were carried out:

- 30th June - Eastern Sector Tactical Command to Kenays Bay
- 4th Fighter Stormo to South Fuka
- 50th Assault Stormo to Abu Nimeir

In the meantime, a Squadriglia of S.81's arrived from Italy and was attached to the 145th Transport Group.

On the 2nd July, our ground forces reached the fortified line which the enemy had set up from El Alamein to El Quattara and as a result, 5th Squadra aircraft were sent forward. The following were moved on the 3rd July:

|   |                        |
|---|------------------------|
| Eastern Sector Tactical Command                       | to El Daba             |
| 1st Stormo Reparto and 10th Gruppo, of the 4th Stormo | to Mumin Basak         |
| 131st Torpedo Gruppo                                  | from K.2 to El Fetejah |

As the advanced bases were vulnerable to infiltrations by enemy mechanised units, and as operations on the Alamein line were being prolonged it became necessary to make further redispositions.

On the 15th July, the order of battle was as follows:-

|                                 |              |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Eastern Sector Tactical Command | near Fuka    |
| 4th Stormo (Mc.202)             | South Fuka   |
| 1st Stormo Reparto              | South Fuka   |
| 2nd Stormo Command              | Bu Haggag    |
| 8th Gruppo (Mc.200)             | Bu Haggag    |
| 13th " "                        | Bu Amud      |
| 50th Stormo                     | Bu Mineir    |
| 23 Gruppo (Mc.202), from Italy  | Bu Haggag    |
| 191st Squadrig. (Cant.Z)        | Mersa Matruh |
| 35th Bomber Stormo              | Barce        |
| 150th Gruppo                    | Benghasi K.3 |

AIR SITUATION

The period of crisis which the R.A.F. underwent during the retreat was very short; the enemy had well equipped airfields in the Nile and Suez zones and the forces which retreated there were soon reorganised. The narrow front enabled them to concentrate their forces and supply problems were simplified. In our case it was quite the opposite - our lines of communication were lengthened, our forces were scattered and supply difficulties arose.

It must be added that the enemy was being reinforced from the Near East (150 aircraft arrived from Palestine in June)

/When

When it is remembered that the enemy was operating in full strength on a small front, it can be understood why our advanced units were faced with an air force far superior to them in numbers.

EL ALAMEIN OPERATIONS

The 23rd Gruppo (Mc.202) was sent from Italy in order to strengthen the 50th Assault Stormo, and the arrival was expected of the 18th Gruppo (Mc.200 with glider-bombs) and 101st Assault Gruppo. Our Mc.202's always met larger enemy formations, but nevertheless they took the initiative and on the 10th July, 22 enemy aircraft were shot down.

SUMMARY OF THIRD PHASE

Operations carried out between the 22nd June-20th July were as follows:

| <u>TYPE OF OPERATION</u>    | <u>SORTIES</u> | <u>FLYING HOURS</u> |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Fighter activities & escort | 1037           | 1457                |
| Ground Objectives (day)     | 347            | 508                 |
| " " (night)                 |                |                     |
| Day and night bombing       | 18             | 58                  |
| Torpedo                     |                |                     |
| Ground reconnaissance       | 117            | 244                 |
| Naval reconnaissance        | 5              | 19                  |
| Coastal reconnaissance      | 52             | 240                 |
| Convoy escort               | 568            | 1372                |
| Port patrols                | 480            | 646                 |
| Transport                   | 56             | 217                 |
| Air Sea rescue              | 21             | 53                  |
|                             | <u>2701</u>    | <u>4814</u>         |
| Enemy aircraft destroyed    | 125            |                     |
| Probables                   | 33             |                     |
| Aircraft lost in action     | 11             |                     |
| " " due to enemy bombing    | 15             |                     |

GENERAL SUMMARY

| <u>OPERATIONAL PHASES</u>                   | <u>SORTIES</u> | <u>FLYING HOURS</u> | <u>A/C SHOT DOWN</u> | <u>A/C LOST</u> |
|---|----------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| <u>1st PHASE</u><br>(1st Mar - 25th May)    | 5527           | 10134               | 38                   | 17              |
| <u>2nd PHASE</u><br>(26th May - 21st June)  | 4062           | 7303                | 102                  | 27              |
| <u>3rd PHASE</u><br>(22nd June - 20th July) | 2701           | 4184                | 125                  | 11              |
| TOTALS                                      | 12290          | 21621               | 265(1)               | 55(2)           |

(1) - Plus 73 probables

(2) - Plus 30 lost, due to enemy bombing.

/REVIEW

REVIEW

1. The operations from the 1st March to the 20th July 1942, in which the 5th Squadra took an active part call for the following observations:-

- (a) The morale of all personnel was high in spite of the disadvantages during the transfers to the advanced airfields, where enemy bombardments were heavier and the threat of infiltrations could be felt.
- (b) The technical superiority of our modern fighters was shown by the manner in which in spite of constant strain, each obstacle was victoriously overcome and our pilots were able to engage larger formations and force them to fight on each occasion.

2. The following must be kept in mind in order to appreciate the supply and organization difficulties which confronted the Commands:-

- (a) with a limited amount of material which was never substantially increased, the 5th Squadra took part in the last two battles in Marmarica during the past 8 months. Command H.Q. was changed seven times. Units, material etc. were moved from the original line to the Libyan-Egyptian border and Sirte, then from Sirte to the Ain Gazala line and lastly from the Ain Gazala line to El Alamein. These movements, which extended over nearly 2000 Km., were carried out whilst operating without respite and under the pressure of events which were at times unforeseen.
- (b) apart from operational duties, personnel had to be employed in the defence of airfields against the large number of small armoured car infiltrations, paratroops and Commandos.

3. The close co-operation with the German Air Force ensured a more economic use of the forces in Libya, and enabled all efforts to be concentrated against the more important objectives.

The quick capture of Bir Hacheim and Tobruk, was mainly due to the efficient air intervention.

4. The system of close contact between staffs and direct communication with the Commanders at the front, facilitated air to ground co-operation, which was always outstandingly good.

5. The work carried out by the Air Force during the battle for Egypt, gained full recognition in a speech made by the Duce during a ceremony on the recaptured Tobruk airfield, when 5th Squadra pilots were decorated.

The General Officer Commanding,  
5th Squadra Aerea  
(Vittorio MARCHESE)

20th May 1942

Personal and Confidential

TO THE EASTERN SECTOR COMMANDANT

Operations

Copies to:-

1610/OP 6-E

H.Q. Armed Forces High Command N.Africa

Air Force General Staff Superaereo

Subject:- Operations 'Alfa' - Air Force Operations

According to orders from Armed Forces High Command N.Africa, the duties of the 5th Squadra in operations 'Alfa' - are as follows:

GENERAL DUTIES

- 1 - Operations against advanced enemy air bases in order to minimise their air strength - particularly fighters - just before the beginning of the battle.
- 2 - Establishment of air superiority, in co-operation with the German Air Force, in order to protect the movements of our ground forces and be free to carry out attacks against enemy ground forces.
- 3 - Strategic, tactical and coastal reconnaissance, protection of convoy landing stages at Tripoli and Benghazi and coastal navigation between Tripoli, Benghazi and Derna.

In addition, the following special duties are to be undertaken:-

NIGHT OF X DAY-1 AND X DAY

Bombardments to be carried out with S.82's and Cant.Z's on the Capuzzo, Abu Misheifa and Mersa Matruh railways and on enemy depôts.

NIGHT BEFORE X DAY

Continuous straffing and dive-bombing attacks (Cr.42's with glider-bombs) on enemy airfields in the Gambut zone (Gambut and Gars El Arid), which are occupied by almost their entire strength of first-line fighters.

Bombing of Gambut and Gars El Arid in preparation for the dive-bombing attacks to be carried out against the airfields at dawn on X day.

X DAY

At Dawn:- Low-level attack against Gambut and Gars El Arid in co-operation with German fighters.

0900 hrs. - attacks against M/T vehicles in S.E. zone and East of Segnali Sud.

1400 hrs - attacks against enemy columns moving to the North of Trigh Enver Bey, increasing in the zone to the South of Ain El Gazala and interdiction of the line of retreat towards Acroma and Tobruk.

2200 hrs - bombardment of the main railways and continuous night fighter raids on the Ain El Gazala - Tobruk road; Incendiary-bomb attacks on Bir Hacheim.

/AT

X DAY + 1

At dawn:- attack in the Gambut zone (especially on British Armoured Command H.Q.) and on the radio-communication centres.

During the day:- operations against enemy columns moving to the South and S.E. of Ain El Gazala. Interdiction of the line of retreat to the East and of supply routes.

ORDER OF BATTLE

During the period of operations 'Alfa', the following Units will be at your disposal and stationed as follows:-

|                                   |          |                 |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------------|
| 1st Fighter Stormo                | } Mc.202 | } at Martuba IV |
| 4th " "                           |          |                 |
| 2nd Fighter Stormo                | } Mc.202 | } at Martuba V  |
| 3rd " Gruppo                      |          |                 |
| 158th Assault Group               | } Cr.42  | } at Derna      |
| 159th " "                         |          |                 |
| One Section (3 S.82 bombers)      |          | Derna           |
| One 35th Stormo Squadrig. Cant Z. |          | "               |
| 35th Bomber Stormo                |          | Barce           |
| 118th Recce Squadrig. Ca.311      |          | "               |
| 131st Torpedo Group S.79          |          | K.2             |
| 174th " Squadrig."                |          | "               |
| 150th Fighter Gruppo Mc.200       |          | "               |
| 123rd Recce Squadrig. Ca.311      |          | K.3             |

OPERATIONAL DIRECTIVES

- 1 - The main function of the Mc.202's is to provide cover over the battle area. During the first three days of ground fighting it will be vital to have a Group of Mc.202's continuously in the air from dawn to dusk.
- 2 - Mc.200's and Cr.42's are to carry out attacks against ground objectives. They are to be employed only against enemy ground units in movement and will be escorted by Mc.202's.
- 3 - Cr.42' will also carry out night attacks against enemy lines of communication.
- 4 - Protection of ports and convoys will be carried out as usual.

GENERAL

- 1 - I will reach agreements of a general nature in conjunction with the Fliegerfuhrer Afrika, in order to obtain the best results from the Italo-German Air Forces with the minimum of material. During the battle, you will be able to co-operate with the Fliegerfuhrer, with whom you will always be in contact.
- 2 - All proposed alterations in the actual order-of-battle and movements to new bases during the development of operations are to be approved by me.
- 3 - From X Day - 1, 5th Squadra Tactical Command will operate from Derna.
- 4 - All questions regarding organisation of services and communications are dealt with in separate orders.

The General Officer Commanding,  
5th Squadra Aerea.  
(V. MARCHESI)

DIARY OF A BRITISH PRISONER OF BIR. HACHEIM

30th May

Light enemy fire. Around me, there are 236 wounded Free-French friends. Their cries during the silent night are unnerving. We have only been issued with 10 gallons of water; the French have 50. The heat is stifling.

31st May

Enemy attacks. French forces open fire: the guns are placed in an arc with two Senegalese battalions. The latter are issued with 35 gallons of water under heavy fire.

1st June

I visited the Liaison Officer but did not manage to obtain any important information. At 1200 hrs. we undergo heavy bombardment carried out by Stukas coming over in waves. The walls of the fort crumble, burying the dead. It's a horrible sight.

2nd June

Another bombardment carried out by 20 aircraft which attack at low level. Impossible to resist. Many more dead. To finish the day, the RAF comes over and bombs us twice. This is the help which was promised to us.

3rd June

Three raids this afternoon by Italian and German aircraft. We can only get a little water at night. The wounded increase: their cries of pain fill the ruined walls of the fort; we don't know how to avoid them. They ask for water, but water does not arrive.

4th June

First raid by 12 Junkers. It is just 7 o'clock, even the enemy ground forces are attacking with machine-gun fire. At 8.45 the second raid with 12 other aircraft; third raid at 9.30; there are 15 aircraft dive-bombing and strafing us. The air is impregnated with smoke which stagnates in the very high temperature. I am thirsty, but no one can give me water. We are anxiously awaiting our Air Force in order to alleviate the torture; we request the intervention of our Air Force, but it seems that they have abandoned us. The wounded are complaining. At 13.50 heavy bombardment from the ground; at 14.20 another raid. Friendly aircraft at last; it is 15.10 we assist in an air battle but our aircraft are forced to desist. Even this time we were not saved from air bombardment. Heavy gunfire at 1600 hrs. At 18.15, fifteen Stukas dive-bomb us. At 1820 hrs. the RAF passes over but several bombs fall on us.

5th June

Very heavy bombardment between 6 and 7 in the morning. Four of my friends wounded. Lack of stretchers and water; impossible to bury the dead. Amid acrid smell of gunfire is the nauseating stench of the dead. The sight of them helps to wear our nerves.

/6th

6th June

Enemy infantry actions. Their fire continues without interruption all day. I can't manage to list the air raids; first come the Stukas, then the straffing aircraft and then the bombers again. And nobody stops them. The wounded increase.

7th June

Orders are given to ration food and water. I am trying to leave this infernal place with the next column. But will I manage to leave with the next column? At 9.30 fifteen German aircraft drop bombs. It is the first raid; many others follow before dusk. We are alone, abandoned; only God can help us. The eyes of my friends have a new light, they look mad. All look continuously at the sky; I had no idea that enemy raids were so deadly. There is no good protection and we cannot stay crouched in a hole all day.

8th June

30 enemy aircraft attack us; they come in a surprise attack and there is no opposition. Artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire; exploding bombs. Tank and machine-gun attacks are practically continuous; at 1405 hrs. the RAF drops several bombs on us. This is the kind of help we are getting. Enemy aircraft come when they want to; I can hear the drone of the engines in my brain; its a sensation which lasts even when it is quiet. But such moments are very short.

9th June

Very heavy artillery bombardment; air bombardment and machine-gunning from morning until 1300 hrs. The infantry attack at the same time, but all look up at the sky. Fear of the raids has become a terror. I pray God to save me. No one protects us. I don't think that Bir Hacheim can be held any longer and am afraid that all promises of help are in vain.

10th June

Another infernal day. Water, Water, Water, is the cry of the wounded and the cry of the survivors. How are we going to resist? A raid at 9; another at 10; straffing all day long. The stench of the dead is unbearable and it overcomes all will to resist. The RAF has disappeared; maybe it is better like this as it has made too many victims of us. At 23.30 hrs we get orders to abandon heavy vehicles and artillery. We must escape if we can. Which way? Nobody bothers any more about us. We are exhausted.

11th June

I am a prisoner. I am treated well.

A.H.B.6. Distribution

Same as for Translation No.VII/68.