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R.A.F. NARRATIVE

(First Draft)

THE MIDDLE EAST CAMPAIGNS

VOLUME I

OPERATIONS IN LIBYA AND THE WESTERN DESERT

SEPTEMBER 1939 to JUNE 1941.

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THE MIDDLE EAST CAMPAIGNS

VOLUME I

OPERATIONS IN LIBYA AND THE WESTERN DESERT
SEPTEMBER 1939 - JUNE 1941

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SEPTEMBER 1939 - JUNE 1940

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PART I. THE ROYAL AIR FORCE IN EGYPT 1939 - JUNE 1940

INTRODUCTION

The complex problem of Egypt had divided France and England towards the end of the nineteenth century. By the perversity of fate England had stumbled into the inheritance which properly belonged to France. The French had conquered and modernised Egypt; French enterprise had dug the canal; but England had bought the Khedive's foundation shares and although France had joined with her to restore Egypt after the extravagant ravages of ISMAIL she had elected to be a sleeping partner. When she tardily awoke from her timid slumbers it was to find Britain the dominating power in Egypt. It has since been British policy to retain that position. The balance was to some extent adjusted in 1902 when Joseph Chamberlain and Paul Cambon were overheard at a party at Marlborough House talking of Egypt and Morocco. In the resulting transaction France recognised Britain's rights in Egypt while Britain acknowledged France's position in Morocco.

The strategic significance of Egypt increased rather than diminished with the rise of the aeroplane. From the earliest days it had been a crossroads of the world's land routes. In 1867 de Lessops made it an intersection of sea highways. Now it has become a vital staging post in air communications between Europe and the East.

To the heirs of Gottlieb Daimler the Middle East had an added importance. From Iraq the Iranian oil-fields are controlled. Through Palestine the pipeline runs to Haifa. A twelfth of the oil supply of the United Kingdom came from Iraq and Persia; but with an Atlantic made hazardous by U-boats and the resources of Russia and Rumania denied, the Iranian supply was of increased importance. Egypt then was not only a main link in the chain of Imperial communications but was also the southern protector of these oil-fields.

The decision in 1921 to hand over the Imperial defence of Iraq to the Royal Air Force made air defence in the Middle East an important commitment which became increasingly difficult to cover as the clouds of war gathered over the Libyan desert.

In territories covering vast areas of Africa and Asia, much of which is desert and uncharted or mountainous and inaccessible, the aeroplane offered an apt solution to the keeping of the peace. Military expeditions take time to organise and where means of ground transport are few their arrival at the seat of disorder is inevitably delayed. Aircraft on the other hand can quickly reach the scene and probably quell the unrest before it has time to spread. Air power was also cheap, offering "control without occupation", and its mobility permitted it to take action at a wide radius from static bases. This feature gave rise in Egypt to a highly centralised organisation of air forces dependent on well-developed bases and the ability rapidly to reinforce any area which required instant assistance. This principle underlay all the war plans and the early campaigns in the Middle East and admitted the possibility of making a little, as indeed it was, go a long way.

In order to effect this policy for our air forces in the Middle East it was necessary to have a base nearer to the seat of probable operations than England. Egypt provided the answer. It was a central area where in peace the air force could be effectively trained and administered in a tolerable climate and good living conditions. In war its geographical position would enable air forces to operate in many directions. This system was dependent on two cardinal conditions. If the mobility of the air force was to be exploited, it must be possible to switch it in force to a threatened point at a time of emergency. This could only be done if the chain of Imperial air

communications was intact, well stocked and serviceable. In the event of war in the Mediterranean, Gibraltar and Malta were likely to be the life line of Egypt. A neglected link in this chain would impair the mobility and reinforcement of the air force. The second condition was that the air force must not be tied down to the central area by inclusion in the local garrison. Squadrons on airfields in the Middle East were to be regarded in the same light as battleships in the Grand Harbour.

The effectiveness of the base depended to a great extent on the internal security of Egypt; a bugbear which continually raised its fuzzy head to the discomfort of all except perhaps Sir Hugh Trenchard who regarded "the Egyptian as a chicken-hearted savage, which he would remain" and who was convinced that one bomb would settle any trouble with them. When it later appeared highly probable that the bomb would be an Italian one, the problem of internal security became serious.

TRU FORCE
REPORT

The economy of the R.A.F. compared with the army as a policing power recommended it to pre-war politicians who were prepared to give the air force the opportunity of development and experience even if its targets were limited to Mad Mullahs and recalcitrant sheikhs. Consequently the Royal Air Force in the Middle East remained active and progressive during a period of retrenchment and disarmament. However it was not until Italy struck at Abyssinia and the Fleet abandoned Malta to avoid the air threat from Sicily and Calabria that the air forces in Egypt became a matter of major consideration. Although the Fleet moved to Alexandria it could still be attacked by long range bombers from Cyrenaica and the Dodecanese. The R.A.F. in Egypt was therefore reinforced from the United Kingdom. The main problem at the time was to bring Italian military objectives in Cyrenaica within the range of our bombers (Harts) which were unable to reach the frontier from bases in the Delta. The Italians on the other hand could attack Alexandria and the Delta from their airfields at Benghazi and Tobruk. The only solution was to dispose our aircraft on forward airfields in the Western Desert. Accordingly an R.A.F. force moved out to Mersa Matruh to operate squadrons from Advanced landing grounds, principally Sidi Barrani and a service of ten others further forward.

The experiences of this force provided a foretaste of what war in the Western Desert would mean. When the crisis was over the force returned to tell a tale which four years later was to ring incessantly in the ears of staff officers in Cairo and Whitehall. They spoke of the impossible shortage of personnel, the crippling lack of equipment, the scarcity of intelligence and the dust which had to be seen to be believed. Great dust storms raged from upwards of three days to three weeks. The discomfort of the men was indescribable. During these periods they could neither eat nor sleep in comfort. In self-defence they wore gas masks to keep out the dust. Nights were often spent in preventing tents, stores and aircraft from blowing away and office work had to be carried out on typewriters choked with dust under canvas which offered little protection. Technially aircraft suffered severely. Nothing less than a vacuum cleaner would remove all the dust which collected inside aircraft. Most of the difficulties experienced with engines and controls undoubtedly arose from the ingress of dust or from stones thrown up from the desert landing grounds. Despite these difficulties exercises were carried out from the forward landing grounds, a supply system set up and the experience had served as a preliminary canter for the war which was to come.

PREPARATIONS FOR WARA. PLANNINGBackground to Planning

CID 296th
Mtg. 5.7.37

Cab(30)37
Cmd 5

It was not until July 1937 that the Committee of Imperial Defence reversed the Cabinet's previous decision⁽¹⁾ to exclude any expenditure for defence against Italy. The Committee recommended and the Cabinet approved that some steps (which should involve no very large expenditure) should be taken to bring the defence of ports in the Mediterranean up-to-date and to increase their efficiency.

At Air Ministry in March 1938 the Italian threat was carefully reviewed. It was estimated that Italy could attack Egypt with two motorised divisions supported by a considerable weight of air power which she was in a strong geographical position to reinforce easily and rapidly from her metropolitan air force. Within two months of the outbreak of war Italy might be able to direct some 730 aircraft against Egypt. Of this total 174 aircraft were estimated to be already in Libya (see Appendix X). In opposition we could perhaps muster a third of that number by drawing on Palestine, Iraq and India. While this would be a deterrent to attack it would not provide adequate defence. In contra distinction to the rapid reinforcement which the Italian air forces in Libya could expect, the R.A.F. in Egypt would only receive reinforcements slowly and gradually for it was to be assumed that Italian air action would temporarily close the Sicilian narrows so that shipping to Egypt would be diverted round the Cape. Even so ships would be liable to air attack in the Red Sea. If Britain and France were also at war with Germany reinforcements from England would not be despatched for some time. It was against this background that the early plans were formed, on the assumption that Italy would be the principal enemy in the Middle East.

The Air Officer Commanding in Egypt was authorised to exercise general co-ordination of the Air Forces in Iraq, Aden and Malta on important matters which concerned the Middle East plan. In April 1938 the post was upgraded to that of Air Marshal and in the following April given the title and status of Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief. In order to meet the added commitments of co-ordinating plans for all the air forces in the Middle East the Air Ministry approved the addition of a small staff⁽²⁾ to Headquarters R.A.F. Middle East. Similar arrangements were made by the Army in August 1939. General Wavell was appointed G.O.C.-in-C., Middle East.

A Joint Planning Staff was then created to provide the machinery to co-ordinate the plans of the Senior Staff Officers of the three Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East Intelligence Centre.

AS WAS A

Origin of the Combined Plan

As a basis for discussing joint action with the Egyptian Government the Chiefs of Staff had called for a combined plan from the local commanders in Middle East in order to ensure immediate co-ordination in an emergency. From the air point of view this was very necessary as experience in the recent crisis of 1938 had shown that the Egyptian Government would require careful handling if complete co-operation of all arms for the Air Defence of Egypt was to be achieved. Previously, when Air Vice Marshal Nicholl had made suggestions to the Egyptian War Minister concerning the dispositions of the Royal Egyptian Air Force he had

(1) November 1933

(2) 1 W/C and 2 F/Lts Intelligence and S/Ldr Plans.

had met with a flat refusal, nor would the Minister agree to the control of the air raid warning system by the Royal Air Force. Since then both the G.O.C. and A.O.C. had pressed the Egyptian Government to organise a comprehensive warning system but none yet existed in February 1939. An air observer line of sorts from Mersa Matruh to Bahariya was under way, but in the words of Air Vice-Marshal Nicholl "it will be many years before they can be expected to produce an efficient system with the type of person available reports made are likely to be extremely inaccurate and their transmission slow and uncertain". Evidently Nicholl had no higher opinion of the Egyptians than Trenchard.

Co-ordination with the Egyptian Government

Nevertheless, Sir Miles Lampson the Ambassador to Egypt had achieved partial success in establishing some standing machinery for effecting a measure of co-ordination which had been wholly lacking in the recent crisis. (1938). He had first suggested that the Anglo-Egyptian Defence Committee formed during the Abyssinian crisis should be re-established, but the Egyptian Premier opposed the idea lest it should be thought that he was playing into the hands of the British. Finally it was agreed that there should be two committees, one British and one Egyptian. Amin Osman Pasha who was persona grata at the British Embassy presided over the Egyptian and acted as liaison to the British committee. The latter adopted the practice of sitting in camera during the morning and inviting the Pasha to attend in the afternoon. By this clumsy means it was possible to press such schemes as the storage of supplies, the warning system, accommodation (1) for the Fleet Air Arm, the provision of landing grounds and other problems which had to be solved in concert with the Egyptian Government.

However, in the preparation of the Combined Plan 1939 submitted by the local commanders the Egyptians had played no part. On this ground the authors of the plan objected to the use of the word "combined" in the title, as no plan, they said, could be regarded as combined without the participation of the Egyptian Government.

System of Command

In drawing up the plan the commanders incorporated recommendations which had been made by the Cairo Conference in the previous November and later approved by the Chief of the Air Staff. The conference had suggested that the system of R.A.F. Command (2) in the Middle East should be reorganised to include a bomber group headquarters in Egypt and the expansion of R.A.F. Station Helwan to throw off a bomber wing and Ismailia to throw off a fighter wing. It had been the intention that these should be formed in war, but the crisis had shown that the delay caused by a reorganisation in an emergency called for their establishment in peace. In the organisation set out in the plan these headquarters were provided. Under H.Q. R.A.F. M.E. a bomber group Headquarters would control the long range bomber squadrons and reconnaissance aircraft located in the back areas. The task of the bomber force was to assist the Army in delaying the Italian land assault on Egypt and to attack Italian aerodromes and other objectives in order to reduce the scale of Italian air offensive. Under the direction of the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, a General Reconnaissance Group Headquarters at Alexandria would control oversea reconnaissance thence to midway to Malta and along the coastline from Mersa Matruh to Haifa. Fighter aircraft allocated to the home

/defence

(1) Lake Mariut scheme

(2) See plan of existing organisation. Appendix I.

defence of Alexandria, Cairo, Suez etc. were to be controlled by a fighter wing under H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.. However, aircraft which were specifically allotted to the defence of Alexandria would come under the direction of the Fortress commander. In general it was proposed to employ the fighters in the defence of Alexandria and on offensive patrols in support of co-operation and ground attack squadrons in the Western Desert. If the situation demanded, aircraft would have to be withdrawn to defend the Cairo and Suez areas. In the Alexandria Defence Scheme standing patrols in daylight were proposed.

In the Western Desert an Advanced Wing would control and administer the bomber squadrons supporting the Mobile Division in the forward area and also the fighter squadron allotted to the Western Desert. The army co-operation squadron, which was under the operational control of the G.O.C. Mobile Division, would be administered by the wing. The plan generally showed a restricted view of the employment of the air forces.

Air Defence

A.M. File
S.47862

The principles of air defence observed by the Air Ministry were flexibility by centralising control, a co-ordinated system of warning at a report and broadcast centre, and co-operation of artillery and fighter defence with special protection for vital points whatever the enemy's approach. The combined plan did not conform to these principles. The system of dividing the small fighter force by allotting fighters to the Fortress commander ignored the tactical flexibility of air power. With the addition of a third fighter squadron the British and Egyptian air defence resources required an organisation which would ensure the most flexible and economical employment and give the maximum defensive concentration at a threatened point.

The key to air defence, said the Air Council, was to shoot down as many enemy bombers as possible before they reached the target. To do this it was essential to have an efficient warning system, good communications and centralised control of a proper sector organisation which covered every line of approach. The allocation of a few fighters to each vital point would be totally ineffective and long experience had amply shown that standing patrols such as had been proposed for the protection of the Fleet were uneconomical and inefficient. Moreover with the limited resources then available in the Middle East it was quite impracticable and would only wear out both aircraft and crews at a time when there was little hope of replacements and the repair organisation was already strained. The system should be capable of concentrating every available fighter in defence of the Fleet when it was the principal object of attack; equally the Fighter Commander should be able to reinforce other sectors when they were heavily threatened.

A.M. File
S.47862

The Air Ministry suggested the formation of a central operations room where the Fighter Commander could control the sector operations rooms and the warning organisation. He would then be able to allocate patrols as the situation demanded and strengthen sectors which were heavily committed. By this means it would be possible to intercept raiders before they reached their objectives. At the time there was only one radar set at Alexandria. The proposed organisation would need three more to cover the Wadi Natrun, Fayoum and Damietta sectors. The fighter squadron in the Western Desert although under the control of the G.O.C. should be in direct contact with the Fighter Commander so that it could shoot down bombers returning from Egypt. The infliction of casualties would be the greatest deterrent against air attack. When supporting the army the squadron could be best employed against the enemy's forward airfields and over our own troops when they were actually engaged.

The Air Council also proposed that the bomber group approved after the Cairo Conference should be further expanded in war to form an Egypt group for the direction of all air operations in the Western Desert and Libya. The advanced wing would become a subordinate formation of this group.

These points were explained by the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff to the AOC-in-C on the 21st March 1939 but they remained under discussion with the Admiralty and the War Office until they were officially communicated to the AOC-in-C Middle East on 15th June, 1939. On the matter of general reconnaissance aircraft the Air Ministry was of the opinion that the control of these aircraft should not be withdrawn from the AOC-in-C and proposed that command should be exercised through an area combined headquarters. This point remained under debate with the Admiralty. (See Naval Co-operation Narrative).

Control of Operations in the Western Desert

Certain of these recommendations had been put into effect before the Air Council's proposals were officially put forward. In a directive to the AOC Egypt, the AOC-in-C placed him in command of all units allocated by H.Q. R.A.F. ME. for operations in the Western Desert. He would command in war the two bomber wings in the Delta and the Advanced Wing whose headquarters (formed primarily from HQ Ismailia) was to move with two bomber squadrons, an army co-operation and a fighter squadron to the Western Desert. The directive indicated how co-operation with the army was to be effected. The normal channel between G.O.C. and A.O.C. would be through the Officer Commanding the Advanced Wing. It was intended that the latter should be near Mobile Division headquarters in order that he might operate in close collaboration with the G.O.C. To effect liaison between the G.O.C. and the O.C. Advanced Wing, it was proposed to attach a senior air staff officer to the division's headquarters. This officer was to be so informed of the ground and air situation as to be able to advise the G.O.C. "at any moment" what air support he could expect and also to warn O.C. Advanced Wing of anticipated targets or vital areas requiring air defence. It was admitted that "this connecting link was not an ideal organisation" and suggested that the O.C. Wing should take every opportunity of personal contact with the G.O.C. Although the army co-operation squadron was to be under the direct control of the G.O.C. the directive to the A.O.C. Egypt laid it down as the responsibility of the O.C. Wing to advise the former on its employment. Equally the O.C. Wing was to be at all times aware of the operations and intentions of the army co-operation squadron in order that the Operations of his own squadrons could be co-ordinated with them. In view of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of replacing crews and aircraft the force would have to be employed with economy and only strictly military targets were to be bombarded. The fighter and general reconnaissance organisation remained as in the combined plan.

Note on the Plan

The tendency in these plans was to split up the air force into penny packets, a squadron to the G.O.C. in the desert, some of the fighters to the Fortress Commander at Alexandria and general reconnaissance aircraft to C-in-C. Mediterranean. This was most apparent in the organisation of the fighters. Concentration was particularly desirable in view of the numerical superiority of the Italians.

Need for a Quick Offensive

In the opinion of the Director of Operations at Air Ministry, the fact that we were faced by superior air forces made it all the more important to try and throw the enemy back on to the wrong foot at the outset by a quick offensive which might eventually penalise his effort.

A.M. File
S. 1046

M.E. File
WGM/4.

An important factor which might govern air policy was whether Italy would have command of the sea to send stocks to Libya. The effort of the Italian air force might be governed for some time by stocks held in Libya in peace. To attack these stocks might pay the best dividends. Another obvious fact was our inferiority in strength to the Italian air force. Attacks on their air force bases and repair facilities might best reduce this margin. It was appreciated that the Italians in Libya had no maintenance unit comparable to our Depot which was capable of undertaking complete overhauls. Aircraft wastage was mainly made good by sea or air reinforcement from Italy.

Middle East Operational Plan. September 1939

HQ.ME Air
Staff/
Sept. 39
ORB App. 2

These considerations were reflected in the Operational Plan produced by HQ.ME in September 1939. The primary role of the air force in Egypt had been amended from assistance to the land forces to action against Italian air forces and their bases and supply lines and, in co-operation with the Royal Navy (and the French), sea communications to Eastern Libya. The method of employment and the strength to be allotted for each role of the air forces in Egypt was to be determined by the A.O.C.-in-C. but the actual operations and choice of targets would be the responsibility of A.O.C. Egypt Group. The latter could meet requests from military commanders for close support and if the situation demanded this support should be given first priority for as long as necessary.

Reorganisation of Air Defence

HQ.ME.,
ORB/Oct. 39
Air Staff
App 2

As might be expected, the greatest change was in the fighter organisation. A RAF Fighter Commander was to control all fighter units other than those in the forward area in the Western Desert. This included such Fleet Air Arm units as the C.-in-C. Mediterranean made available for the defence of Egypt and the Royal Egyptian Air Force Fighter squadron. A sector organisation was provided in this Plan with Sector Headquarters complete with Operations rooms, RDF, DF and R/T control at Alexandria, Bir Hooker (central sector), Almaza and later at Port Said when the second Royal Egyptian Air Force Fighter squadron was available. In conjunction with the RDF posts there existed a system of air observation to report raiders approaching the Delta and Canal Zone. All reports were received at an air report centre at Mex where they were plotted on an operations room table. The information derived from these plots was made available to those concerned in the active and passive air defence of the Delta and Canal Zone either by direct observation or repetition to other operations rooms. The centre was in a special building in the quarries near Mex alongside the military road, about a mile east of the Egyptian Army barracks. Under the R.A.F. Fighter Commander and at the Air Report Centre were the operational headquarters of the 1st Egyptian A.A. Brigade which controlled and operated its own guns and the A.R.P. representative of the Ministry of the Interior who was responsible for the warnings.

There were three authorities for manning the air observation posts. The frontier administration was responsible for all posts other than those on the Delta and Nile valley which were manned by the police under the Ministry of the Interior and those along the coastline of the Delta and adjacent to the Suez Canal which were manned by the Coast Guards Service. The Director-General of Frontier Administration was, however, in executive control of all land sections of the air observation system. All RDF stations were manned and operated by the British Royal Air Force. The authority for manning the whole system was rested with the A.O.C.-in-C. In that event he would make a request direct to the Minister of National Defence for this to be done. Any changes in readiness of the system would be notified by Headquarters Middle East to Headquarters British Troops in Egypt so that the ground defences could be informed. To man the outer posts in the Western Desert took up to 48 hours.

At the Air Report Centre the R.A.F. Fighter Commander operated Royal Air Force, Fleet Air Arm and Royal Egyptian Air Force fighter aircraft. He was also responsible for plotting on the table information received by RDF and for estimating and recording the E.T.A. of raids over the target areas. The decision whether an aircraft was hostile or friendly rested with him. The Fortress commander at Alexandria passed to the Centre reports received from H.M. ships and warnings of Fleet Air Arm movements over the air observation system. The plotting on the table of aircraft reports was an Egyptian responsibility. At Cairo the information on the table at the Air Report Centre was reproduced in the operations room at Headquarters Middle East.⁽¹⁾ Here was represented the Officer Commanding Egyptian A.A. Brigade who was responsible for the anti-aircraft defence of Cairo and for a quick interchange between the Brigade and the Cairo Sector of information concerning our fighters and hostile aircraft. Air raid warnings for the Cairo area would be given by the Ministry of the Interior from the Cairo Sector operations room.

These arrangements were a considerable improvement on the earlier plan. The warning system was more co-ordinated. Instead of coming under the direction of the Fortress commander the Fighter commander appointed a liaison officer to him. The role of the fighters (amounting to seventy-five, discounting the Fleet Air Arm and the second Royal Egyptian Air Force squadron) was broadly described as "the destruction of enemy aircraft attacking any objective in Lower Egypt". Particular reference was made to the protection of the Fleet base at Alexandria, the capital in Cairo and the Suez Canal. Such terms of reference should allow the "tactical flexibility" demanded by the Air Ministry.

Naval Co-operation

Naval co-operation had been a matter of sustained discussion with the Admiralty in 1939, as Air Ministry was concerned that in the early part of the year the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief was agreeing to a system of control which handed over the operation of general reconnaissance aircraft to the Navy. In explanation the Air Officer Commandant-in-Chief admitted that he was in difficulties in providing adequate co-operation for the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean at Alexandria. The tendency was for the Admiral to be more and more at Alexandria where the Fleet, the general reconnaissance squadrons and the disembarked Fleet Air Arm would be in war. In the absence of an existing General Reconnaissance Group control of these aircraft was bound to fall into the hands of the Fortress commander. Sir William Mitchell said that the Admiral was not anxious for this, but through the lack of an R.A.F. organisation it would happen. In July the Deputy Director of Plans went out to discuss the problem with the Air Officer Commanding and Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean. It was agreed that the Air Officer Commanding Mediterranean would be under the command and general direction of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief but would deal direct with the Naval Commander-in-Chief concerning the operation of naval co-operation aircraft. This was incorporated in the September Plan. Initially the Air Officer Commanding Mediterranean would be at Malta but "later possibly at the Fleet base whenever practicable". The adverbial hesitance indicated the difficulties involved. If the Air Officer Commanding moved from Malta he would delegate his local responsibilities for defence and general reconnaissance to a Group Commander on the island. At Alexandria there was to be a nucleus group for the operation of general reconnaissance aircraft in the eastern Mediterranean. When the A.O.C. left Malta he would take with him a small operational staff. He would then join the Fleet either at Alexandria (where he

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(1) Later this Sector Ops. room was transferred to Helwan

A.M. File
S.47151

M.E. File
WGM/2

HQ. ME/
ORB/Sept. 39
App. 1

would amalgamate with the general reconnaissance group) or elsewhere. Consequently on 18th September 201 Group formed at Alexandria to operate all general reconnaissance aircraft in Egypt under the direct control of A.O.C. Mediterranean.⁽¹⁾

Sundry Units

The A.O.C.-in-C was to control directly the two bomber transport squadrons which would be used initially for the movement of squadrons to war stations. It was anticipated that in addition to the fighter squadrons the Royal Egyptian Air Force would have for reconnaissance duties an army co-operation squadron which would be employed in two flights, one at Suez under the orders of the Brigadier, Canal Brigade and one at Almaza at the disposal of the G.O.C.-in-C.

B. REINFORCEMENT

Existing Squadrons

The execution of the plan was dependent upon the reinforcement of the air forces in Egypt from the adjoining territories and India. The squadrons in Egypt in early 1939 were one army co-operation squadron, three bomber, one fighter and one bomber transport squadron. To these could be added two or possibly three bomber squadrons from Iraq and a further bomber and a fighter squadron from Palestine and Trans-Jordan Command. It had always been realised that in the event of War with Italy the closing of the Mediterranean would greatly complicate reinforcements. Reinforcements from U.K. would take seventy days to reach Egypt by the Red Sea and ninety via Basra. The Cairo Conference had put forward as a solution a self sufficiency policy which was endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff in their strategic appreciation in April 1939. It was proposed to hold a reserve of ninety days stores, supplies and petrol for the garrison. This was finally agreed in July by the Committee of Imperial Defence. In the initial stages of war the R.A.F. would be committed to a policy of conserving its strength. By air action against Italian troop concentrations and supply lines the build up of the Italian assault might be delayed, giving us valuable time to reinforce Egypt.

CID 364th
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D.P. (P)45

A.M. Signal
X977
24/5/39

In May 1939 the new reinforcement plan assuming a multilateral war was completed. The plan recognised that reinforcements from U.K. would not be forthcoming for some time after hostilities had begun. The moves set out in the plan were a bomber Wing Headquarters and Nos. 30 and 55 bomber squadrons from Iraq to Egypt (with the possibility of No.84 squadron if relieved in India and not required in Aden) followed by a mobile A.S.P. No.202 G.R. Squadron would move from Malta to Egypt and it was possible that a bomber squadron would be available from India. However all moves were dependent on the situation in the reinforcing commands.

A.M. File
S.38173

The two squadrons promised from Iraq were re-equipped with Blenheim aircraft. In Egypt No.211 squadron received Blenheims in April 1939, No.45 squadron in June and No.113 squadron re-equipped with Blenheims in September. Aircraft and personnel for the additional fighter squadron, No.112, arrived in June, making a total of three Gladiator squadrons. G.R. squadron had arrived to join No.202 in the Mediterranean in May, but was returned to England when war broke out in Europe.

COS
932 J.P.

In August 1939 the Chiefs of Staff reviewed our air strength and commitments with the reinforcement plans as amounting to a

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(1) See Narrative: The R.A.F. and Naval Co-operation in the Mediterranean.

hundred and thirty two bombers (seventy two existing and sixty⁽¹⁾ by war reinforcement). If India released another squadron for Egypt the total would be raised to a hundred and forty four. This force would be responsible for the neutralisation of the Italian air striking force, the denial of the east Libyan ports to Italian shipping and attacks on their bases and supplies. In addition they were to provide close support for the army.

Forecast of Requirements

The air defence of Egypt in August 1939 was entrusted to three British and one Egyptian squadrons amounting to seventy five⁽³⁾ first line aircraft operating from three Delta and one forward stations. When formed and trained another Egyptian squadron would operate from a fourth station in the Delta. It had already been agreed that this was inadequate. On the basis of allowing one squadron in the air at any given time in the Cairo and Alexandria sectors the Chiefs of Staff estimated that each of the two sectors would need three squadrons. A further three would be required for the Port Said sector, and two for army cover in the forward area. This amounted to a total of eleven squadrons of which six squadrons were to be found from Imperial sources and five by the Egyptian Government. To realise this we would have to produce three more fighter squadrons and the Egyptians⁽⁴⁾ two.

W.P. (39)
148

Idem

The number of General Reconnaissance aircraft was also inadequate. At Malta there were two squadrons and one amphibious squadron at Gibraltar. It was accepted that seven were required. This involved an increase of four squadrons, two for Alexandria and one apiece for Malta and Gibraltar.⁽⁵⁾

Idem

It was estimated in the Chiefs of Staffs paper that shortly after the outbreak of war our army strength in Egypt would be two divisions and that the scale of operations in the Western Desert was likely to increase. The existing squadron might be increased to eighteen aircraft or another provided to meet the requirement.

In anticipation of the arrival of up to twelve heavy⁽⁶⁾ bomber squadrons from the United Kingdom administrative preparations for their reception were to be commenced. The existing bomber transport squadrons would form the nucleus of this heavy bomber force.

Idem

Unfortunately these were estimated requirements and not existing squadrons and if the best use of the present limited resources was to be made the Chief of the Air Staff had to have the power freely to reinforce any particular area in an emergency. Air Ministry therefore pressed for authority to move units from Kenya, Trans-Jordan and Iraq to Egypt as soon as the occasion arose.

C. ADMINISTRATIVE BACKGROUND 1939/40

Shortage of Spares

The administrative background to these plans was not wholly satisfactory. In spring 1939 the lack of spares in the Command caused Sir William Mitchell "much concern". In explaining the situation to

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- (1) 72 bombers in Squadrons No. 14, 45, 113, 211, 216 (B.T.) and No. 1 R.E.A.F.
- (2) 60 bombers in Squadrons No. 30, 55, 84, 70 and 28, to be transferred from India and Iraq.
Note. The establishment of bomber squadrons was 12 Initial Equipment and 6 Immediate Reserve.
- (3) 75 fighters in Squadrons No. 33, 80, 112 at 21 I.E. plus 11 I.R. and No. 2 R.E.A.F. at 12 I.E. plus 6 I.R.
- (4) There was already one Egyptian Army Co-operation squadron.
- (5) See Narrative: R.A.F. and Naval Co-operation in the Mediterranean
- (6) Later categorised as Medium

M.E. File
WGM/2

the Director of Equipment at Air Ministry he pointed out that the spares then held for both Blenheim and Lysander squadrons were insufficient to keep them in operation under war conditions for more than a short period. As an example only two spare petrol tanks were allowed to a Blenheim squadron. As bullets through tanks were a common occurrence in war a number of aircraft would soon be immobilised. The Director of Equipment replied in June that hitherto no allowance had been made in the reserves for war damage. However this had been reconsidered by the Committee of Imperial Defence who were now permitting Air Ministry to seek financial approval for a war reserve of three months stock for the Middle East as part of the general programme. Normally these stocks would take a year to supply but the Director intended to borrow from the Metropolitan Air Force. In the light of the international situation in the summer of 1939, Sir William had good cause to be concerned, particularly as he himself observed the Middle East might have to subsist on its resources for many months after the outbreak of war whereas the Metropolitan Air Force had the industries close behind them.

The Repair Organisation

Another cause for concern was that the aircraft depot at Alexandria by reason of its position was extremely vulnerable to air attack and sabotage. During the previous crisis certain sectors had been dispersed to Abu Sueir as a precautionary measure. At the time of the Cairo Conference the A.O.C.-in-C. had represented its removal to the Canal area as an urgent necessity, and the Chief of the Air Staff had subsequently approved that the aircraft storage and equipment units should be located at Abu Sueir. The M.T. Depot was also to be in the Canal Zone and the ammunition and petrol dump at Helwan. This would allow the essential expansion of the depot organisation. To this end the A.O.C.-in-C. urged Air Ministry in June 1939 to agree to the removal of No.4 S.F.T.S. from Abu Sueir to Iraq in peacetime so that the workshops could be taken over by the depot.

M.E. File
WGM/4

M.E. File
WGM/2

WGM/4

Sir William also complained to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff that the depot was not only overworked but also under establishment in skilled trades. The change over under the re-arming programme to twin-engine aircraft had added to its work, there was an increased number of squadrons to cope with, maintenance for the Fleet Air Arm had to be carried out and the re-arming completed. Moreover there was still an "abnormal delay" in the arrival of spares from the United Kingdom. To this tale was added the packing and despatch of obsolete aircraft to the Afghans who were already complaining to London that they were arriving in a poor state.

The outbreak of war in Europe gave an added urgency to these needs. On 7th September a subsidiary aircraft depot was formed at Abu Sueir to supply operational squadrons with serviceable aircraft. An equipment section was added to the aircraft storage section there for the supply of replacement spares, aircraft equipment and stores. Flying Training School moved to Iraq. In October the M.T. repair flight moved from the depot to the premises of Messrs. Cook in Cairo. At the beginning of November a light M.T. repair section formed at No.1 Advanced Repair Section at Fuka. (1)

Reserves

The emergency of the previous year had shown that the provision of M.T. was totally inadequate to place the squadrons on a mobile basis. Lack of M.T. had delayed their moves to advanced stations for war. To counteract this the M.T. repair organisation had been expanded as indicated above and numbers of vehicles had been purchased or

M.E. File
HRN/10
Pt.2

A.M. File
S.46838

/commandeered

(1) No.1 A.R.S. was formed by milking four squadrons of their Squadron Servicing Parties.

M.E.File
HRN/10
Pt.2.

commandeered locally. Messrs. Cooks were modifying lorries to carry bombs. But the shortage was not confined to M.T. The crisis had demonstrated that the Command was without the reserves to turn immobile units into mobile squadrons without robbing Peter to pay Paul. This change over was essential to the concentration of air forces to meet the Italian threat. At that time it had also been found impossible to form the additional units such as operations rooms, supply and transport sections, salvage parties, ammunition and petrol depots and additional headquarters staffs all demanded by a state of tension or war.

Personnel

M.E.File
HRN/10
Pt.2.

The shortage in personnel was acute and it was suggested that an adequate pool must be formed in peace time. To this end the Cairo Conference had recommended the opening of R.A.F.V.R. centres in Egypt. The civilian substitution scheme had not been successful. The Senior Personnel Staff Officer at Headquarters Middle East at that time pictured "a squadron being ordered to move at dawn after being bombed overnight and then finding that their native drivers had deserted probably with their fastest vehicles".

Stores

HQ.ME
ORB
Sept.39

Experience had also shown that in moving squadrons from distant locations to their war stations in the desert it was necessary to have certain essential stores laid down in advance of their arrival. Consequently in September, 1939, 4,000 tons of petrol reserves were deposited between Fuka and Mersa Matruh and the petrol reserves in the Western Desert increased to cover two weeks maximum effort with an additional 50% allowance for extra squadrons. On 15th September the immediate reserve of aircraft for desert stations was brought up to 50%.

Staff

S.43159

These shortages were the growing pains of the Middle East and were felt from the squadrons upwards to the highest level. At Headquarters Middle East periods of tension had shown that the A.O.C.-in-C. not only required to be free to control the whole Middle East air war by off-loading local administration on to an A.O.C. in Egypt but also that his own staff would have to be increased for planning, organisation, control of operations and the collection of intelligence. The appointment in war of an A.O.C.-in-C. with the rank of Air Chief Marshal, the expansion of planning and intelligence staffs, small as it was, marked the beginning of the recognition of the new state of affairs.

Administrative Planning

COS(39)
60

The advent of war in the west had tightened the policy whereby first priority was given to forces at home and in France. Middle East reserves would have to be built up slowly to the three months scale approved by the Committee of Imperial Defence as and when prior demands had been met and shipping was available. It was agreed that the resources of India should be used when possible. At a meeting in October 1939 the Chiefs of Staff accepted the R.A.F. reserves in the Middle East as being between two and three months, aircraft reserves amounting to 140% of initial equipment rising to 200% when aircraft became available; explosives and full reserves as being up to three months and the latter being increased by five weeks shortly. Viewed through the eyes of those in the Middle East the prospect was less rosy, prejudiced as it was by a lack of spares and other critical items.

COS(39)
146
COS(39)
54th Mtg.

The main factor which governed our build up in the Middle East was our inability to operate additional forces until bases and communications had been developed. It was essential to consolidate the present position before undertaking new enterprises. As the Chief

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COS(39)
22nd Mtg
COS(39)146

of the Imperial General Staff explained to the Chiefs of Staff, he was building up forces as rapidly as possible but they still fell short particularly in ammunition and air co-operation units. A statement of Cabinet policy would enable our forces and administrative facilities to be developed on a sound basis. Furthermore such a statement might ensure that the French conformed, and would serve to check attempts by them to dictate allied strategy in the Middle East, a tendency which the Chiefs of Staff wished to counteract. On 17th December the War Cabinet considered the recommendation that we should go ahead with administrative arrangements in the Middle East. They regarded this as a lengthy process and by making a start then we should be able to operate reinforcements as soon as they became available. In the matter of air forces the Chiefs of Staff took a less optimistic view than earlier. War in the west had delayed the time when it would be possible to provide adequate air forces to counter the Italian attacks and it would be still longer before reserves could be built up. The first essential now was to increase the mobility of the existing squadrons so that maximum weight could speedily be brought to bear at a threatened point.

The long term target increases which the Chiefs of Staff had in mind for the Middle East were twelve bomber squadrons and ten fighter squadrons, five army co-operation and facilities for eight general reconnaissance squadrons to co-operate with the Navy in the Mediterranean and Red Sea. The addition of a Fleet Air Arm complement of two carriers was also being examined.

Even if these reinforcements had been immediately available on the outbreak of War with Italy the problem of routing them to Egypt with the Mediterranean closed and the Red Sea menaced by Italian air forces in East Africa was formidable. There remained the overland route from Basra to Palestine or Mombassa to Egypt, but these had not sufficient capacity to maintain the existing garrison, let alone additional forces. A reinforcing route from West Africa was being opened and it might be possible to fly in aircraft via Malta. On this precarious supply position we would from the beginning be committed to defend Egypt, Aden and Sudan, Somaliland and Kenya. Force of circumstances was forcing a self-sufficiency policy on the Middle East although the degree of sufficiency was doubtful.

Airfields

Interview/3
with Mr. Fay
29 Aug.45

At the outbreak of war in September 1939, there were five permanent R.A.F. Stations in Egypt, which had been in existence before the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936. They were Aboukir, Ismailia, Abu Sueir, Heliopolis and Helwan. There were various Desert Landing Grounds in the Western Desert up to Mersa Matruh, and South to Luxor and Wadi Halfa, and a number of emergency Landing Grounds in the Canal and Red Sea areas. Of the Desert Landing Grounds, Mersa Matruh was a good civil airfield, with some permanent technical accommodation.

Immediately prior to the war, consideration was being given to the implementation of the terms of the Anglo Egyptian Treaty, which allowed for the construction of five new permanent stations in the Canal zone, besides the two stations already existing there (Ismailia and Abu Sueir). It was intended that these stations should be built and paid for by the Egyptian Government. At the outbreak of war, immediate action was taken to provide them as additional requirements to the Force, quite apart from the terms of the treaty, and responsibility for construction was transferred to the Air Ministry Works Directorate. An additional station (Dever Soir) was added to the programme, making six new stations in all, and work on these was completed in 1941.

Western Desert Landing Grounds

Lessons
learned

One of the lessons learned during the 1938 crisis was that the operation of Squadrons in the Western Desert might have been severely

/handicapped

in 1938
crisis
GS68/13/10
Para.5
Inter-Com-
mand Confer-
ence
Oct.1938.

handicapped if hostilities had suddenly broken out, owing to the absence of prepared Landing Grounds, and at the Intercommand Conference held in October of that year, it was decided that operational Landing Grounds should be maintained in the Western Desert with camp facilities provided at selected sites, which were to be stocked with bombs and petrol. The work on these was to be undertaken by the Egyptian Government.

HQ RAF ME
O.R.B.
Summary
for
Sept.1939

When war did break out, twelve landing grounds, constructed under the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, were accepted by the Royal Air Force as being fully operational. These were:-

Amriya	Khataba	Fuka
El Hamman	Ma'aten Bagush	Mersa Matruh
Daba	Ikingi Mariut	Bir Hooker
Qasaba	Burg El Arab	Sidi Barrani

Landing Grounds near the Bahariya Oasis had also been constructed at the instigation of the Royal Egyptian Air Force for operational use. All three were inspected and found to be unsuitable for high speed monoplane aircraft, except in an emergency.

Mr. Fay
interview/3
25 Aug.45

In the early days of the war many Landing Grounds were cleared by the Works Department to provide operational facilities for the Royal Air Force in connection with the first advance of the Army against Italians in the Western Desert.

O.R.B.208
Squadron

Squadrons also made their own Landing Grounds, No.208 Squadron clearing one at Bir Kenayis, where they "prepared quite a reasonable landing ground, with telephonic communication with Quasaba", and No.33 Squadron constructing one at Garawla.

Mr. Fay
interview/3
25 Aug.45

The Western Desert Landing Grounds were not generally of a high standard, and they varied considerably in quality from a hard gravel surface to loose drift sand. The areas selected, however, were reasonably flat, and little work, apart from clearance of scrub, was necessary to convert them into reasonably satisfactory landing areas; when, after being in use for some time, they became badly rutted, it was not a difficult matter to change their locations.

Landing Grounds constructed by the Works Directorate were all provided with camp facilities on a tented basis; cookhouses and dining rooms for the troops were usually built of prefabricated sectional hutting, and technical facilities were provided by the erection of Bessoneau or similar type hangars.

HQ RAF ME
War Diary
Monthly
summaries
for Nov.,
Dec.and
April

During November a number of landing grounds were made unserviceable from time to time by heavy rainstorms, and these conditions prevailed until April. It was found, however, that five or six hours of sun were usually enough to dry them out and make them operational again.

Supply Policy

To summarise, our forces in co-operation with the French were thought to be adequate (except in aircraft and A.A. units) to meet the Italians alone, but action would be limited to defence or diversion. Air action in particular would be restricted to the defence of Egypt. Additional forces would be necessary if a second enemy began operations in the theatre. But the increase of our air forces which was so necessary could only be at the expense of the R.A.F. in the west.

Unhappily the Metropolitan Air Force was still short of all classes of

/aircraft

aircraft and despite an ambitious programme of air expansion⁽¹⁾ and a production aimed at 2,550⁽²⁾ aircraft each month. Middle East could not expect aircraft or personnel for some time. Meanwhile the policy was, of necessity, to build up administratively using the local resources of Egypt. Palestine and elsewhere east of Suez, and the factories of South Africa and India, to increase the mobility of existing formations and gradually add squadrons up to the target figures as the situation permitted.

The interests in the Middle East at the close of 1939 were regarded as important but not so pressing as the security of Britain, France or Singapore. It was the intention of the Chiefs of Staff to keep priorities of the various theatres under constant review.

Administrative Position - January 1940

At Headquarters Middle East the whole administrative position was under examination. When Air Vice-Marshal Maund arrived from Iraq in December 1939 to take over the post of Air Officer Administrative at Headquarters, R.A.F. Middle East, he immediately applied himself to investigating this problem. The situation revealed was serious. For example replacement facilities for aero-engines at the depot were still based on single-engined aircraft. Blenheims required engine replacement after approximately 225 flying hours. Assuming that a Blenheim flies 110 hours per month in war, sixty engine replacements (excluding casualties) would be needed each month. The facilities which existed might provide ten Blenheims per month. The shortage of spares for these aircraft still persisted. War stocks of 250 lb bombs which were normally used by our bombers only amounted to fourteen days intensive effort. Stocks of Browning and K guns were low and there was a deficiency of spares. After six months in the desert the R.A.F. tentage which had been manufactured in the Great War was rapidly wearing out either due to old age or deterioration after camouflaging. Sand was doing its worst. Air cleaners for Blenheims had to be serviced every five hours flying, a job which takes some three hours of maintenance work. A replacement cleaner takes only fifteen minutes to fit, but there were in January 1940 only six spares in the Command. As anticipated, Vokes cleaners were a disappointment. The air intake on the Blenheim is particularly near the ground, so that during running up and take off a column of dust was sucked in. At the depot, now renamed 103 M.U., experiments were being made with a special fitting for taxiing and running up which would be removed on take off. Messrs Cooks were manufacturing sand mats of canvas reinforced and weighted with sewn in metal for running up. Sand penetrated into the instruments, dust and dirt interfered with the variable pitch air screws so that the screw would not pass to coarse pitch in the air. The heat of the desert sun exceeded the plastic temperature applied when moulding the Perspex sheets, which as a result blew out and cracked. These difficulties, when added to the normal task of repairing and maintaining the air force, taxed severely the engineer and equipment organisation. Improvisation was possible up to a point but not to the extent of manufacturing some of essential engine and machine repairs for modern aircraft.

Air Vice-Marshal Maund's Visit to U.K.

In order to try and clear up some of these personnel and equipment problems and to discuss plans for Balkan operations the A.O.C.-in-C. /decided

- (1) Two hundred millions were authorised for the expansion of the R.A.F. for the fiscal year of 1939. The estimates introduced by Churchill before leaving the A.M. in 1921 were 18,411,000 for 1921/22.
- (2) The annual output of aircraft at the end of the Great War was 32,000 odd. This works out at slightly more than the COS figure. (Trenchard in Lords 24/5/38).

HQ.202 Gp
S.4/1

ME.Misc
Papers

HQ.ME ORB
Nov.39

HQ.ME.ORB
Jan.40

ME.File
WGM/2

decided in January 1940 to send A.V.M. Maund home to visit Air Ministry, As Sir William Mitchell explained to the C.A.S. it was impossible to plan new campaigns (e.g. Turkey) until the personnel position improved. He was unaware at the time that Air Ministry had put a ban on trooping to the Middle East.

At the beginning of his visit to Air Ministry A.V.M. Maund received a set-back. The Director of Organisation met him with proposals for reducing non-participating units to a care and maintenance basis and eliminating the depot in favour of small salvage and repair sections. A.V.M. Maund was opposed to the plan and referred the matter to his A.O.C.-in-C. who replied that he could not roll up any combatant units, and although some personnel might be thrown up by the reduction of certain units they would be limited. He reiterated that any analogy with units in France ignored the fact that our forces in the Middle East had not an aircraft industry within reasonable distance. The core of the matter was that assuming Italian neutrality thoughts in Whitehall were turning towards South-eastern Europe and for this Middle East would be milked. However, Sir William stated roundly that the forces at his disposal were quite inadequate for operations in Turkey. Had he known, he said later, that Air Ministry had placed a ban on trooping to the Middle East he would have spoken even more plainly.

A.M.Signal
X794

The discussions continued and a week later on the 26th January, A.V.M. Maund was able to say that suitable war establishments had been agreed with the Director of Organisation, that the position of Middle East on the priorities list vis-a-vis France and U.K. was being raised, that many of the badly needed spares were being shipped and the ban on trooping was being amended to allow deficiencies in peace and war establishments to be filled. A better understanding with the authorities in Whitehall had been reached, but the difficulty of reconciling the two points of view persisted. Both A.M. Mitchell and A.C.M. Longmore had complaints to make on the subject of unsatisfactory liaison with Air Ministry.

D. THE ENEMY

Italy

The Prime Minister in 1937 had expressed the view that Italy, although unlikely to be aggressive without the assurance of German support, could no longer be regarded as a reliable friend. Limited expenditures to guard against a hostile Italy had therefore been authorised. From then onwards periodic reviews of our position in relation to Italy had been made.

War Potential

It has already been observed that Italy holds a strong geographical position in the Central Mediterranean which permitted her not only to reinforce rapidly her air forces⁽¹⁾ in Libya from the Metropolitan Air Force but also to dominate the Sicilian Narrows from her airfields in Pantellaria, Sicily and Calabria, thus cutting our principal sea route to Egypt. In addition she could menace our secondary route by the Red Sea with her navy and air forces in East Africa. On the other hand politically, financially and economically Great Britain was stronger. Strategically Great Britain was better placed as she controlled both the eastern and the western exits from the Mediterranean. Thus she could sever Italy from her East African empire and her trade with the outer seas. Italy herself, although almost self sufficient in food stuffs, lacked most industrial raw materials and her manufacturing capacity concentrated in the north was weak. However, if she could maintain her sea communications within the Mediterranean, to the Black Sea, she might be able to exert an intensive war effort for a considerable period.

D.P. (P)45

To maintain her East African empire it would be essential for Italy to gain control of the Suez Canal. As the British Fleet would command the eastern Mediterranean this could only be done by a land assault against Egypt from Libya. If this was to be successful she would have to be certain of her communications to Tripoli or build up large stores in Libya in peace. In such a campaign the forces would be limited by distance and water. From Tripoli to Alexandria is some 1,100 miles and the line of advance offered little protection from air attack.

D.P. (P)45

In spring of 1939 Italy was acknowledged to be numerically superior on land and in the air but Britain was stronger economically and on the sea. As the eastern and western Mediterranean would in war be controlled by Britain and France, Italy would concentrate on protecting her route to Libya by air and light surface forces and submarines. She would be cut off from her seaborne trade and East African possessions and in view of her inferiority in capital ships the Italian Navy could be expected to avoid engagement with our ships. Our shipping would be diverted round the Cape. While our forces adopted a defensive policy, immediate economic pressure could be applied to reduce the enemy's power of resistance and the allies would intensify their industrial output which was fed from their greater resources.

The British European Appreciation (see Appendix XII) estimated that at 1st April 1939 the strength of the Italian Metropolitan Air Force was 1,393 of which 444 were bombers with an equal number of fighters. In Libya and the Dodecanese there were probably 96 bombers, 81 Army Co-op, 9 Recce and 90 fighters; in East Africa 138 aircraft; a total of 414 aircraft. Our forces in the Middle East amounted to 246 including those in the Sudan, Kenya, Aden, Malta and Iraq. The French in North Africa and the Levant could raise 323.

/Anglo-French

(1) See Appendix XI for Normal Italian Air Force in Libya.

Anglo-French Counteraction

A.F.C. (J)
5th Mtg.

In the Anglo-French conversations to investigate how best the Italian position in Libya and Ethiopia could be rendered untenable, the French rightly pointed out that Egypt offered to the Italians the weakest spot and the greatest prize. The British representatives were aware, they said, of Italian intentions and preparations, and calculated that the enemy could maintain two motorised divisions and one small mobile division under desert conditions. The lack of prepared lines did not indicate that His Majesty's Government underrated the capabilities of the Italians to seize Egypt, but, in contrast to the Mareth line, the Egyptian desert was not suited to static defences for the going was good on a wide front and there were no defiles which could be easily defended. The British army was not planning a passive defence but a limited offensive aimed at capturing perhaps Bardia and later the important naval and air station at Tobruk. The greatest danger was the Regia Aeronautica in Libya, Sicily and Pantellaria which contrasted unhappily for the Allies with the meagre R.A.F. in Egypt and the weak French air forces in North Africa. The situation was summed up by the head of the French delegation as undoubtedly dangerous but probably within the power of our defending forces to meet.

The plan put forward by the representatives was that should the Italians advance on Egypt the British mobile division would, if time permitted, concentrate at Mersa Matruh to engage this invader. If there was not time the defence line would be Daba. This division, reinforced during the first month with one infantry Brigade and a field regiment, was deemed sufficient to hold the Italians while the French launched an offensive from Tunisia. If, on the other hand, the Italians attacked along the Mareth line in order to protect their base at Tripoli, the British in Egypt would undertake their limited offensive which would prevent the reduction of Italian forces in Cyrenaica.

Intelligence

A.M. File
S. 1046

The collection of adequate information about the Italian situation in Libya was a matter of concern both to Headquarters Middle East and Air Ministry. As early as March 1939 the Director of Operations had been anxious on this point and the lack of information reaching Egypt from Libya was fully realized by the A.O.C.-in-C. One of the main difficulties was that no trade existed between the two countries and there was therefore no direct channel of communication. It was extremely difficult to obtain information since it was not possible to introduce reliable agents into Libya under adequate cover. Only through Italy itself and Greece which traded with Libya could sufficient commercial cover be obtained. Furthermore the policy of avoiding provocation to Italy hampered activities. In any case permission to employ agents had to be obtained from London; and granted that, the money allowed was inadequate, in the opinion of the A.O.C.-in-C.

WGM/4

Italian Air Force in Libya

WGM/4

On the outbreak of war with Germany, Air Commodore Collishaw produced a memorandum on the Italian Air Force for the information of his squadron commanders and flying personnel. He warned them that if the teaching of General Douhet at the Italian Air Force War College was followed we could expect massed bombing attacks against vital centres. The Italians had recently conducted an exercise in moving 400 heavy bombers from Italy to North Africa demonstrating the ability to reinforce rapidly the existing air forces in Libya. These were estimated at some 200 aircraft the majority being fighters, reconnaissance and light bombers but comprising two regiments (1) /of

(1) Regiment equals 4 squadrons of 6 aircraft.

WGM/4

of bomber aircraft each consisting of twenty-four S.81 Bombers which were capable of reaching objectives in the Delta when carrying a 2,000 lb bomb load. If the Italians concentrated on Alexandria it would be possible for S.81 aircraft to carry a 4,000 lb bomb load. Assuming one raid a day for each aircraft, 48 of these machines could drop a total of 86 tons in a day. The memorandum pointed out that it was a principle of the Italian Air Force that bomber aircraft should be relieved as far as possible of the responsibility of protecting themselves in order to allow them to concentrate on their main task. Consequently, whenever possible, fighters would accompany the bombers in close escort. Air Commodore Collishaw warned No.33 squadron that the Italians believed in allocating numbers of aircraft to attack troops from a low level altitude by a combination of machine gun fire and anti-personnel bombs. Accounts from Europe lent substance to this warning. The information available indicated that only a skeleton force of anti-aircraft artillery and searchlights existed in Libya at the time. It was presumed that A.A. would therefore not greatly hinder the 'fast flying' (sic) Blenheims. At the outset weak A.A. defences were expected at Benghazi and Tobruk.

Reference has already been made to the poor maintenance facilities for Italian aircraft in Libya and the necessity for wastage to be made good from Italy. There was, however, no reason to suppose that shortage of petrol or bombs would hamper the Italian air forces in Libya in the early stages of the war.

Policy of non-provocation

COS(39)
309th Mtg.

The Chiefs of Staff had decided in July 1939 that there were no grounds for assuming that Italy would be knocked out in the early stages of the war. A French offensive from Tunisia was considered to offer the main chance of early success. But assured Italian neutrality, they thought, was preferable to Italian hostility. As events in Europe creered towards open war, the Chiefs of Staff decreed two guiding principles for further precautions against Italy. First, any reasonable defence measure to meet a hostile Italy was to be taken; the necessity of a full scale garrison was stressed as fears of the bombing of civilians and paratroop invasion increased. Secondly, Italy was not to be provoked. This attitude dominated our policy until war with Italy was inevitable.

HQ ME ORB
Air Staff
Sept. 39

AM Signal
X161 6/11
ME ORB 39

COS(40)270

While the R.A.F. established itself in France, Italy preserved a precarious neutrality. Although outwardly friendly she continued to reinforce Libya and the Dodecanese with troops and air forces. At home it was feared that an allied reverse might still bring in Italy against us. In the meantime, the great concern was to reduce the numerical disparity between the R.A.F. and the German Air Force by careful conservation and development of resources. In this way it was hoped to redress the unpleasant equation produced earlier by the C.A.S. that G.A.F. = 2 (R.A.F. and F.A.F.). Middle East were told that they would have to curtail their activities to the minimum which would produce reasonable operational efficiency and meet training requirements, as the output of the aircraft industry would be fully absorbed by Europe for some time. It was frankly admitted that "our air forces overseas have deliberately been kept short of their full requirements in equipment and personnel in order to assist in building up our strength in the metropolitan sphere, and are not at present in a condition to undertake operations on a serious scale". It is not difficult to see why it had been decided to try and keep Italy out, and in the face of this statement the later success of these air forces may be set.

/Deterrant

Deterrent Measures.

COS(39)84

During the early months of 1940 Italy's attitude remained indeterminate, and the C.I.G.S. warned that no reliance could be placed on her neutrality. The idea of a détente had already been discussed and abandoned. Commenting on the meeting in the Brenner Pass between the heads of the German and Italian States, the Chiefs of Staff observed that the intervention of Italy would greatly complicate our difficulties. Meanwhile, British policy hovered between a conciliatory attitude, which the Chiefs of Staff feared might be taken for weakness, and a demonstration of force which might be construed as provocative. The Chiefs of Staff decided this was a question for the Supreme War Council. Accordingly, they prepared an aide memoire setting out the military and economic measures which might be applied, if the War Cabinet decided to make a show of force to deter Italy from entering the war and so modify their previous policy of deliberately avoiding offence to Italian susceptibilities.

COS(40)275
27/3/40

The courses of action which implicated the air forces were first, an increased activity on the airfields in the South of France, with not too carefully concealed discussions of preparations to receive British units; secondly, a reconstitution of the French troops and air forces in Tunisia, combined with a concentration of British forces in Egypt and Palestine. This latter might be achieved by transferring two of India's squadrons from Singapore to Egypt, one Rhodesian squadron from Kenya and one Austrian squadron from Australia to Palestine.

COS(40)
66th Mtg

The reconstitution of the French forces in Tunisia referred to their recent withdrawal for operations contemplated in Southeastern Europe. The French air forces in North Africa at that time were on a much reduced scale as a result of a re-equipping programme which was being carried out. This had been discussed at HQ R.A.F.M.E. at the end of January during the visit of Commandant de Chassey from Algiers. De Chassey had then indicated that the French had abandoned the idea of an early offensive against Tripoli and were more concerned with operations in Southeastern Europe. Moreover, the situation had changed since the French had undertaken to open an offensive against Libya within one month of the commencement of hostilities. In the interim the Italians had strengthened their defences, and the French were in particular need of more heavy artillery. Their offensive against Libya would therefore be postponed. As our troops in Egypt were depending on the French attack to give them the opportunity of a limited offensive, the British role in the new situation would have to remain defensive until the French took the initiative. This development was hardly welcome in the light of Sir Percy Lorraine's recent telegram in which he expressed the view that Italy might come into the war against us. If she did, it was expected to coincide with a German offensive in the West.

COS(40)303
(J.P.)

Before coming to a decision concerning measures to deter Italy, the War Cabinet on the 18th April invited the Chiefs of Staff to consider the implications of war with that country. The Joint Planning Sub-Committee therefore weighed the advantages of war with Italy against the disadvantages. A state of war would enable the Allies to tighten their economic blockade of Germany, to whom Italy might become an economic liability. Ultimately she might also become a military liability, particularly in view of the lack of preparedness of her land and air forces and the vulnerability of her industrial areas and sea communications to her African colonies. On the other hand, we were, at that time, heavily committed in Scandinavia and the West. War in the Middle East would mean a further dispersal of forces already strained to meet the threat. The interruption by naval/air action of our sea communications in the Mediterranean, and probably the Red Sea, would place an added

COS(40)303

burden on our mercantile marine. With the existing strength of our forces it would not be possible to give any direct assistance to countries with whom we had contractual obligations. On the balance, the Chiefs of Staff again decided that the intervention of Italy would add greatly to our difficulties and concluded that Italy must be kept out, if possible, until we were in a position to attack directly her colonies and herself. Initially some measure of offensive might be achieved if agreement was reached with the French to attack the industries concentrated in Northern Italy. This would also have the effect of drawing off fighters from the Mediterranean for the protection of the industrial area.

COS(40)309

The idea of a demonstration of power to deter Italy was finally quashed when the Supreme War Council agreed on 23rd April that it should be a governing consideration that no action should be taken which would be likely to precipitate hostilities with Italy before the necessary concentration of allied naval and air strength in the Middle East had been completed.

Internal Security in Egypt

WGM/1

At HQ. RAF. ME. the general shortage in the R.A.F. and the needs of the Western European theatre were fully realised by the A.O.C.-in-C. who accepted that the situation in the Middle East was equally appreciated at home. The Ambassador on the other hand was less willing to believe that the Air Ministry and the War Office were fully aware of the position. Despite the restraint of the G.O.C.-in-C. and the A.O.C.-in-C. who explained that referring the matter higher was merely flogging a dead horse, His Excellency felt that the carcass should be produced at intervals for inspection in the shape of voluminous diatribes to the Foreign Office. The A.O.C.-in-C. however, was at pains to dissociate himself from these communications.

A matter of general concern was the apprehension of the bombing of the populated areas of Egypt. This state of mind was aggravated by the increasing anti-British propaganda instigated by the Axis before the outbreak of war with Germany. In April 1939 the Governor of Cairo had visited the A.O.C.-in-C. in order to explain his concern about the attitude of the people, who were influenced by propaganda that the British had neither enough troops nor aeroplanes to defend Egypt. At the request of the Governor, the A.O.C.-in-C. arranged for the R.A.F. to carry out some formation flying over Cairo and the Delta with the object of restoring morale. To an Egyptian who was acting as caddy to an R.A.F. officer on the Gezeira golf course at the time, the demonstration had the opposite effect. "I suppose they are flying away before the Italians come" he remarked when told that they were British planes. A more significant sequel followed the march of the Mobile Division through Cairo to show the flag and raise morale. Locally, it was a great success, and the effect excellent, until the War Office issued a statement that the troops in Egypt had not, and would not, be increased.

COS(39)12

Fearing reprisals the Egyptian Cabinet was divided in September 1939 on the question of declaring war on Germany. It appeared that there was a deep-rooted fear that Britain contemplated a strategic sacrifice of Egypt, and their government was not satisfied that the British troops in Egypt were sufficient to repel an attack by Italy. When the Ambassador explained the deplorable effect of the non-belligerent attitude of the government, the Egyptian Prime Minister expressed his desire that, on this first such crisis in the history of independent Egypt, unanimity should be obtained. By treaty, Egypt was bound to come to the aid of Britain if the latter were engaged in war, and to furnish all facilities and assistance in their power; however no specific reference had been made to the need for a formal declaration of war. With a non-belligerent Egypt, difficulties would inevitably arise concerning internal security and confiscation of contraband.

/The

COS(39)
6th Mtg

COS(39)
22nd Mtg.

HQ ME ORB
Sept, 39.

WGM/7

The Ambassador suggested that the arrival of the brigade from Palestine and firm assurances of our intentions would probably allay the fears of the Egyptians and enable their Prime Minister to overcome the opposition of his colleagues. Although the Chiefs of Staff decided to reinforce immediately the land forces in Egypt that country merely broke off relations with Germany and did not declare war. The King had surrounded himself with anti-British advisers. Wealthy Turco-Egyptians, unimpressed by the strength of the Allies and defeatist in attitude themselves, found comfort in the Italian Minister's suggestion that Egypt need not go to war. Levantine and foreign communities although pro-ally were quick to react to news either way. The Middle class were democratic, but resented the emergency power of the Prime Minister; the lower class blamed Britian for low market prices. Consequently the war in the Middle East was fought against the uncertain background of a non-belligerent Egypt, a position which both the Ambassador and the A.O.C.-in-C. regarded as impracticable in March 1940; Sir William adding that to sit and cower under the protection of a non-belligerent Egypt was unbecoming to a first class power. The recent successes of the Germans in Norway aided by subversive action, pointed to the need for a sound state of internal security in Egypt.

A.A. Defence of Egypt

Under the terms of the Angl-Egyptian treaty, the ground defences of Egypt were to be handed over to the Egyptian government. In 1938, the British Army began the transfer.

S.47862
Revised
Plan.
Defence
of Egypt.
Annex 1
para.17

The control of the A.A. guns was discussed at length between the Air Ministry and the War Office during 1939. It was considered by the Air Staff that, while close liaison and co-operation would be required between the anti-aircraft artillery commanders, there need be no question yet of the guns coming under the operational control of the Air Force.

S.47862
Draft ME
Defence
Plan.
June 1939
Annex 1
Para.3

The guns and lights available in June 1939 were as follows:-

36 Army A.A. guns and 39 lights, and the guns and lights of the Fleet when in harbour. In May 1940 the A.A. situation was:-

COS(40)351
Annex 3
9.5.40

Area	No.	Type	Static or Mobile	
Alexandria	(8	3"	M	
	(12	3.7"	M	
	(14	3"	M	Egyptian manned
Cairo	(4	3.7"	"	"
	(16	3"	M	" "
	(4	40 mm	"	"
Suez	4	3"	M	" "
Mersa Matruh	2	3"	M	" "

For disposal by C. in C., M.E.

4	3.7"	M	Arrived Alexandria	2.5.40.
8	3.7"	S	"	" "
12	3.7"	S	"	" "
12	40 mm	-	Left Gibraltar for Alexandria	6.5.40

COS(40)447
12.6.40 In June 1940, the C.I.G.S. reviewed the A.A. position in the Middle East in the light of Italy's entry into the war.

/He

He did not recommend moving units from the Far to the Middle East, but that the defences of the Middle East should be built up from new production. It would be dangerous to have more resources on the move.

(1) Defences existing:-

<u>Area</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Static or Mobile, etc.</u>
Alexandria	(8	3"	M)
	(20	3.7"	S)
	(16	3.7"	M)
	(14	3"	M
	(12	Bofors	British manned
Cairo	(4	3.7"	M)
	(20	3"	M)
			Egyptian manned

Approved for Alexandria

32 heavy A.A. guns
32 light A.A. guns

As has been indicated the Egyptian A.A. Brigade operated and controlled their own guns through representatives in the various fighter operations.

COS(40)454
13.6.40

In reviewing the effects of the non-belligerency of Egypt, the British Chiefs of Staff observed that the Egyptian anti-aircraft guns might refuse to fire at enemy aircraft. Also our own anti-aircraft guns would be useless at night unless the searchlights which were manned by the Egyptians were operated. Other serious effects would be that the Egyptian coastal defences might refuse to fire on approaching Italian ships and the Egyptian motor patrols on the frontier might refuse to fight on contact with the enemy. At Mersa Matruh the defending garrison was partly Egyptian.

E. Redeployment

Between September 1939 and June 1940 plans did not alter fundamentally. Certain adjustments were made in the organisation and our commitments were increased by the collapse of the French armed forces.

WGM/7

In the Spring of 1940 the strength of the Italian land forces in Libya was given at 170,000⁽²⁾ and air reinforcements were known to have been sent recently to Eritrea. News of the Brenner meeting put the King of Egypt into a state of considerable panic, in which his main concern was the air forces available for the defence of his country. As the situation deteriorated, more and more emphasis was placed on the inadequacy of our air forces in the Middle East which were regarded as dangerously weak in the early days of May, although the land forces were considered adequate to ensure our vital interests. By the 25th May, however, the Chief of the Air Staff was able to tell the Chiefs of Staff Committee that he had given orders for fifty fighters to be modified to enable them to operate under sand storm conditions.

COS(40)
149th Mtg

/Six

(1) The War Office Summary of Operations, 12.6.40, gives the following figures for the Egyptian manned guns:-

Alexandria	8 heavy guns
Cairo	20 heavy guns 4 light guns
Mersa Matruh	4 heavy guns
Qasaba	4 heavy guns

(2) W.O. gives the strength as: Tripolitania - 9 Divisions, Cyrenaica - 5 Divisions. Overall total 180,000 in all ranks.

Six had already been completed but for long range tanks. These aircraft would augment the air protection for the Battle Fleet which had been sent to the Mediterranean. Appropriate aircraft stores were being sent round the Cape. Having released these aircraft C.A.S. made a stand and informed the meeting that he would feel bound to oppose any further weakening of the home fighter defences.

COS(40)357

By the middle of May not only had the situation vis-à-vis Italy deteriorated rapidly but also our hope of a French offensive from North Africa had dwindled until even a local offensive operation by the French was conditional on direct British air support. This was clearly impracticable.

Comment on the French Commitment

HQ ME ORB

There was much discussion with the French in Africa and Syria concerning co-operation between the two air forces, following upon talks in London, Rabat and Algiers. Close contact by means of General Wavell's liaison officers and visits from the 2ieme Bureau had been established with the authorities in Beyrouth and Algiers, and a complete exchange of 'Y' information in North Africa was arranged. But the British air forces in Egypt were too small and the Armee de l'air in North Africa too variable to permit much constructive air planning. In the first instance, it had seemed as if the French would be able to undertake an offensive from Tunisia which would ease the pressure on the British in Egypt. At Rabat, the offensive became conditional on the assured neutrality of Spanish Morocco. Until that was certain, the majority of the French Independent Air Force and some of the Army Co-operation Force in North Africa would be contained in that area. The French were deficient in bombers and fighters, and were apprehensive about the reduction of the North African air forces in favour of the Fatherland. The Tunisian airfields offered great advantages, but the R.A.F. was in no position to provide forces to operate from them, although it was realised that they might be of capital importance at a later stage.

AFC 37

HQ ME ORB

In October 1939 a staff officer from General Bouscat's Headquarters in Algiers had visited Cairo to discuss the co-ordination of the two air forces. Although he had spoken with confidence of the French offensive against Tripoli, he indicated that the Farman aircraft had already been withdrawn to France, leaving only obsolescent bombers in Tunisia, of which two squadrons were being detained in the rear for retaliation against Sicily. Of the fighters, half were new Moranes. The Frenchman sought information concerning the extent of British air assistance which could be expected, but no satisfactory answer could be made. In January 1940, came Commandant de Chasse from Algiers. His account was less encouraging. The effective air striking force was much reduced as a result of a re-equipment programme (1) which was due to be completed in April. The idea of an early French offensive against Tripoli had been abandoned and plans were focused on South-Eastern Europe. The A.O.C.-in-C. detected a distinct note of 'wait and see' in the French policy.

The striking power of the French air forces in North Africa appeared doubtful in 1940. The loss to the R.A.F., when it came, was principally one of strategic airfields, valuable both for attack and reinforcement. Had French North Africa remained in Allied hands, the interruption of Italian supplies to Libya would have been effective earlier. When the initiative passed to the allies

/a.

(1) Provided	100 Modern Bombers	
	78 Morane	66 Fighters
	12 Potez	63 Rocce a/c.

a powerful air offensive against the two Sicilies and Calabria could have been developed immediately from the Tunisian airfields. Furthermore, the Italian air force would have been kept in an unenviable Janus position. It had already been admitted that Italian air power might close the Mediterranean. A French collapse would make it a certainty. Supplies for Egypt would have to circumnavigate the Cape and run the gauntlet through the Red Sea. As German armour penetrated deeper into Metropolitan France, and the attitude of Italy became increasingly bellicose, this contingency seemed more than probable.

Command of the Royal Air Force Middle East

On 13th May 1940, Sir Arthur Longmore relieved Sir William Mitchell as Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East. Uncertain of his exact relationship, particularly in administration, to other Middle East Commands, Sir Arthur asked for a statement from Air Ministry. In the directive which he received, he was put in command of all British air forces in the Middle East including adjacent territories and seas. In Egypt, the Sudan, Palestine and Transjordan, he had full administrative control, but Aden, Iraq and Malta dealt directly with Air Ministry concerning administration. However, A.C.M. Longmore as A.O.C.-in-C. had authority to draw on or interchange their resources as necessary. This meant that he might transfer units from one operational area to another within his Command, and allot additional reinforcements to the various formations according to the development of the strategic situation.

DO AML/

At the outset of hostilities A.C.M. Longmore intended to determine the general lines on which units in Egypt were to be employed and the strength of effort to be allotted to the fulfilment of each role. It had also been agreed that the A.O.C.-in-C. should control the operations of the Egyptian squadrons except when placed under an Army Commander. The control of operations in the Western Desert had been delegated to Air Commodore Collishaw. The latter was naturally anxious to have a free hand but Sir Arthur Longmore, with an eye to conserving the force, wished to confine its use to the most rewarding and economical objectives. Consequently A.C.M. Longmore decided that targets for air bombardments in Libya should be selected by Headquarters Middle East, but No. 202 Group⁽¹⁾ would be responsible for the actual conduct of operations; a ruling which was described by the Air Staff at No. 202 Group as a "muzzling order". The A.O.C.-in-C. also exercised general control over the fighters (No. 252 Wing) and general reconnaissance aircraft, the bomber transport squadrons and such reconnaissance units as did not come under the Army. The primary role of the Middle East air forces was the defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal and the maintenance of Red Sea communications. But the possibility of these forces being used for other plans approved by the Chiefs of Staff was not precluded. (Appendix III Location of Units)

RAF ME
OPERATIONAL
PLAN
NS/101
Min.2

For the defence of Egypt A.C.M. Longmore decided that his immediate objective should be the Italian air force, wherever it could be reached, as this constituted perhaps the greatest threat to Egypt and the Fleet. Air bases and supply lines were therefore laid down as targets of primary importance, although direct support for land and naval forces might, from time to time and for limited periods, supervene. The Navy would require air co-operation in interrupting supplies to Eastern Libya. For this air reconnaissance of enemy ports and seas would be needed. Enemy war ships and transports would have to be attacked, convoys protected and troops and bases defended from air attack. In the latter connection Sir Arthur Longmore observed that the lack of radar was a grave handicap to defence, particularly as no observer system was possible over the sea. This made high altitude approach from the north and west difficult to detect.

HQ RAF ME
O.R.B.
May 40

/These

(1) Previously the Egypt Group

These tasks would stretch the existing strength and equipment in the Middle East to the maximum. In addition such possibilities as the intervention of the German air force and the support of operations further afield had to be faced.

Preparations and Reorganisation

Most of the squadrons in Egypt had been at their war stations since September 1939, although some units were withdrawn temporarily during the winter for training. The Advanced Wing was in the Western Desert with a fighter, an army co-operation and two bomber squadrons. Three further bomber squadrons, stationed in the Delta, were prepared to use advanced landing grounds in the Western Desert. Most of the squadrons had remained at their war stations throughout the winter undergoing intensive training and taking part in exercises. The demand for more army co-operation aircraft, occasioned by the increased land forces in the area, was met by the reorganisation of No.6 squadron on a three flight basis armed with Lysanders instead of Gauntlets. General Wavell pressed for a portion of the bombers to be allocated to him. This was opposed both by the A.O.C.-in-C. and Air Ministry as an unnecessary and uneconomical dispersal of the small force which was available.

S.1791
19.4.40

S.43159

HQ ME ORB
Sept, 39-
May 40

RAF Helwan
O.R.B.

In the interval between the outbreak of hostilities with Germany and the Italian declaration of war, preparations were pushed forward in Egypt. Exercises were frequently held to train staffs for operations duties and these were attended by Egyptian anti-aircraft and A.R.P. representatives. The operations room which controlled the Cairo sectors was moved from HQ.RAF.ME. to the fighter station at Helwan. At Abu Sueir anti-submarine and convoy escort courses were carried out and co-operation with the Fleet and merchant shipping was practised. Refresher courses were held to bring rusty pilots up to standard on high speed monoplanes and conversion courses to introduce newly trained pilots to modern aircraft. Navigation courses were begun but the shortage of spares prevented flying experience. Within the scope of the conversation policy, crews were brought up to as high a pitch of training as possible by means of courses ranging from air firing to army co-operation.

HQ. ME.
O.R.B.

For the ground staffs there were administrative and drill courses, intelligence and A.R.P. courses, fire fighting and gas courses and even police courses. Comprehensive instructions varying from routeing and recognition to attacks on enemy submarines were circulated to all concerned. The Air Ministry and the Egyptian Civil Aviation Meteorological services combined to give a wider range over desert areas. Exercises were conducted to test the coastal defences, the blackout and A.R.P., and finally a full dress rehearsal on 7th to 13th May 1940 to try the air defences of Egypt. Air Chief Marshal Longmore took over command on the last day of the exercise.

A fortnight later he began a tour of the Western Desert taking with him Air Commodore Collishaw, A.O.C. No.202 Group, whose headquarters was then at Heliopolis. Leaving the green and populous Delta behind them, they set course across the barren solitude of the Western Desert. Their first port of call was Maaten Bagush where Collishaw had stationed the Advanced Wing (No.253 Wing) under Group Captain L.O. Brown through whom air support for the Mobile Division was arranged. Maaten Bagush was a simple camp under the lee of the sand dunes which separated it from the wide sweep of the Mediterranean. After a brief inspection, Sir Arthur Longmore flew on to Qasaba where 'C' Flight of No.208 Army Co-operation Squadron was stationed, although the main squadron headquarters was still at Heliopolis. Qasaba was also the war station of No.1 Royal Egyptian Air Force Squadron.

/Later

Matruh
Defence
Scheme
1940

Later in the day the A.O.C.-in-C. went on to Mersa Matruh, our main defensive position in the Western Desert and pivot of the Armoured Division. Seen from the air, Matruh appeared the quintessence of a Mediterranean village, its white buildings and silver sandhills bordering the blue sea. It was already ringed about with ditches and defences but as yet it was unscathed. Below the surface run a network of dugouts and offices where operations could be controlled during air raids. Not only was this the forward base of our mobile forces, but it also had a supply of water, port facilities and an aerodrome. Here A.C.M. Longmore visited No.202 Group's only fighter squadron, No.33, which co-operated with the Egyptian anti-aircraft battery and the British guns for the defence of the area. When the R.A.F. fighters engaged the enemy aircraft the guns were to cease fire and not re-open while our aircraft were in the vicinity.

O.R.B.

(See
Maintenance
Narrative)

At dawn the next day A.C.M. Longmore flew up to the frontier to look over the defences and our forward landing grounds, before flying back to breakfast at Fuka, where he met the officers of No.45 Blenheim squadron. The squadron had had a hard winter, for in November they had been flooded out by a desert rain storm. Undaunted, they constructed a new camp on a drier site where they achieved the distinction of throwing the first cocktail party in the desert. Some seventy officers from other units and headquarters had attended. Also at Fuka were the Advanced Repair Section, (1) Salvage section and No.31 (M.E.) Air Stores Park which maintained Air Commodore Collishaw's force.

Longmore
Memoirs

On the same day the A.O.C.-in-C. visited No.211 Blenheim squadron at Dhaha where despite some severe dust storms during the winter they had succeeded in digging themselves in. Sir Arthur Longmore had now seen all the squadrons which were stationed in the Western Desert, and he was impressed with the quality of the pilots he had met and also the technical efficiency of the ground crews who maintained the aircraft.

COS(40)
421 J.P.

On his return A.C.M. Longmore decided to concentrate the whole of No.202 Group in the desert. War with Italy at the beginning of June seemed certain. Throughout May the state of readiness in the Command had been steadily tightened. At the beginning of the month it was brought up to 48 hours. On 17th May all R.A.F. units were ordered to standby and readiness in daylight was intensified to four hours. On 29th all leave was cancelled. By the turn of the month the A.O.C.-in-C. had been warned that Britain now had to face the possibility of the collapse of France. But the strategy remained unchanged. Although defensive in principle, with the object of securing allied interests, our action in the Mediterranean would sever Italy's communications with the outer seas and East Africa. Immediately economic pressure would be imposed upon her. From the first the Chiefs of Staff placed great emphasis on local offensive operations, and urged the Commanders in the Middle East to take the initiative at the earliest moment.

To consolidate the air striking force A.C.M. Longmore issued orders
/for

- (1) The functions of the Advanced Repair Section were:-
1. Collect crashed aircraft.
 2. Routine inspections.
 3. Return of aircraft to R.S.U. or M.U.
 4. Minor repairs to airframes.
 5. Engine changes.
 6. Inspect and repair M.T.
 7. 180 hours inspections.
 8. Overhaul and maintenance of air screws.
 9. Blenheim and Gladiators maintenance.

App.B
O.R.B.
253 Wing

for Air Commodore Collishaw with his headquarters No.202 Group to move up to Maaten Bagush and combine with No.253 Wing. This eliminated one link in the chain of command and made Group Captain Brown available for whole time liaison with the Mobile Division.⁽¹⁾ At the same time, two of the Blenheim squadrons at Ismailia were moved to the Western Desert, No.55 Squadron to Fuka and No.113 Squadron to Maaten Bagush. No.208 was ordered to join its Flight at Qasaba. The remaining squadron, No.30, stayed in reserve for bombing or strategical reconnaissance at Ismailia under the direct control of Headquarters R.A.F. Middle East. Thereafter Air Commodore Collishaw was relieved of responsibility for the Delta stations and was able to devote himself to the control of the squadrons in the desert.

The opposing Forces - June 1940

COS(40)
387 JIC

Meanwhile Italy had in recent weeks been busily engaged in preparation for war. Her troops in Libya had been further increased, and by the end of May it was estimated that her air force would be ready for active operations. Italy apparently had decided upon war although the date was still uncertain. In Libya there were mounted some 215,000 troops. These were opposed by about 36,000 British troops,

Wavell's
Despatch

Information concerning the Italian forces in Libya was considerably hampered by H.B.M. Government's instructions that nothing whatever was to be done which might impair our relations with Italy. This not only prevented the establishment of an intelligence service in Italian territories, but also made it impossible to counter hostile Axis propaganda. Immediately before Italy's entry into the war the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief estimated that there were in Libya at least 200 Italian bombers and 200 fighters. These figures exceeded the Air Ministry intelligence estimate on 21st May 1940 when the total number of Italian aircraft in Libya was given as 341. The lowest available estimate was that made by D.D.W.O. at Air Ministry on 9th June, this put the existing strength in Libya as 248 aircraft. Their serviceability was considered to be low, approximately 60%. If the A.O.C.-in-C's figure is correct then the Italian Air Force in Libya had been nearly doubled since September 1939 when it was approximately its normal strength. (Appendix XII)

Longmore's
Despatch

S.61219

Air Ministry Intelligence gives the dispositions of the Italian squadrons in Libya on the 21st May as eight squadrons at Castel Benito, eight at Benghazi, and five at Benina. In addition there were the colonial squadrons; three at Mellaha, one at Sirte and two apiece at Benghazi and El Adem. There were also some 20 aircraft of various units administered by the Saharan battalion. The greatest concentration was therefore in the Benghazi area. This air force represented about one seventh of the whole Italian Air Force and could be rapidly augmented from the metropolitan air force.

On the eve of war the R.A.F. in Egypt (and available from Palestine) amounted to 63⁽²⁾ Gladiators and 1 Hurricane, 72⁽³⁾

/Blenheim

- (1) Under the new arrangement the Army Co-operation aircraft were controlled by the Corps Commander through the Group Captain. The squadron was connected to Corps H.Q. by telephone and had a small section of military A.I.L.O's. (IIJ6/49/6(i))
- (2) No.33, 112 and 80 squadrons at an I.E. of 21 aircraft: Longmore Despatch gives 40 Gladiators.
- (3) No.113, 45, 211, 55, 30 (in reserve) 11 sqnds(air echelon only - a/c distributed to 30, 55 and 112 sqdns).

80 Sqn ORB Blenheim bombers, 24 Bombays and Valentias, 24⁽¹⁾ Lysanders, and ten
 11.6.40 Sunderland flying boats.⁽²⁾ In the case of Gladiators, Blenheims
 Longmore's and Lysanders there was a reserve of approximately 100% but the poor
 Despatch prospect of reinforcement made conservation of resources essential.
 Longmore's The Gladiator biplane with its four .303 machine guns and speed of
 Memoirs 230 m.p.h. was an even match for the Italian CR42. The Italian S.71
 bomber on the other hand had a better endurance and bomb load than
 the Blenheim I. The Bombays were slow but could be used for long
 range night bombing. Lysanders were also slow and out of date for
 army co-operation. The Royal Air Force in Egypt was therefore about
 half the force opposing it in Libya and was in need of modern fighters
 such as Hurricanes and Spitfires and also long range bombers. On
 the credit side our pilots had impressed Air Chief Marshal Longmore
 on his first tour of the squadrons as being of superior quality. And
 despite their numerical superiority the Italian maintenance was known
 to be poor. It was the task of R.A.F. Middle East to destroy the
 superior numbers of the enemy without wearing itself out or
 sustaining heavy casualties. (Appendices IV, V & XIII).

Lack of Modern Fighter Aircraft

DO/AML/2
Pt.I 15a

DO/AML/3

DO/AML/2
Pt.I 8a

DO/AML/2
X640 5/6

ditto 14a

Although Sir Arthur Longmore was confident of the fighting qualities of his pilots, he was seriously perturbed by the lack of modern fighters. As the situation deteriorated alarmist reports from all sources continued to be received concerning Italy's intentions - that she was about to attack the next day, or even in a matter of hours. A considerable number of aircraft had recently been moved up between Benghazi and the Egyptian frontiers. However, A.C.M. Longmore was aware that the Italian air forces were not in a high state of preparedness. With the imminent prospect of war the Egyptians were slithering badly and were flirting with the idea of declaring their neutrality. They naturally resented the Yugoslavs and the Turks having Hurricanes and the Greeks long nosed Blenheims. After hearing on the radio of the wonderful exploits of Hurricanes and Spitfires in the west, they regarded their own country as inadequately defended with Gladiators alone. Britain had, in fact, given Turkey some of her best equipment at the expense of the air forces in Middle East. This state of affairs prompted the Egyptians to propose that Cairo should be declared an open town which would not be defended and from which military organisations should be removed. Both Sir Arthur Longmore and General Wavell agreed that their Headquarters could not be removed from Cairo at the present. In Air Chief Marshal Longmore's opinion Royal Air Force strength in Egypt would have a more steadying effect on Greeks and Turks than 'hush money' in the shape of aircraft which we needed badly. He, therefore, joined with the Ambassador in appealing to Whitehall for Hurricanes and Blenheims IV to be flown out from the United Kingdom via Malta while it was still possible. The Chief of Air Staff had previously given orders for fifty Hurricanes to be tropicalized, but in view of the intense fighting in the West they were not to be released. He explained that we were fighting for our lives on the Western Front and soon would be in the United Kingdom. On the 5th June, however, the A.O.C.-in-C. was relieved to hear that six Hurricanes would be flown out during the next few days; but he was warned that this should not be taken as an indication that re-equipment was imminent, because Middle East was unlikely to receive many replacement aircraft until the supply position at home was more favourable, and there was no chance of an early supply of suitable aircraft from the U.S.A.

/Although

- (1) Given in COS(40)351 as 21 Lysanders, i.e. 12 of 208 sqdn
 9 of 6 sqdn.
 (2) Including 228 Squadron which arrived in M.E. 11.5.40.

15a Although grateful for this crumb from the high table, A.C.M. Longmore was still worried about shortages of personnel and spares. Of the latter he wrote to the Director of Operations (Overseas) on 7th June:-

"Perhaps your plans department is not in sufficiently close touch with the appalling spare parts situation which exists at the present moment. I am already resigned to the fact that my chances of getting any replacement aircraft for the present are very small and this has influenced me in the plans I have made in the event of war with Italy. I was very pleased to get Air Ministry signal X640 5/6 with regard to the six Hurricanes being flown out. I feel sure they will be a valuable contribution."

Targets

HQ. ME
O.R.B.

In satisfaction of the Chiefs of Staffs instruction that everything should be done to gain the initiative at the first possible moment, Sir Arthur Longmore issued an operational order to the A.O.C. 202 Group empowering him to attack certain objectives, without referring back to Cairo, immediately war was declared. The first objective in priority was El Adem, the aircraft, the petrol and ammunition dumps and the aerodrome; next the fort and aircraft on the aerodrome at Amseat, aircraft on the landings grounds at Tobruk, Derna (El Fatayah), Bardia (Menastir) Sidi azziz and Schegga, then the defence posts along the frontier, particularly Schegga, where troops might be concentrated, and lastly any military objective in the Bardia area except those in the main Wadi running down to the harbour. Oil storage and establishments at Tobruk, establishments at Derna or the Italian Fleet were not to be attacked without first referring to HQ. RAF. ME. The order stressed the importance of attacks taking place at the earliest possible moment so that by surprise the best results might be achieved. The A.O.C. was authorised to initiate operations without waiting for further instructions if he intercepted an official broadcast announcing war with Italy, or in the event of a definitely hostile act by Italian forces either taking place or being officially reported.

The Eve of Hostilities

202 Gp.
O.R.B.

Air Commodore Collishaw's move into the field on 10th June was only just in time. No sooner had he drawn up his office lorries and pitched his tents at Maaten Bagush than it was rumoured that Italy had declared war. Air Commodore Collishaw paraded all ranks and warned them of the imminence of hostilities. Then he ordered all aircraft to be made ready for immediate operations. The weather promised well, for it had been a hot day with a clear sky.

Immediately on the outbreak of war it was of first importance to all three services to gain as rapidly as possible an insight into the enemy's intentions. For this purpose Air Commodore Collishaw intended to send out aircraft to report on, and record photographically the strength, composition and disposition of the enemy's land, sea and air forces in the area immediately to the west of the coastal end of the Egyptian-Libyan frontier. To each area a number had been given so that the aircraft could be ordered to their sorties with the minimum of briefing. The aircraft were to report any enemy land and sea movements, or concentrations in the areas. All reconnaissance aircraft were ordered to carry a full load of 250 lb bombs so that they would have immediate means of attacking important targets which were observed during reconnaissance. However, their primary role was reconnaissance with special emphasis on operational airfields. To reproduce the photographs taken on reconnaissance they had to be sent to No.45 Squadron at Fuka where they could be processed in their photographic lorry.

/All

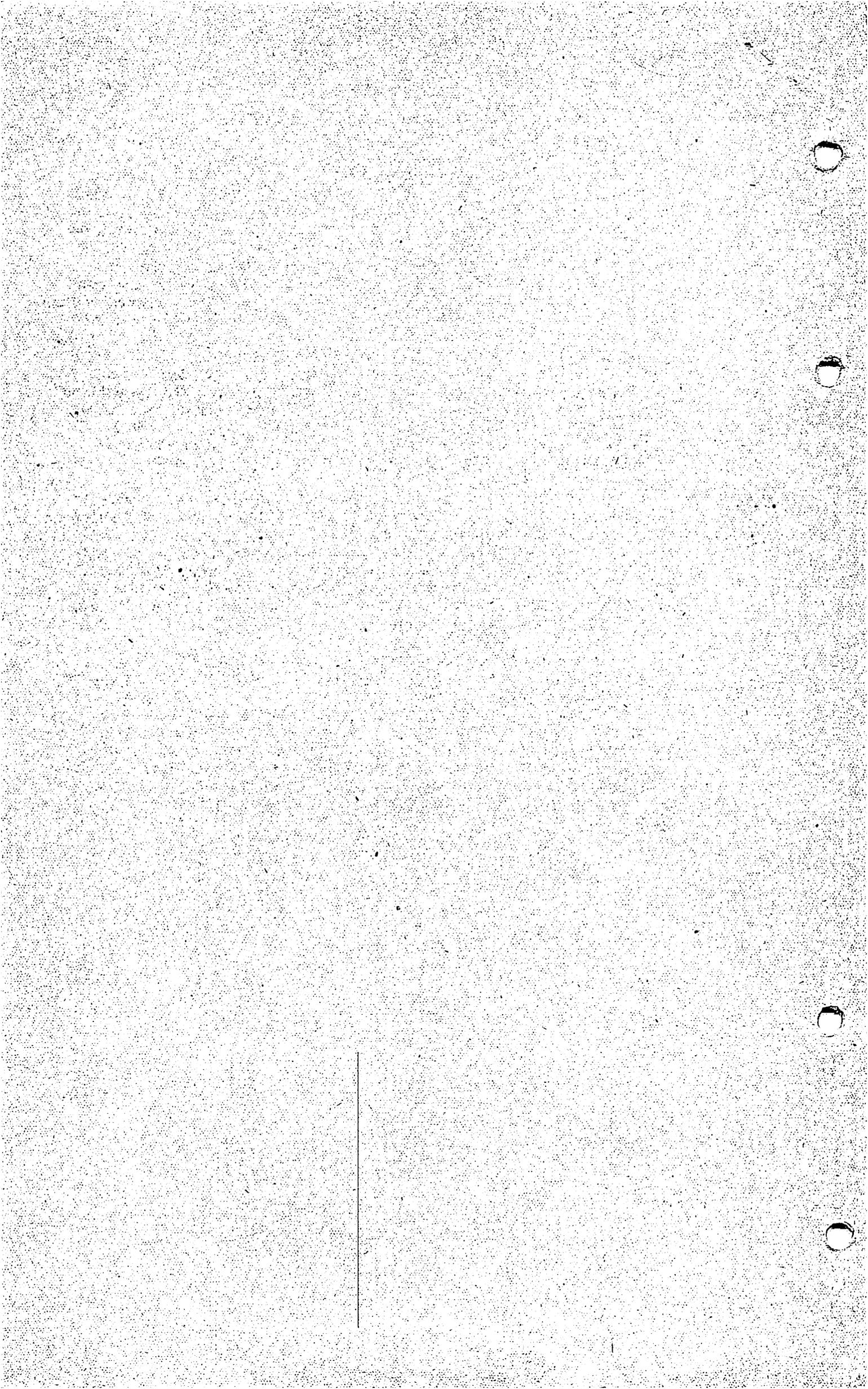
All preparations had been made; targets had been fixed, reconnaissance routes plotted and operational orders issued. It but remained to put them into effect. All but one of Air Commodore Collishaw's squadrons were at the alert on their desert landing grounds in the vicinity. Behind him lay the fighter organisation of No.252 Wing, with whom he would have to co-operate to shoot down Italian bombers attacking targets in the Delta. The Commander of the Wing had Blenheims of No.30 Squadron standing by to shadow the raiders back to their air bases. The information would then be passed to No.202 Group, so that they could intercept or attack them as soon as possible after landing. In his underground defence centre in the quarries near Alexandria, the Commander of the Wing awaited the first Italian raiders to be plotted on his operations room table. In the same room the Representative of the Ministry of the Interior waited to sound the first air raid warning, the Commander of the Egyptian A.A. Brigade watched for his first target. The operations officers were ready to pass on the information to Helwan and Cairo. In Alexandria itself, No.201 Group awaited anxiously the arrival of their second flying boat squadron and cast envious glances at the Italian yacht club, which they proposed should be their war-time headquarters.

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

To counter the threat of the enemy mining Alexandria harbour and the Suez Canal, No.1 G.R. Unit had been despatched from Manston in England to Ismailia where it arrived at the end of May. By dint of working day and night the D.W.I. aircraft were modified to suit local conditions. On the eve of the outbreak of war, 10th June, three aircraft were ready and carried out their first operation of sweeping in formation the harbour at Alexandria and the Great Pass. (See Naval Co-operation narrative).

O.R.B.
33 Sqn.

As the sultry June night wore on, Air Commodore Collishaw prepared to put his plans into operation. Shortly before midnight he received an order from A.C.M.Longmore "to come to immediate readiness for war with Italy but await (R) await further instructions before initiating hostile act". He did not have to wait long, for nine minutes after midnight Longmore gave the word: "A state of war with Italy exists. Carry out reconnaissance as arranged. Bombing formation as available should accompany reconnaissance in Northern area favourable targets observed especially concentrations of aircraft".



PART II

THE ITALIAN INVASION OF EGYPT

THE OPENING PHASE

The Beginning of the Air Offensive

Air Commodore Collishaw took the first opportunity to wage a quick offensive against the Italian Air Forces in Libya. By striking immediately against their air bases and ports of supply, he hoped to gain the initiative and so delay the Italian advance on Egypt. For political reasons also, it was necessary to make a demonstration of force in order to bolster up the morale of the Egyptians.

OC/AAL/L 26A

45 Squadron
O.R.B.

202 Group
O.R.B.

33 Squadron
O.R.B.
S.58163/22

During the night of the 10th June, Air Commodore Collishaw issued orders for No. 45 Blenheim Squadron to attack at dawn, the Italian airfield at El Adem. The series of reconnaissance operations to gain early information of the enemy dispositions were carried out at first light by No. 211 Squadron. In case the enemy had similar intentions for their bombers, all No. 202 Group units were warned that heavy bombing attacks could be expected about 8 o'clock on the following day and that all aircraft and motor transport should be widely dispersed. Where practicable aircraft were ordered to satellite aerodromes and dummy aircraft were erected to draw the attacks. In the early morning, Gladiators of No. 35 Squadron carried out patrols between Matruh and Dhaba but the Italian raids did not materialise, since Signor Mussolini apparently neglected to inform his advanced troops that he had declared war on Great Britain and France. Consequently the eight aircraft of No. 45 Squadron making a low level attack by flights achieved complete surprise in the early hours of the morning. The aircraft dropped small H.E. and incendiary bombs and also fired their guns. No opposition was met from enemy fighters but the ground defences came into action. As the flights turned away to rejoin out to sea, one Blenheim from the last attack was seen to crash into the water off Tobruk with flames coming from beneath the fuselage. On the return journey another Blenheim was forced to put down at Sidi Barrani where it burst into flames on landing. Both these aircraft were lost with their crews. A third pilot also made a forced landing west of Sidi Barrani as a result of engine failure after leaving the target, but the aircraft was repairable and none of the crew were injured. The experience of this first raid on the Western Desert showed that much caution would have to be exercised if our slender resources were not to be depleted by constant casualties.

208 Squadron
O.R.B.

208 Squadron
O.R.B.

While this raid was in progress a Lysander of No. 208 Army Co-operation Squadron from Qasaba flew a dawn tactical reconnaissance sortie from Sollum to Fort Maddalena for the 7th Armoured Division. The weather was good but no enemy movements were observed and the aircraft encountered no opposition. The Division moved forward during the day and B flight⁽¹⁾ of No. 208 Squadron was moved up to Sidi Barrani advanced landing ground to operate under them.

Counter Air Force Operations

The attack on El Adem aerodrome was repeated during the
/afternoon

(1) 4 aircraft, 5 pilots and 32 airmen with an A.I.L.O.

55 Squadron
O.R.B.

afternoon by nine Blenheims of No.55 Squadron and nine of No.113 Squadron, when both Squadrons were in the process of moving up from Ismailia to Fuka. The aircraft left the Delta in the early morning, landed at Fuka to refuel and bomb up before setting out for their target. The approach was made from the sea, just east of Tobruk where the formation broke up and carried out the attack by flights. Several hits were observed on many aircraft on the ground and fires were started among the hangars, but accurate assessment of damage was hindered by the dust raised from the bomb bursts. B flight made a second run over the target and two aircraft were hit by fairly accurate A.A. fire before they were chased out to sea by twelve Fiats CR.32 which were unable to come within firing range. The raid cost two aircraft damaged and the seizure of one engine.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

216 Squadron
O.R.B.

With the intention of continuing the offensive during the night of the 11/12th, the A.O.C.-in-C., had moved ten Bombays, each with 8 x 250 lb. bombs, from their base at Heliopolis to Dhaba in the Western Desert where they were to operate against Tobruk under the orders of the A.O.C. 202 Group. This operation, which was to prepare the way for a fleet bombardment was, however, cancelled as it was considered essential to avoid the risk of bombing non-military targets.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

Enemy reaction in the air was ineffective throughout the day in the Western Desert, but a succession of hostile air raids against Malta began at 0450.

Naval Support

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
Op. Order No.4

On the following day, 12th June, the R.A.F. gave full support to a naval sweep directed against Tobruk at dawn. The role of the aircraft was to drive out patrols and shipping from the harbour by air action or hit them in the harbour. Air attacks on Tobruk aerodrome were also ordered to keep down enemy air action against our own fleet. It was hoped that this naval and air bombardment would serve to stiffen the Egyptians in making up their mind to break off diplomatic relations with the enemy, to dismiss the Italian Ambassador, and to intern a number of Italian suspects.

DO/AML/2
Pt.1 26A

45 Squadron
O.R.B.
211 Squadron
O.R.B.

A force of twenty four Blenheims from Nos.45, 113 and 211 Squadrons was despatched to be over Tobruk at dawn. Unfortunately several mishaps depleted their numbers. Weather conditions were bad, due to fog and low cloud. As a result the six aircraft from No. 45 Squadron were unable to locate the target and returned to Fuka. Of the nine Blenheims from No.211 Squadron two crashed on take off and one collided with a Bombay of No.216 Squadron. The remaining six aircraft continued to the target. A number of enemy fighters, Fiats CR42, attempted to engage our aircraft but fell back as the Blenheims proved too fast for them. C flight however, claimed to have shot down two of them. During the raid A.A. fire was efficient and ships in the harbour co-operated. On the return journey another mishap occurred when the airscrew of one Blenheim flew off. Fortunately the pilot was able to make a safe landing at Fuka.

55 Squadron
O.R.B.

No.55 Squadron fared even worse, five aircraft were detailed for the raid, but the engine of one could not be started and the observer of another was struck by the propellor. Finally three aircraft took off but one developed engine trouble over Matruh and had to turn back. When the two surviving aircraft were in sight of their objective and approaching from the sea they encountered about fifty fighters of the CR.32 type. Since many of the enemy fighters were in a menacing position above them, the Blenheims decided to return to base. The

/enemy

202 Group
O.R.B.

enemy did not attack and were satisfied to see our bombers turn back. The nine aircraft of No. 113 Squadron took off at 0425 to bomb Tobruk and, in the absence of any information to the contrary, it must be assumed they hit the target. Considering the very poor serviceability of the aircraft detailed for this raid, the assessment of the results was encouraging. A large ship believed to be the old cruiser San Giorgio was set on fire and later shown on photographs to be beached near the oil tankers. The naval jetty was also fired.

202 Group
O.R.B.

Army Support

33 Squadron
O.R.B.

On land the Army made a thrust across the frontier assisted by long distance reconnaissance by Blenheims of No. 113 Squadron and by tactical reconnaissance by No. 208 Squadron's Lysanders one of which attacked Fort Cpuzzo with 8 x 20 lbs. Despite his efforts to sting the enemy into activity the pilot was still only able to report "no movement". Apart from this attack the air forces were ordered to abstain from bombing troops in the Sidi-Amseat area where our Army was operating. During the day No. 33 Squadron carried out defensive patrols forward and seawards of Mersa Matruh. Although they had nothing to report in the way of enemy aircraft they were able to pass on the welcome news that three precious Hurricanes escorted by a Hudson had arrived from the United Kingdom.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

Having hit the enemy twice in full strength, the A.O.C. decided to relax bombing operations for the next day, 13th June. Reconnaissance sorties were carried out to build up a picture of the enemy's dispositions and particularly of the frontier posts which the Army intended to attack on the following day. During the respite Squadrons took the opportunity to disperse aircraft as much as possible. 'B' flight of No. 208 Squadron moved forward again for two days to Buq Buq to be near Divisional Headquarters and a flight of six aircraft from No. 33 Squadron with a small ground party was moved up to Sidi Barrani in order to be within range for escorting bombers on the next day.

33 Squadron
O.R.B.

202 Group
Ops. Order
No. 18

From the information collected it appeared that the Italian frontier fort, Ridotta Capuzzo was held only by a weak force. The Army Commander, therefore, decided to attack in the forenoon of 14th June. Before the Army reached the fort, the Air Force planned to assist by putting one bomber squadron on to Ridotta Capuzzo which was an old Turkish fort of red brick and easily destructable. At the same time a second bomber squadron was to attack the other posts by flights. Accordingly eight⁽¹⁾ aircraft of No. 211 Squadron bombed Fort Capuzzo in the early morning. As the fort was reported to be weakly held the aircraft made low flying attacks with delay⁽²⁾ action 250 pound bombs. Unfortunately some of the delay fuses failed and the bombs exploded instantaneously damaging most of the aircraft. The fort, which offered little opposition, was extensively damaged and a dump hit. The Army took the post shortly afterwards together with eight officers and two hundred other ranks. To protect the bombers and our troops, No. 33 Squadron carried out offensive sweeps over the frontier as far as Bardia. There were a number of inconclusive encounters over Sollum, but over Capuzzo the Gladiators succeeded in shooting down one CR.32 and one Caproni 133, and carried out a successful low flying attack on Ghibli aircraft at Sidi Azeiz.

211 Squadron
O.R.B.

W.O. Summary
of Opera-
tions.

/In

(1) One aircraft of the original nine turned back, due to engine failure.

(2) 11 seconds.

In accordance with the plan, No.45 Squadron sent two aircraft to attack Sidi Azeiz and three to Fort Maddalena where the target was hit, but the fort was not destroyed. A second attack was made about noon and was followed up by British Armoured fighting vehicles which later occupied the fort. No.45 Squadron also carried out one sortie against Giarabub, but the aircraft failed to return. Later reconnaissance discovered a burnt out machine near the target.

Enemy reaction to our activities was now increasing slightly. In retaliation, our frontier posts at Shegga, Weshka and Sollum which had already been evacuated, were bombed but casualties were negligible. It was becoming clear that our bombers were able to outpace enemy fighters. On the other hand enemy bombers enjoyed something of the same advantage. Not only were the Gladiators slow but the warning organisation rarely gave them sufficient time to scramble. During dangerous periods, such as dawn and dusk over Matruh or during Army movement, patrols had to be carried out.

Tobruk

Reconnaissance showed that Tobruk harbour was congested with shipping which offered a favourable target to the Air Force. In addition there were along the waterfront large naval oil reserves, in the town a Corps, an Army and an Air headquarters and some thirty four aircraft on the two landing grounds⁽¹⁾ near the town. In order to reach these targets one Bombay of No.216 Squadron was placed nightly under the control of A.O.C., 202 Group for the week of the moon period. For the actual operations the aircraft was flown up to an advanced landing ground at Matruh where it arrived at dusk, returning to Heliopolis at dawn after the operation; thus reducing the chance of damage by air attack at Matruh during daylight. During the first raid on the night of 14/15th the aircraft arrived over the target in moonlight, but visibility was slightly obscured by a haze. The attacks were made with eight 250 lb. bombs from a height of 10,000 feet. Direct hits on small craft and one large warship were confirmed by photographs, but no results were observed on the oil tanks. The enemy were evidently surprised by these night attacks; there was no A.A. nor fighter opposition. The attack was repeated on the following night by a single aircraft, but this time the enemy were prepared. Heavy and accurate A.A. fire and 'flaming onions'⁽²⁾ were encountered, but a dense cloud of smoke rising from the oil tanks indicated that the raid was a success.

The night operation was followed up at dawn on 16th by No.113 and No.55 Squadrons in company. Again maintenance difficulties depleted the force of eighteen aircraft when three 55 Squadron machines failed to reach the targets which were the Tobruk airfields at El Gubbi and El Adem. The raid provoked considerable fighter opposition and although small bombs fell among aircraft it was estimated that no great damage was done. To provide protective patrols for the bombers six aircraft of No.33 Squadron were flown up to Sidi Barrani but were forced to return as the airfield was covered in mist. During the flight one Gladiator dived into the sea and was lost. No.113 Squadron continued the attacks in the evening with three aircraft

/operating

- (1) One L.G. 2 miles S. of town: one on the edge of the town known as the Town L.G.
- (2) These are the bursts of a stream of light A.A. shells which are fitted with a percussion and a self destroying fuze.

202 Group
O.R.B.

operating singly against dispersed aircraft and hangars at El Adem. At the same time one Bombay again attacked the oil tanks. Enemy fighters were seen but they did not attack. The town was protected by approximately twenty searchlights. When these failed to hold the aircraft they dimmed and the defence relied on the A.A. batteries concentrated near the town and the guns of the ships in and off the harbour. Our aircraft attempted to surprise the defences by approaching high over the sea and gliding over the target without engines.

Review of the Period

So far the quick air offensive of the Air Force had prospered. A.C.M. Longmore records that "it obviously took the Italians by surprise and, in the case of aerodromes, before they had effected adequate dispersal of aircraft and supplies". Support had been given to the Naval sweep off Tobruk and to the Army attacks on the frontier posts. A series of raids against the port and airfields of Tobruk had been carried out and although little damage was confirmed by photographs, the attacks served to put the enemy on the defensive in his back areas. The mass raids against Egypt had not materialised and a measure of this immunity can be attributed to the aggressiveness displayed by the R.A.F. The enemy's air offensive had so far been confined to our forward positions at Sollum, the airfield at Sidi Baranni and Matruh which had been bombed by formations of up to a dozen bombers. On the other hand one offensive which had received the full support of the Egyptian press had undoubtedly stiffened the local government and populace.

Fighter Interception

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
App. 63

202 Group
O.R.B.

DO AML/2
Pt.1 26A

Boughton
"They flew
through Sand"

2020 Group
O.R.B. "Memorandum on the Tactical Employment of Hurricane aircraft"

The difficult problem was to intercept enemy raiders. Although much attention had been paid to the warning arrangements in the Delta, the air raid warning system in the forward areas, particularly Matruh, had been improved little since November 1939. The introduction of an efficient mobile observer system was prevented by a lack of Army and Air Force personnel. For the present No.202 Group had to rely on an improvised system using the Army advanced units for providing warnings. The A.O.C., admitted that fighter contact with enemy bombers was 'largely one of chance'. Air Commodore Collishaw was already doubtful whether Gladiators could deal with the S.79 and asked for a flight of Hurricanes. Although A.C.M. Longmore recognised the need, he was unable to supply a whole flight when his total assets in this particular were only four Hurricanes. On the other hand twelve Blenheims of No.30 Squadron were already converted to fighters, so a flight of two Blenheim fighters from No.30 Squadron and the Hurricane from No.80 Squadron was formed and attached on 17th June to No.33 Squadron now at the newly constructed airfield at Maaten Gerawla. This Hurricane⁽¹⁾ was popularly known as Collishaw's battleship which by operating frequently from different landing grounds tried to bluff the enemy into thinking we had many of this type. The remaining three Hurricanes were retained for the defence of Alexandria and the Delta.

In order to make the most of his own Hurricane which was attached to No. 33 Squadron, Air Commodore Collishaw ordered that it should be flown only by special pilots and that as far as possible it should operate with the fighter Blenheims. In a defensive role the Hurricane and Blenheims, on receiving a warning, were to climb to 15,000 feet N.N.W. of Matruh and thirty five miles out to sea. On this patrol line they should intercept

/enemy

(1) Houghton says this first Hurricane arrived in the W.D. at the end of August 1940. This error is repeated by Guedalla.

enemy aircraft flying east. For special operations the Hurricane and Blenheims could use an advanced landing ground at Bug Bug and accompany our bombers on raids on enemy airfields with the object of inflicting casualties on enemy fighters. As a general policy the Hurricane pilots were urged to adopt aggressive tactics to frighten the enemy. "Success will adversely affect Italian morale as he will be fearful that Hurricane fighters may attack at any moment" so ran the instruction.

The five-front gun Blenheims, although capable of destroying bombers, and owing to their long range of shadowing them to their bases, were not suitable for engaging highly manoeuvrable fighters. For this reason they had to maintain considerable height on patrol and were closely supported by Gladiators. The Hurricanes and Blenheims achieved their first successes on the morning of the 19th June. Four Gladiators on patrol with a Hurricane over the Sollum area encountered a formation of twelve Fiat C.R.42. In the combat which ensued, one enemy fighter was shot down into the sea and another on land while a third was forced down at Sollum and captured. Later in the morning a similar patrol with fighter Blenheims engaged a formation near Bug Bug. The Hurricane shot down one C.R.42, and the fighter Blenheims two, while two more aircraft were damaged and probably failed to reach home. The combats were most successful but it was also apparent that the Hurricane had to exercise caution with superior numbers of C.R.42s which could turn very quickly. The A.O.C.-in-C., congratulated the Group "on splendid work of fighters this morning. Results are most encouraging".

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
App. 69

The Reinforcement Prospect

DO AML/
26A

On the matter of reinforcement there was prospect of slight improvement⁽¹⁾. Writing to the Deputy Chief of Air Staff on 16th June, A.C.M. Longmore referred to the many signals which had passed concerning Hurricanes. "The situation now is that three have arrived here and have been fitted with their guns and are ready. We thus have four Hurricane fighters. Two more and a Hudson are waiting at Tunis. The stock of spares which had reached Gibraltar in H.M.S. Delhi was dumped ashore there and now appears to have gone for a ride in a merchant ship round the Cape, goodness knows when we shall get them. You have just signalled news of twelve more Hurricanes and twelve Mark IV Blenheims and they will be very welcome. If their spares can be sent through the Mediterranean by fast destroyer, it will be better still."

C.O.S. (40)
465

C.O.S. (40)
512 J.P.

C.O.S. (40)
465

C.O.S. (70)
512 J.P.

The situation at home was too critical for a definite plan of reinforcement of the Middle East to be carried out. France was collapsing and meanwhile Britain was doing her best to secure as much French equipment and as many overseas bases as possible. Although faced with the invasion of Britain, the Empire had taken the decision to fight on single-handed and to defend her position in the Middle East, which formed an important sector in the economic blockade of Europe. Our ability to maintain our position in the Middle East was to a great extent dependent on reinforcements reaching Egypt. These reinforcements had to come mainly round the Cape and through the Red Sea as it was already recognised that the Western Mediterranean was closed. Air reinforcements could arrive in small numbers through Malta if we held the island and by the Takoradi route which was being developed urgently. If the Red Sea was closed, it was unlikely that the alternative land route via Basra would be adequate. Meanwhile the policy was to husband resources in U.K. against the trial of strength in the air which was impending, and to release equipment for Egypt whenever possible. Such equipment was

/intended

(1) For details on reinforcements see Appendix XXIV

intended initially to re-equip squadrons with more modern aircraft and to replace wastage, rather than to increase the first line strength.

Against our handful of aircraft the opposition in Libya was estimated by the Chiefs of Staff as between three and four hundred bombers of the Italian Air Force whose morale was gauged as indifferent and whose maintenance was poor. This figure was a marked increase⁽¹⁾ on Sir Arthur Longmore's estimate that there were 200 Italian bombers in Libya on the outbreak of war. From these considerations two essentials were clear, first that the Red Sea was vital to the survival of the Middle East forces; and secondly that the existing forces would have to be used with the greatest economy. To meet the case A.C.M. Longmore decided to withdraw from the Desert one of the Blenheim squadrons, No. 45, to reinforce the Sudan, and to curtail air operations in the Western Desert as much as possible. In explaining the situation to Air Commodore Collishaw, Air Commodore Drummond pointed out that we might have to face both the German and Italian land and air forces in Libya. The loss of control of the Western Mediterranean ruled out the possibility of preventing the arrival of Germans in Africa. Moreover he added "it is clear that it would be a long while before we get any substantial wastage replacements for our forces which we shall ultimately need most desperately to insure our holding this country (Egypt). I therefore feel that we must consider very carefully every air operation we embark upon." Support of Army and Navy operations in future had to be restricted to those of strategic importance as we could not afford to lose even a few aircraft on operations which only had a tactical significance.

DO AML/2
Pt. 1 26A

MS/107
20.6.40.

The Lull

Air operations from 17th to 21st June consisted mainly of night attacks of single aircraft of Nos. 216 and 113 Squadrons against the airfields of El Adem and El Guibbi, on each of which approximately a hundred aircraft had been observed. The total number of effective sorties on these raids only amounted to ten. A typical instance was on the night of 19th/20th when No. 216 Squadron sent one Bombay to El Guibbi and one to El Adem. They were guided to their targets by a Blenheim of No. 113 Squadron which dropped one stick of bombs on each target to illuminate and render the defences conspicuous.

202 Group
O.R.B. Op.
Order No. 18

S. 58163/22

Regular reconnaissance missions were carried out every day by Lysanders which collected tactical information and by Blenheims of No. 113 on strategic reconnaissance which was passed back both to the A.O.C.-in-C., and the C.-in-C., Mediterranean. For tactical reconnaissance a detached flight of Lysanders was kept forward at Sidi Barrani. In order to protect these aircraft and also to provide a fighter screen to prevent the enemy interfering with our advanced patrols, a flight of No. 33 Squadron also operated from Sidi Barrani. These flights were frequently replaced by others from the same squadrons.

Enemy Air Activity

On 19th June our forces withdrew temporarily to positions on our side of the wire. The enemy made a determined attempt between 15th and 19th to force us to abandon the advanced

/airfields

(1) M.E. W.I.S. for the first fortnight of the war gives no information concerning the arrival of new units in Libya. Units concentrated towards the Egyptian frontier.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

S.20090

airfields at Sidi Barrani by sustained air raids. After a prelude of threatening leaflets, the effort was then switched against Matruh as the enemy had evidently obtained intelligence of our ammunition and petrol dumps there. After they had been straddled several times with 500 lb. bombs it was decided to remove the dumps. The enemy intelligence service failed to appreciate this and the position was still bombed. Towards the end of the month the attacks⁽¹⁾ on the airfields at Sidi Barrani and Matruh were intensified in a renewed attempt to render our forward landing grounds unserviceable. The raid on R.A.F. Station Mersa Matruh on 28th June was the first in strength. The attacks were made between 0900 and 1000 hours by two Vic formations of six and five aircraft respectively bombing in close succession from about 10,000 feet. A glide approach was made so that personnel on the ground were given little or no warning. A pattern of bomb craters twenty to thirty yards apart was put down on the southern half of the aerodrome rendering it temporarily unserviceable. The railway siding, dumps and the Lido Hotel were also hit. It took twenty labourers with two lorries working a day to fill in the fifty odd craters on the aerodrome. The enemy also employed jam-tin⁽²⁾ bombs against M.T. and troops in the forward area.

80 Squadron
O.R.B.

112 Squadron
O.R.B.

211 Squadron
O.R.B.

During the night of 22nd June, Alexandria received its first air raid. Italian bombers came in from the west in a clear moon-light sky to bomb the British Fleet in the harbour. The duty battle flight of No.112 Squadron and two aircraft of No.80 Squadron took off to intercept. They received much attention from our own A.A. guns and searchlights due to the absence of adequate means of recognition. No interceptions were made and the enemy bombers dropped seventeen bombs near the harbour in two raids. Bombs were also aimed at the A.M.E. Station at Daba on the return journey. This station had caused some excitement on the 18th June by detecting a submarine off the coast. A Blenheim of No.211 Squadron attacked the position twice and an oil patch was seen. The submarine was later observed on the bottom, where it was thought to be lying damaged, but there was no confirmation of its sinking.

Naval Bombardment of Bardia

MS/107

No.55 Squad-
ron

The lull in R.A.F. operations was broken on 21st June by a series of operations to assist the naval bombardment of Bardia. At first the S.A.S.O. at Middle East was reluctant to co-operate because he doubted the value of the operation. Finally it was decided to provide a flight from No.33 Squadron to protect the ships and the naval spotter aircraft and to bomb Tobruk harbour and airfield to prevent interference by enemy forces. As a preliminary No.113 Squadron made a photographic mosaic of Tobruk harbour and No.201 Group carried out a dawn reconnaissance during which one Sunderland was lost. Nine aircraft of No.55 Squadron were detailed to attack warships in the harbour. To counteract engine failures each flight had a reserve aircraft standing by to take off. A and B flights reached the objective without mishap but only one of "C" flight aircraft stayed the course. The target was clearly seen and after a good run up all bombs were dropped. Immediately a heavy barrage opened up and two enemy fighters chased "B" flight out to sea without its being able to make an attack. The remaining four aircraft, which bombed some ten minutes later, observed a large ship on fire at the entrance of the harbour. On the return journey two CR.42s

/attacked

M.E. W.I.S.
No.3

- (1) The majority of the attacks were carried out by formations of 3 or 6 aircraft from medium or high level.
- (2) These are 4" round and 8" long with central detonator. The case is light thin tin with shrapnell in the H.E.

211 Squadron
O.R.B.

attacked the Blenheims which met them with the concentrated fire of the formation. Both the enemy fighters were damaged and probably unable to return home. Meanwhile No.211 Squadron attacked Tobruk aerodrome with one aircraft and El Adem with four. At daybreak the bombardment of enemy positions and dumps at Bardia was carried out by the cruisers Orion, Neptune, Sydney and the French battleship Lorraine under fighter protection. At the same time fighters from Sidi Barrani carried out offensive patrols between the frontier and Bardia.

Offensive Operations

202 Group
O.R.B.

On the same morning (21st June) eleven Blenheims of No.113 Squadron attacked, at the urgent request of the G.O.C., Western Desert Force, a large concentration of troops of the Libya Division at Bir el Gobi, which was being developed as a fortified position and forward supply point. Bombing in the area was then suspended while our troops advanced. Sidi Azeiz was occupied, the airfield cratered and a dummy aircraft captured. It was suspected that dummies were also being used at El Adem and El Gobi. This was later corroborated by an Italian prisoner. Reconnaissance aircraft continued to watch the concentration which by the 24th June consisted of approximately 10,000 troops, partly mechanised. On that date nine Blenheims of No.55 Squadron were ordered to attack the targets by flights. The eight machines which reached the objective achieved complete surprise; no fighters or A.A. fire was encountered and the majority of their bombs were seen to fall in the target area. The enemy concentration in the north continued, however, and on 28th June, the Italians recaptured Sidi Azeiz and Fort Capuzzo.

On 24th June a captured Italian prisoner started a rumour that the enemy intended to land a brigade between Sollum and Matruh. A careful watch was kept on Derna but the raid did not materialize. On the 26th, however, Italian cruisers shelled the Sollum ridge and aircraft dropped a number of 250 lb. bombs in an unsuccessful attempt to destroy the escarpment road.

No.211 and
No.55 Squad-
rons' O.R.Bs.

Our remaining air effort for the month was directed towards continuing the offensive against the Tobruk airfields. There was an attack on El Adem by a single aircraft on the night 22/23rd June when the pilot took advantage of being 'homed' onto the target as a supposedly friendly aircraft. On the 28th there were indications that the aircraft from El Adem had been moved to El Gubbi, 4 miles S.E. of Tobruk; so Nos. 55 and 211 Squadrons were ordered to attack the latter at dusk. Approximately a hundred aircraft including transports were seen on the ground and were attacked by our twelve aircraft. Again the raid was a complete surprise but very heavy A.A. fire soon opened up from the ships in harbour. Two other aircraft attacked the town landing ground at Tobruk. In both raids aircraft and petrol stores were damaged. This was confirmed by photographs.

M.E.W.1.S.
No.3
202 Group
O.R.B.

The enemy was given no chance to disperse his aircraft after this raid, for nine Blenheims (No.113 Squadron) attacked them again soon after daybreak, when direct hits with H.E. and incendiary bombs were observed. The enemy however reacted promptly with a heavy barrage, and C.R.42 came up in force. An extended air battle ensued in which one C.R.42 was shot down into the sea and a second was confirmed destroyed. Two Blenheims were shot down, and one damaged. A captured Italian prisoner stated that the enemy had been forced to abandon the aerodrome at Tobruk which was later used as an M.T. park. Another prisoner reported that according to Rome Radio, Marshal Balbo was killed during this raid, when his aircraft was hit and set on fire just after

202 Group
O.R.B.

/landing,

landing, but it was later reported that Tobruk guns, made a little nervous perhaps by the recent visits of the R.A.F., had shot down the Marshal and this was later confirmed in a captured Italian diary. He was succeeded by Marshal Graziani.

R.A.F. Fighter Successes

112 Squadron
O.R.B.
H.Q. M.E.
Table of Ops.
M.E. W.I.S. No.3
22 Squadron
O.R.B.

Shortly after the raid on El Cubb on 29th, three aircraft (No.33 Squadron) were on patrol in the Capuzzo area when they encountered three C.R.42s. A dog fight developed during which Pit. Off. Woodward forced one of the aircraft down and then pursued another to Bardia where he engaged and destroyed it. On a similar patrol a pilot of one of the fighter Blenheims attached from No.112 Squadron destroyed a RO.37 and two C.R.32s while on patrol over Libya. These successes were repeated on the next day when a flight of Gladiators patrolling over Bardia aerodrome where they caught three aircraft taking off. Two of the Gladiators attacked and shot down in flames two of the enemy, one C.R.32 and one C.R.42.

35 Squadron
O.R.B.

To exploit these successes Air Commodore Collishaw felt justified in increasing the effort from the advanced landing ground at Sidi Barrani by sending up a further six aircraft for offensive patrols, S.A.S.O. No.202 Group went forward to control the operations. Italian fighters now began to show much greater determination. Standing patrols of ten aircraft were met at El Gubbi and single aircraft and patrols of two in the Capuzzo area. No major clash took place, however, until the 4th July, when a morning patrol in the Sollum area where the 7th Hussars were countering an enemy thrust, engaged two C.R.42s. In the ensuing combat one Italian plane crashed in flames, the pilot escaping by parachute, while the other was forced to land. Both pilots were taken prisoner. Later in the day the escort of a Lysander encountered nine Fiat fighters taking off from Merrastir landing ground. The leader of the section of four aircraft engaged the enemy and succeeded in shooting down four enemy fighters himself while the other two members of the flight accounted for three more. Meanwhile the other section joined the attacks and two more enemy fighters were shot down. Our casualties were one slightly damaged and one completely lost, the pilot descending by parachute inside Egyptian territory. The Lysander completed its mission and reported a considerable concentration of enemy vehicles west of Bardia. This was confirmed on the following morning and was successfully attacked by nine Blenheims (No.113 Squadron). However the experience of the Lysander led to the decision that they must in future always be escorted.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.3

33 Squadron
O.R.B.

No.112 Squadron
O.R.B.

No.208 Squadron
O.R.B.

80 Squadron
O.R.B.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.3

On the same day while our advanced fighters were successfully engaging the enemy across the frontier, Gladiators attempted to shoot down a formation of ten S.79s bombing Alexandria. Although attacks were made all the bombers escaped except one which was believed to have been shot down. Two bombs fell on the quay causing slight damage, fourteen on Aboukir without damaging R.A.F. property and the rest in the water.

Attacks on Supplies

55 Squadron
O.R.B.

No.55 Squadron rounded off a busy day (4th July) for the R.A.F. with a raid on Bir El Gobi. Photographs on the previous day had confirmed that this was the rail head for Italian Army supplies. No.202 Group estimated that in the dumps there the Italians had accumulated "sufficient military stores for important operations". Seven aircraft bombed the target but photographs did not confirm any considerable damage.

202 Group
O.R.B.
M.E. W.I.S.
No.3

/On

202 Group On 5th July a photographic reconnaissance of Tobruk was carried
O.R.B. out by No.113 Squadron in order to make a mosaic to assist the Fleet
Admiral James Air Arm in its first attack on the harbour on the following evening.
Report Twenty seven ships were counted in the harbour including four
202 Group destroyers and three submarines.
O.R.B.

211 Squadron In order to divert the enemy air force from the Fleet Air Arm,
O.R.B. eleven Blenheims attacked the aerodrome at El Gubbi, with small
33 Squadron bombs. While the raid was in progress two flights of No.33
O.R.B. Squadron carried out patrols over Tobruk. The enemy attempted to
ground these aircraft by a sudden attack when they were refuelling
at Bug Bug. "B" flight just managed to get off the ground before
the bombing but "C" flight was caught and two aircraft slightly
H.Q. R.A.F., damaged. The Fleet Air Arm attack was successful and the nine
M.E. Table of Swordfish claimed eight hits on shipping. A reconnaissance on the
Operations next day showed the harbour to be completely disorganised. After
Opium 27 the raid one destroyer Zeffiro was confirmed sunk and the vessels
Liguria (15,354 tons), Manzoni (3,955 tons) and the Serenitas
(5,171 tons).

Summary

M.E. W.I.S. Information concerning the reinforcement, strength and loca-
No.3 tion of the Italian Air Forces in Libya were still meagre. The
situation on 5th July is given at Appendix XIII. The period of
eighteen days 17th June - 5th July was marked mainly by an increase
in enemy activity in the Desert area and over the Delta. Our
fighters enjoyed marked success in the forward area, having shot
down thirty-four enemy aircraft confirmed. On the other hand our
bomber effort was on a small scale amounting to about a hundred
sorties. In the short period of the initial offensive 11th-16th
June this had been exceeded in five days by a bomber effort of a
hundred and six effective sorties. In this first period, however,
only two enemy aircraft were confirmed destroyed; we lost one
Blenheim but no fighters. In the later period we lost five
bombers and one fighter, whereas the enemy losses were thirty-four
aircraft confirmed in Egypt and Libya. Taking into consideration
the odds, the R.A.F. in Egypt had made a promising start. It was
reasonable to presume that any purely Italian offensive against
Egypt could be held, although the danger spot was still their Air
Force. The policy remained the same, generally defensive, but
taking every opportunity for local offensive action.

DO/AML/2

The Pattern of Operations

The pattern of operations for the defensive period was now
set. Blenheims (No.113 Squadron) did the long range strategical
reconnaissance of enemy ports and dispositions. Lysanders (No.208
Squadron) escorted by Gladiators (No.33 Squadron) provided tactical
reconnaissance of the forward area and observation for artillery
shoots. Forward fighter patrols were carried out by Gladiators
(No.33 Squadron) and a Hurricane and fighter Blenheims (attached
from No.112 Squadron) operating by flights from Sidi Barrani.
When Blenheims were attacking objectives in Libya fighters provid-
ed a protective screen to cover their withdrawal. Bombing opera-
tions were undertaken with great economy by Blenheims (Nos.55, 113
and 211 Squadrons) and during the moon periods by Bombays.
Targets would be photographed afterwards by No.113 Squadron so that
the results could be assessed. For periods of up to five days no
bombing operations would take place, but the reconnaissance air-
craft would be busy collecting information about the enemy and our
fighters protecting Sidi Barrani and Matruh from the raids of the
enemy.

The tactics of our bombers were to go out to the target over
the sea, then turn in about thirty miles off shore. Attacks were

/made

made from high or medium level in flights astern. On the return journey a patrol of fighters usually operated forward of the frontier to cover the withdrawal of the bombers and protect stragglers.

Resources

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

Conservation of resources was the watchword. The raid on an M.T. concentration on 5th July when a pilot was wounded and the observer killed as a result of a low flying attack, provoked sharp criticism from the A.O.C.-in-C. He wrote to Air Commodore Collishaw: "Whilst fully appreciating the initiative and spirit shown by the squadrons operating under your command in the Western Desert, I must draw your immediate attention to the urgent necessity for conserving resources. Instances are still occurring when Blenheims are being used for low machine gun attacks against defended camps and aerodromes." He quoted the incident on the 5th. "I consider such operations unjustified having regard to our limited resources of which you are well aware." Air Commodore Collishaw excused the incident as a deviation from instructions and took 'suitable action'.

7th Meeting

DO/AML/2
4CA.

It was appreciated in London that the retention of our position in the Middle East formed an important part of our grand strategy. Our success in the area, however, was to a great extent dependent on adequate air reinforcements reaching Egypt. This problem was considered by the Re-equipment and Expansion Policy Committee at Air Ministry. They decided to dispatch immediately to the Middle East a dozen each of Hurricanes, Blenheims IV and Lysanders⁽¹⁾ and thereafter a monthly delivery of twelve Hurricanes, twelve Blenheims IV and six Lysanders with equivalent spares. In addition some 150 Glen Martins off French orders and due within the next six months were promised to Middle East. (See Appendix XXIV).

As it was not expected that the Takoradi route would be working until September, the first and second consignments were to be sent round the Cape in fast ships to be assembled at other ports. A.C.M. Longmore, therefore, had some figures on which to plan.

REDUCED ACTIVITY 6th - 31st JULY

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

From the 6th July up to the end of the month air operations were of necessity on a small scale. A trickle of reinforcement aircraft had been promised from Whitehall but there was a long time lag before the aircraft would enter the battle line in Egypt. Meanwhile it was A.C.M. Longmore's constant care to keep in being the handful of aircraft which were holding the Italian Air Force at bay in the Western Desert. If he was to succeed in this, even stricter conservation of resources would have to be observed. On 17th July he wrote to Air Commodore Collishaw: "We are rapidly consuming available reserves of all types of aircraft in the command and must in consequence exercise still greater economy in their employment as there is no immediate prospect of wastage replacements arriving from U.K." Reconnaissance flights had to be restricted to those essential to the security of our forces and those necessary to obtain the greatest advantage from our bombing operations. These latter were further reduced to the minimum

/necessary

(1) C.O.S.(40)573 states: aircraft recently sent via Cape in fast ship, 12 long nosed Blenheims, 24 Hurricanes, 12 Lysanders.

necessary to prevent the enemy thinking that we had gone over completely to the defensive. Until a regular and sufficient supply of replacement aircraft was in sight, only a small part of the striking force was normally used and attacks by more than one squadron on military concentrations were confined to those calculated to assist the Army in operations of major importance.

S.58163/22

Within the severe limitations of this policy Air Commodore Collishaw continued his offensive against the enemy's lines of communication between Derna and the frontier. All forms of transport and depots were attacked in order to restrict the enemy's supplies and hamper all movement along the main coastal road. In this way it was hoped to prevent the enemy from moving his reinforcements into the forward area and so retard the date when he might be in a position to take the offensive.

In early July the Italian East Cyrenaican Main Command petrol and ammunition dump⁽¹⁾ was reported by intelligence sources to be five miles southwest of Tobruk. Two squadrons (Nos.211 and 55) assisted by three aircraft of No.113 Squadron were ordered to attack this target on 10th July. A section of Gladiators from No.33 Squadron was moved forward to Sidi Barrani to provide defensive patrols during the operation. Twenty-two aircraft reached the target which consisted of piles of 45 gallon drums covered over with loose earth removed from the excavations in the hill alongside, but cloud over the objective made it difficult to assess the damage done.

Night Operations

202 Group
Form O.R.B.
App.A

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

For the rest of the month the Tobruk area remained the focal point for the R.A.F. bombers. Advantage was taken of the moon period to employ the Bombays in night attacks against this target. No.216 Squadron was therefore placed at the disposal of No.202 Group for one week during the moonlight period. Reconnaissance indicated that there were approximately thirty ships in the harbour. Air Commodore Collishaw decided to attack these first on the night of 12th July, then as the moonlight increased to strike at the oil tanks along the north foreshore where lay the main wharves and supply stores.

Although operating under the orders of No.202 Group the Bombays, as previously, remained based at Heliopolis. To avoid the danger of daylight bombing attacks the aircraft were called up to Fuka at dusk, operated during the night and returned to Heliopolis each morning. At Fuka the squadron kept a small party of about ten men to refuel the bombers and control the night flying.

216 Squadron
O.R.B.

202 Group
O.R.B.

On the first night (12/13th) one Bombay attacked shipping in Tobruk harbour but no results were observed. On the following night the raid was repeated by six aircraft operating singly. In order to mislead the enemy A.A. gunners, fake orders were given to the Bombays over the R/T telling them to make a low level attack. This ruse had the desired effect, some pilots saw the barrage bursting well below the aircraft. By a similar method the impression was given that fighter escorts were operating at night. The air at this time was pregnant with bogus messages as the Italians were also issuing false instructions to our aircraft ordering them to carry out their attack at a particular manner and at prescribed height. Our answer to this was to impose rigidly R/T silence within forty miles of the objective.

/On

O.R.B. App.A
H.Q. 202 Group
Op. Order No.23

(1) 59th Petrol Depot consisting of underground reservoirs and collections of barrels buried in pits.

On the night of the 14th, attacks were switched to the naval oil tanks which were bombed by another six Bombays. In addition to the barrage some biplane fighters were seen, but they did not open fire. All crews reported that most of their bombs burst in the target area. Two aircraft failed to return to their base, one being found later south of Matruh.

Bad weather conditions emphasised the need for D/F system. 202 Group M.T. headlights were used as guiding beacons but these were often O.R.B. bombed by the enemy. As a result of these losses Headquarters Middle East confined further attacks on the oil tanks to sections of three Bombays on the night of the 15th⁽¹⁾, when the harbour was covered with dense clouds of black smoke, and the 16th after which the Bombays returned to the Delta.

Day Operations

Raids on Tobruk were sustained until the 23rd July by (C) Blenheims of Nos. 55, 211 and 113 Squadrons; on 18th by three aircraft and on the 19th by seventeen Blenheims which had been ordered to attack an Italian cruiser plying between Crete and Tobruk with units of the British Fleet in pursuit. The aircraft failed to find the cruiser and instead bombed Tobruk harbour where twenty-eight ships were lying at anchor. On this occasion A.A. fire was severe but this ceased when three CR.42 fighters came up to engage the last flight of Blenheims. One of the fighter pilots came right up under the wing of the second bomber and despite all efforts to dislodge him, he succeeded in staying in this position until Bardia was passed and the Blenheims met their fighter patrols (No. 33 Squadron). The face of the pilot could be seen quite plainly as he waited his chance to tilt the nose of his machine upwards in order to give the leader of the formation a burst, but the high speed of the Blenheims made this impossible without falling into range of the rear guns. On the other hand fire from the other Blenheims would have endangered No. 2 aircraft.

This raid on Tobruk was followed up on the same night by six H.Q. M.E. Swordfish of No. 824 F.A.A. Squadron in a successful torpedo attack Opsum No. 45 which put out of action two destroyers - Ostro and Membo - and the merchantman Sevene (2,333 tons) which were sunk by torpedoes. The July raids on Tobruk closed with two attacks on the nights 21/22nd and 22/23rd respectively when single aircraft (No. 211 and No. 113 Squadrons) attacked the submarine jetty. Results were not ascertained.

Towards the end of the month there were indications that the enemy was becoming apprehensive as a result of our air and naval action concerning the failure of Tobruk as a major base and port. On 24th June a reconnaissance pilot reported that the only active warships in the harbour were a submarine and the Guardship San Giorgio. If pressure were continued it might be possible to force the Italians to rely exclusively in Benghazi.

The assessment of results presented a difficult task at this time as photographic coverage was still meagre. Visual assessments always vary in value, but were particularly suspect at this time as reports were received that the Italians were igniting a powder called Volpi which gave our pilots a false impression of the results. Unserviceable aircraft were also used to create dust storms which would obscure airfields during air raids and also prevented an accurate assessment of damage.

/The

(1) No. 55 O.R.B. and Opsum says 1 Bombay failed to return.

The target area of next importance to Tobruk was Bardia. The vital points were not so much the harbour which was now little used but the depots and stores. These were attacked several times during the next ten days; in the first raid two Blenheims received a bogus order from the Italians on the R.T. to bomb at a certain height, and on two occasions a total of seven Blenheims successfully attacked military stores, the results of a third raid by a single aircraft were unobserved, but on the 24th a Squadron of Blenheims attacked as an alternative target an ammunition dump which was in the open waiting storage. Eight aircraft reached the target, part of which exploded in a series of long blue flashes. Gladiators of No.33 Squadron Detachment at Barrani flew offensive patrols over Bardia at the time and were successful in shooting down four of the 18 CR.42s⁽¹⁾ which came up to the attack. One Gladiator was missing from the engagement and one Blenheim damaged.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E.
Opsum No.45

Attacks on Landing Grounds

Counter Air Force operations were continued as far as availability of aircraft permitted. El Gubbi was attacked on the nights of the 12th, the 18th and 21st by Blenheims operating singly. On 15th July two squadrons were ordered to attack aircraft on El Gazzala aerodrome. No.55 Squadron (9 aircraft) successfully attacked the target, although one Blenheim crashed in flames near Bug Bug. No.211 Squadron, however, on the return journey failed to find Gazzala due to faulty navigation and dropped their bombs in Apollonia. After being airborne for over four hours the aircraft ran out of petrol and were forced to land, fortunately on the Egyptian side of the frontier.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.6

No.211 Squad-
ron O.R.B.

Following a photographic reconnaissance which indicated that the majority of the enemy's bombers were concentrated on Derna landing ground, No.211 Squadron was ordered to attack using the Sidi Barrani landing ground for refuelling. Of the nine machines, six reached the target where bombs were dropped among fifty bombers packed closely together on the airfield. No enemy aircraft or A.A. fire was encountered over the targets and on the return journey the squadron kept well out to sea to escape the attention of fighters based on Tobruk and Bardia. In the distance the mountains of Crete could be clearly seen. This raid was followed by nine aircraft of No.113 Squadron which attacked the same concentration of aircraft. A subsequent photographic reconnaissance showed that half a dozen aircraft were badly damaged. During both raids Gladiators provided patrols seaward of Bardia.

202 Group
O.R.B.

Raids on forward positions and troop concentrations were limited to a few attacks by single aircraft.

Increased Opposition

DO/AML/2
46A

The Italians in Libya were now showing signs of recovering from the effects, mainly moral, of our initial air offensive. Their bombers operated from aerodromes beyond the easy reach of the Blenheims and were in a position to intensify their bombardment of ground forces and the aerodromes in the coastal region. Our ability to prevent them was still limited by insufficient Radar, A.A. defence and high performance fighters. Throughout July there were signs that the enemy was preparing to go over to the offensive and reoccupy the frontier positions. All Western Desert units were warned to prepare for the rapid destruction of all petrol stocks in the event of enemy mechanised forces approaching. There were no

202 Group
O.R.B.

/important

(1) 4 confirmed and 1 unconfirmed.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.5

important changes in the dispositions of the enemy air force their attacks were carried out in formations of five to ten aircraft principally on our forward aerodromes in the Sidi Barrani and Matruh area, but extending their activity in the middle of the month along the coast to Dhaba. Dummy aircraft and decoy flare paths fortunately drew some of the fire. Raiders reached Alexandria on a few occasions but the damage done was slight. Twice during the month Haifa was bombed; in the first attack three oil tanks were set on fire.

DO/AML/2
94A

On 23rd July activity increased in the Western Desert as the enemy adopted tip and run tactics from the sea, attacking our armoured cars in the forward area and setting fire to two of them. At the request of the G.O.C. Gladiators were sent to provide protection but their limited endurance rendered them ineffective. To prevent this interference with our troops, A.C.M. Longmore attached four fighter Blenheims to No.113 Squadron. A practice which was considered dangerous at Whitehall. Two of these aircraft met with marked success on the following day while escorting a reconnaissance plane which was engaged by enemy fighters. One fighter Blenheim engaged five of them and shot down one CR.42; the second destroyed one CR.32 out of a formation of seven. After this distinguished interlude the Blenheim fighters were ordered to return immediately to No.30 Squadron.

202 Group
O.R.B.

202 Group
O.R.B.

Enemy reconnaissance aircraft showed marked interest in the Dhaba area where bomb, petrol and oil dumps were situated. On 19th July an enemy aircraft made repeated runs over the area as if making a photographic mosaic. On 28th July orders were issued for the dumps to be moved to the small wadis north of Ghazal railway station.

DO/AML/2
46A

The heaviest attacks during this period were a raid by twenty bombers on Sollum on 29th July and a series of attacks against units of the Fleet at sea. The total strength of the Italian Air Force in Libya at this time was estimated to be not more than 376 aircraft in this proportion:-

Bombers	121
Fighters	146
Reconnaissance	49
Seaplanes	17
Colonial Ghibli	43

M.E. W.I.S. No.5
A.M. W.I.S. No.46

The rate of unserviceability was believed to be only 20% of the first line strength. Serviceability among fighters was reported to be particularly low. A captured pilot stated that the CR.42 was now supercharged, but as no air filters had been fitted there was constant engine trouble under desert conditions.

DO/AML/2
46A

So far the Italian Air Force had not been used in full strength. If it concentrated on heavy attacks on our airfields, ground forces and lines of communication, A.C.M. Longmore had grave doubts whether he could command effective counter measures with the forces then available to him.

Political Background

An additional cause for anxiety was the unstable political background against which the war in the Middle East was being fought. With the change of Prime Minister the situation was temporarily quiescent but fundamentally it was volcanic. At a recent meeting the Ambassador had explained to the Commanders-in-Chief the unsatisfactory position at the Palace where the King harboured advisors who were regarded with contempt and suspicion

/by

by his Britannic Majesty's Government, and whose dismissal was demanded by the Ambassador. Many of the middle class Egyptians were well disposed towards the British cause but even amongst the most staunch there was a growing doubt whether our armed forces were sufficient to defend Egypt. The fear of heavy bombardment from the air was widespread and prompted by this fear the King had already requested the move of the Military and Air Force Headquarters from Cairo; a request to which the Ambassador and the Commanders-in-Chief did not intend to accede.

Prompted by these fears the Egyptian Government continued in its policy of non-belligerency which so embarrassed the British Commanders. This indeterminate policy of the Egyptians may, however, have restrained the Italian High Command from ordering heavy raids on populated districts in Egypt in order not to cause disaffection in a people whom they hoped would revolt against British domination. Whether this is so is a matter of conjecture.⁽¹⁾ On the other hand the Egyptian Army and Air Force remained an untried quantity. When the Egyptian Armoured Brigade moved up to Qasaba, A.C.M. Longmore tried unsuccessfully to persuade Hassan Abdul Wahab Pasha, Director of the Royal Egyptian Air Force, to send a fighter flight forward to defend the Brigade. As aircraft were more likely to become involved in hostilities than Army units during a static period, the Director was unwilling to commit himself. Egyptian aircraft, however, carried out patrols in defence of Cairo and Suez.

DO/AML/2
56A

Reinforcement Policy Reviewed

As the result of a forecast by the Ministry of Aircraft Production the Chiefs of Staff were now able to consider Middle East requirements in more definite terms. On the question of reinforcement it was decided that Egypt's need was paramount. Reserves up to five months were to be despatched round the Cape and the consequent diversion of the factory output which this would entail was accepted. These aircraft were to be used to re-equip existing squadrons in the Middle East with more modern aircraft. The urgency of these supplies increased as the hot season of summer abated, and the more temperate weather for campaigning drew near, for consignments had to be planned and despatched several months before they were to be employed in Egypt. This was a disadvantage which the Italians with their interior lines of communication did not suffer.

C.O.S. (40)
573

Of the various kinds of equipment required in Egypt it was agreed that air reinforcements were of the utmost importance. At a Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on 1st August, the C.A.S. was able to announce an acceleration in the programme. The monthly rate of Blenheim was increased to thirty-six and the Bombay squadrons were to be re-equipped with Wellingtons flown to Egypt via Malta at the rate of six per month. Eighteen Hurricane fighters were now to be sent each month with an additional twenty-four in H.M.S. Argus when it could be arranged. Over and above these allocations, twenty-four Hurricanes were to be sent to the South African Air Force and twelve to Middle East. As soon as possible Hurricane reinforcements were to be maintained at a rate sufficient to support three squadrons in the Middle East, including the S.A.A.F. in Kenya, and half a squadron in Malta.

C.O.S. (40)
242nd
Meeting

8th E.R.P.
Meeting

/PREPARATIONS

(1) In the absence of the appropriate Italian documents.

PREPARATIONS TO MEET THE ITALIAN OFFENSIVE

Withdrawal Policy

Throughout August it became increasingly apparent that the Italian advance into Egypt would not be long delayed. The enemy's strength in the northern sector was constantly growing and his bombers were active against our forward positions, particularly Sidi Barrani and Bug Bug. Bug Bug landing ground had to be abandoned early in August as the bomb holes in the dry lake bed filled with water and could not be repaired. It was also under constant observation by the enemy. There was a marked increase in enemy fighter activity as fighter squadrons concentrated on the forward area to protect the massing of troops. The Italian pilots however, remained reluctant to engage our fighters despite their numerical superiority. On land the enemy's increased strength and the wear and tear on our Armoured fighting vehicles obliged us to restrict patrol activity and withdraw the armour for repair.

202 Group
O.R.B.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.8

The Air Force bomber squadrons which were now well dispersed and using satellite aerodromes remained the same (Nos.113, 211 and 55), No.33 (Fighter) Squadron, however, was withdrawn into reserve to refit at Helwan. Its place in the Western Desert was taken by two flights of No.112 Squadron and one flight of No.80 Squadron. This reduced the fighter protection of Alexandria to one Hurricane flight and a Blenheim fighter squadron. From the point of view of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, the reduction was inopportune as he was in the middle of a major docking programme which would continue through the moonlight nights which were approaching. In order to meet this need of the Navy, the A.O.C.-in-C., moved one flight of No.33 Squadron from Helwan to Amirya to join No.80 Squadron and the R.E.A.F. in maintaining constant patrols of two fighters throughout the daylight hours.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
22 Squadron
O.R.B.

The strength of the Italian forces on the frontier and the enforced retirement of the armoured units, committed the British Army to a general plan of defence which provided that no serious attempt should be made to halt the enemy's advance until the Matruh defences were reached. This policy was not popular with the Air Force since it involved the loss of the vital airfield at Sidi Barrani which was used extensively to bring within range of our aircraft important targets in Cyrenaica, to extend the range of fighter patrols in enemy territory and also as a landing ground for aircraft flying to Egypt through Malta.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.

Bardia

Meanwhile the Air Force continued its policy of active defence, devoting the greater part of its attention to Derna and Tobruk and the various dumps in eastern Cyrenaica. On such a mission No.55 Squadron achieved spectacular and unforeseen results. On 1st August twelve aircraft of the squadron attacked an ammunition dump which the Italians had been digging into the hillside 2½ miles southwest of Bardia. Violent explosions followed the attack and the dump was later observed by reconnaissance to be ablaze. Photographs confirmed that it was destroyed. But this was not the only damage. Information obtained from a prisoner of war disclosed that a lucky shot from one of the Blenheims had hit a store of four gallon tins of soup which disgorged their contents in a sticky mess over the surrounding desert.

No.55 Squad-
ron O.R.B.

M.E. W.I.S.
No. 7

The only other raid on Bardia during this period was on 7th August when a reconnaissance pilot reported two warships

/anchored

anchored off Bardia. Two flights of Blenheims⁽¹⁾ were ordered to attack during the afternoon. When the formation arrived there was a mist over the target and the ships could not be seen. It was therefore decided to attack the alternative target, stores on the foreshore. At the last moment No.55 Squadron flight discerned the ships and turned to attack them, but no hits were observed. The second flight continued on its course and attacked the stores, inflicting some damage.

Derna

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Opsum 54
211 Squadron
O.R.B.
55 Squadron
O.R.B.
113 Squadron
O.R.B.
Italian
Admissions

The principal target for the month was Derna which lies to the west of Tobruk and the Gulf of Bomba. Following a reconnaissance of the harbour where seven merchant ships and a flying boat were observed, twenty three Blenheims were ordered to attack on 3rd August. On the flight out, three aircraft had to return due to engine trouble, but the remainder made a high level attack during which bombs were seen falling round the ship, the jetty and on the landing ground. Subsequent information disclosed that the vessel Ledeletta (2,322 tons) was sunk. During the operation fighters flew the usual protective patrols over Sidi Barrani and west of Bardia.

216 Squadron
O.R.B.

Attacks on Derna were not resumed until the moonlight period when Bombays undertook the task. On the first night (17/18th) the raid was made abortive by dense cloud, but on the following night shipping in the harbour was attacked. Cloud was 6/10th and results could not be seen. Two nights later a single Bombay bombed the aerodrome at Derna where thirty planes had been seen during a late reconnaissance of northern Cyrenaica. (This indicates that our counter Air Force operations had obliged the enemy to base his bombers much further back in the Derna region). An immense new construction, believed to be the main M.T. repair workshop for East Cyrenaica was also observed and subsequently bombed on 22nd August by eight Blenheims (No.211 Squadron). Shipping in the harbour was again attacked on 27th August by seventeen Blenheims (Nos.211 and 55 Squadrons), dropping bombs in a wide spread on ships and jetties. No.211 Squadron, which was forced by cloud to bomb from low level, observed one ship on fire fore and aft; this was confirmed by photographs. Pilots over Derna reported that the recent attacks, which amounted during this period to forty-eight sorties had considerably reduced activity in the harbour.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Opsum 71
DO. AML/2
56A

55 and 211
Squadrons
O.R.B.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.11
No.211 Squad-
ron O.R.B.

Tobruk

Tobruk was attacked in strength by three squadrons⁽²⁾ on 9th August and again by No.211 Squadron⁽³⁾ on 12th. The focal point was a floating crane which persistently escaped damage. Raids thereafter until the end of the month consisted of four sorties by single Bombays during the moonlight period. These raids were undertaken as a retaliatory measure each time the Italians bombed Alexandria. For this purpose a special Bombay and crews were placed at the disposal of A.O.C. No.202 Group. The total of the August raids on Tobruk, up to 30th, was 41 sorties.

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

Army Cq-operation

W.C. Narra-
tive

In preparation for the withdrawal plan the land forces re-grouped to enable them to carry out a general retirement on Matruh.

/One

(1) 4 aircraft from No.55 Squadron and 3 aircraft from No.113 Squadron
(2) 27 aircraft - 9 each from Nos.211, 113 and 55 Squadrons
(3) 9 aircraft

One of the difficulties of Army Co-operation at this time was the distance, some twenty-five miles of No.208 Squadron Forward Detachment from General Staff 7th Division. It was impossible with the abandonment of Bug Bug landing ground to remedy this because the terrain forward of Sidi Barrani was unsuitable. One compensating feature of the withdrawal plan was that there would be more landing grounds adjacent to the Army headquarters. Meanwhile the second flight of No.80 fighter squadron which had been sent up to the desert was accommodated temporarily on the landing ground seventeen miles east of Sidi Barrani.

202 Group
O.R.B.

Army Co-operation aircraft at the beginning of August were meeting with pronounced fighter opposition. Reports were received that the enemy were intercepting aircraft W/T and then despatching a large force of fighters to the forward area. For example on 4th August a Lysander escorted by four Gladiators was carrying out a reconnaissance of a troop concentration at Bir El Gobbi for the Army, when they were confronted by a large⁽¹⁾ formation of CR.42 fighters. During the combat three CR.42s were destroyed for the loss of one Gladiator. A raid of six Blenheims was based on the information brought back and these were also engaged by a large⁽²⁾ formation of fighters one of which was shot down. As a counter measure, No.202 Group organised a special operation. A ground W/T set simulated No.208 Squadron's aircraft testing on the ground before a reconnaissance flight. Meanwhile thirteen Gladiators were despatched⁽³⁾ to the forward area where they encountered twenty-seven CR.32 and CR.42 fighters about thirty miles west of Sidi Omar. During the engagement which followed fifteen enemy aircraft were destroyed. Two Gladiators failed to return but one of the pilots was brought back uninjured to our lines by our advanced troops. This success evoked a particular signal of congratulation from the Secretary of State for Air.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Opsum
No.60
H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Opsum
No.56

No.80 Squad-
ron O.R.B.

The principal support for the Army during August was given on 10th, when the G.O.C. Western Desert Force, requested an air attack on an enemy concentration halfway between Bir El Gobbi and Sidi Omar (31° 28' N, 24° 24' E). This position was threatening the Army's safe withdrawal. Accordingly ten Blenheims were despatched to attack it under cover of fighters from No.80 Squadron. Numerous fires were observed as the aircraft withdrew.

55 Squadron
211 Squadron
and
113 Squadron
O.R.Bs.

Meanwhile air operations continued in the Western Desert within strict limitations, designed to preserve the Air Force for the struggle which lay ahead. The Army was asked on 13th August not to call for attacks on land targets unless it was clear that the enemy offensive was imminent. This request was carefully observed and from then until the end of the month only two attacks,⁽⁴⁾ both by single Blenheims, were made against field targets.

Liaison Visit to London

Early in August, General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces, returned to London to report to the War Office. Air Chief Marshal Longmore took the opportunity to send on a visit to Air Ministry Group Captain Wigglesworth. A.C.M. Longmore felt that liaison between his own headquarters and Air Ministry was

/bed.

- (1) H.Q. R.A.F., M.E. Opsum No.56 says 50 CR.42s.
- (2) 202 Group F.540 gives Approx. 50: 113 Squadron F.540 gives Approx. 36: 24 Squadron F.540 gives Approx. 40/50.
- (3) 8th August.
- (4) Military Camps near Bir El Gobbi

P.10

bad. Replies from the latter took too long and when they did arrive they showed a lack of appreciation of the problems confronting the Air Forces in the Middle East. In his memoirs A.C.M. Longmore later confessed that few people in Middle East realized the gravity of the situation in the United Kingdom.

C.O.S. (40)
255th Meeting

At the 255th Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff, General Wavell outlined the situation in the Middle East. After a successful opening phase during which armoured patrols had penetrated far behind the enemy's lines, it was now necessary to withdraw the vehicles for an overhaul. The Italians had brought up a quantity of guns and had re-occupied Fort Capuzzo. If large enemy forces appeared in that area a limited withdrawal would be inevitable. There were so far no positive indications that German Forces were in Libya but it would not be difficult for the enemy to send them. Information concerning the movement of enemy troops was still scanty as a result of our pre-war policy which prevented channels of information being established and because of the activities of the Italian Security Service. In order to counteract these shortcomings General Wavell was most anxious that the number and range of reconnaissance aircraft should be increased. He represented to the V.C.A.S. that the need for long range reconnaissance in Libya, and in particular Benghazi, was an urgent and immediate requirement. Air Ministry responded by ordering two Mark IV Blenheims to Egypt via Malta. The Wellingtons which were being prepared for the flight out to Egypt would provide a small striking force for bombing Benghazi.

DO AML/2
73A

The greatest danger to the defence of Egypt would be a determined advance towards the Delta on a broad front which would turn our Matruh defences. The participation of large numbers of enemy bombers and transport aircraft would further aggravate a serious state of affairs, since the Army was ill protected against low flying aircraft, having only a limited number of A.A. guns, most of which were manned by Egyptians of doubtful reliability. With this in mind General Wavell urged the Chiefs of Staff to reinforce the Royal Air Force in the Middle East with modern fighter and bomber aircraft.

DO. AML/2
84A

At Air Ministry, Group Captain Wigglesworth investigated the prospects of reinforcement aircraft reaching the Middle East. He found that the plans for 1941 and 1942 were encouraging but that there was little hope of any immediate increase beyond the small quarters already promised as the situation at home was still uncertain. It was this immediate period which was of the greatest concern to A.C.M. Longmore. The Italian attacks, which might be accompanied by intensive air attack and which would have to be countered if British Forces were to hold their position in the Western Desert, was expected in the next few weeks. Mr. Churchill believed it to be imminent and accordingly issued a directive⁽¹⁾ to the Commanders-in-Chief in which he ordered that the largest possible Army should be deployed towards the Western front of Egypt. The fortification of the Matruh position was to be completed with

DO. AML/2
78ACOS. (40)
637

/the

(1) The directive considered the problem of resisting the Italian advance almost entirely from the point of view of the land forces. Withdrawal to the verge of the Delta was envisaged without any apparent attention to the advantage this would give the enemy when attacking the Fleet base at Alexandria and targets in the Delta. Our warning organisation would be greatly handicapped and enemy bombers could make double sorties escorted by fighters.

the utmost speed and a further line of defence developed from Alexandria along the cultivated verge of the Delta. "In this posture then" the Minister of Defence concluded, "The Army of the Delta will await the Italian invasion".

Indeed it seemed in the early part of August that the storm was about to break. Squadrons in the Desert were facing pronounced Italian air superiority, particularly in fighters⁽¹⁾. As a countermeasure Italy's Metropolitan Fighter Force was kept on the alert by night bombers from Britain attacking industrial targets in Northern Italy. This task was assigned to Bomber Command because not only had they the bomber force immediately available but also the distance from Mildenhall to Turin was less than the distance from Malta⁽²⁾ which had neither the maintenance facilities nor the personnel to operate bomber squadrons. An additional reason for this arrangement was that Malta, although admirably situated for attacks on Southern and Central Italy, was itself ill defended at this time. The Chiefs of Staff, therefore, considered that it would be unwise to begin offensive operations from Malta until the scale of defences was sufficient to protect the island against reprisal raids.

There was much official apprehension at this time concerning the influence which the Italian Air Force⁽³⁾ might have on the battle. On this matter General Wavell who consistently impressed A.C.M. Longmore's case on Whitehall, emphasised to the C.I.G.S. that in his opinion the successful defence of Egypt and the naval base at Alexandria was dependent on sufficient air reinforcements being sent. If a strong air force was maintained, he considered that the enemy attack was unlikely to succeed; conversely the strongest ground force would have difficulty in securing Egypt if the enemy gained control in the air.

On 20th August the Deputy A.O.C.-in-C., informed Air Commodore Collishaw of the probability of an imminent land offensive against Egypt, with the reservation that the enemy might choose to wait until later in the year when the weather would be cooler and there would be more water in the coastal wells. If the attack was made on a large scale No.45 Squadron and probably No.84 Squadron from Iraq would be transferred to the Western Desert. A.C.M. Longmore decided to leave Air Commodore Collishaw free to work out a plan for the employment of the bomber force in conjunction with the G.O.C. Western Desert Force.

Bomba

As a result of attacks on H.M. ships by Italian flying boats, C.-in-C. Mediterranean requested that raids should be carried out on Bomba Flying Boat Base. Following a reconnaissance which showed fifteen seaplanes in Menalaio Bay, nine Blenheims accompanied by six fighters of No.30 Squadron made a low level attack after which bombs were seen bursting on the shore, slipway and among the flying boats. No.30 Squadron delivered a converging attack with machine gun fire until all the front gun ammunition was exhausted. A petrol dump of about 300 drums near the slipway was set alight and the fire spread to an equipment store and to two of the aircraft which blew up. The raid encountered little opposition. Later it was confirmed that twelve Hydroplanes were put out of action.

/By

- (1) M.E. W.I.S. No.9. This decreased in mid-August.
- (2) Mildenhall - Turin = 600 miles. Malta - Turin = 725 miles.
- (3) I.A.F. estimated by Longmore on 27.8.40. to be four times R.A.F. in Egypt.

DO AML/2
59A

C.O.S. (40)
650

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

55 Squadron
O.R.B.

30 Squadron
O.R.B.

202 Group
O.R.B.

By 20th August, No.202 Group suspected that submarines, which had been absent from Tobruk, had been established at Bomba and accordingly ordered a series of attacks. First a Blenheim made a moonlight attack on 20/21st August to test the defences and to find out if there were any indications of a torpedo net. The raid was successful and was followed on the next night by an attack by a Bombay. On the 22nd three Swordfish under the operational control of No.202 Group found two submarines and a destroyer and a ship anchored off Jezira el Marakeb in the Gulf of Bomba. The attack was most successful and subsequent evidence showed that a submarine and the Monte Gargane (1,976 tons) were sunk.

CB.04050/43
(8) Admiralty
Monthly Anti-
Submarine
Report
August 1943.

Bombardment of Bardia and Capuzzo

202 Group
O.R.B.
15.8.40.

The bombardment of Bardia and Capuzzo which was undertaken by the Royal Navy on the early morning of 17th August, entailed the disposition of the fighter force on landing grounds along the coast from which aircraft could provide fighter protection for the battleships, cruisers and the spotter aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm. During bombardment and the withdrawal the Bardia force was protected by one section of No.80 Squadron, and the Capuzzo force by another section of No.80 Squadron and a section of the Fleet Air Arm, all operating from a satellite landing ground at Sidi Barrani. The bombardment, which was carried out according to plan on 17th August between 0700 and 0730 hours, was designed to disorganize the enemy's supply centre at a time when an advance seemed imminent. At Capuzzo the target was well hit but the cliff face which masks the town at Bardia prevented serious damage being done. The fleet then withdrew, but was later shadowed by a Cant flying boat which was engaged by No.80 Squadron Detachment and shot down in flames at 0945. Three quarters of an hour later enemy bombers found the fleet, upwards of twenty S.79s attacking in flights of three to five. The standard of bombing was poor, largely due to the presence of our escort fighters which forced many of the bombers to jettison their loads in order to avoid being engaged. Our fighters had considerable success, eight S.79s were confirmed destroyed, with two others unconfirmed.

H.Q. M.E.
Opsum No.71

M.E. W.I.S.
No.10
M.E. W.I.S.
No.10
M.E. W.I.S.
No.10

DO AML/6 8A

In order to co-ordinate the operations of the Royal Air Force with the Royal Navy, Group Captain L.O. Brown accompanied the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean to sea. In general the operation worked well, but it was suspected that the enemy had intelligence of our intentions and had taken dispersal measures. In a letter to the A.O.C.-in-C., Admiral Cunningham generously attributed the success of the day to the co-operation of the Royal Air Force. The operation provided valuable experience in the co-ordination of two services.

Fumigation

On 30th August all squadrons of No.202 Group were ordered to be at the height of readiness for operations on the following morning in connection with the escort of naval reinforcements passing eastwards through the Mediterranean and the protection of a convoy from Malta to Egypt.

The first series of operations were carried out on 31st August ⁽¹⁾
/when

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (1) No.33 Squadron - Gerawla | 30 Squadron - 2 sections of |
| No.112 Squadron - 1 Flight L.G.Y. | Blenheims - Fuka |
| 1 Flight L.G.Z. | F.A.A. Gladiators - 1 section |
| 1 Hurricane and 4 French Fighters | - Sidi Barrani Sat. |
| - Maaten Bagush | 80 Squadron Det. - 2 flights |
| | - Sidi Barrani Sat. |

Squadron
O.R.B.

when the whole of Air Commodore Collishaw's bomber force, supported by protective fighter patrols of No.80 and No.112 Squadrons, carried out attacks on enemy landing grounds in Eastern Cyrenaica with object of suppressing hostile air activity as our Fleet steamed towards Malta. Throughout the day aircraft were despatched in pairs to attack these airfields on which previous reconnaissance had reported aircraft which might menace the Fleet. In all fifty-three⁽¹⁾ sorties were carried out by the three Blenheim squadrons whose efforts kept the fighters busy and prevented any enemy bombers attacking the ships which were within easy reach of landing grounds at Timimi, Tobruk, Gazala, Bardia, Derna and the seaplane base at Bomba, all of which were bombed.

202 Group
O.R.B.

On the return of the Mediterranean Fleet from Malta with a convoy under escort the same landing grounds were attacked throughout the greater part of the day by pairs of Blenheims which made a total of thirty-six sorties. Once again these operations had the effect of preventing the enemy attacking our ships.

Re-organisation of the Fighter Squadrons

DO AML/2 1A

The arrival of a few reinforcement aircraft enabled A.C.M. Longmore to re-organise the fighter squadrons. Out of the three existing squadrons of 21 I.E., he decided to form four squadrons of 16 I.E. No.112 Squadron reformed into a two flight squadron in the Western Desert, the third flight in the Sudan eventually becoming a separate squadron. No.80 Squadron reformed into a two flight Gladiator Squadron in the Western Desert and No.33 Squadron remained at Amriya as a two flight non-mobile squadron. The third flight of No.33 Squadron and a flight of Hurricanes from No.80 Squadron were then formed⁽²⁾ into the new No.274 Squadron under the operational control of No.252 Wing. There was in addition No.30 Squadron with fighter Blenheims whose value was not yet confirmed.

55 Squadron
O.R.B.

Raids on enemy airfields were confined during August to a few attacks in order to give the impression that we had not abandoned the offensive. El Gubbi was attacked twice by single aircraft and El Adem, where a large concentration of fighters were reported to be, three times by small numbers of aircraft; the largest raid of this type was made by eight aircraft which attacked a concentration of S.79 bombers on Tmini landing ground. Cloud obscured the target during the approach but the formation broke through it in time to make a good run up. The aircraft on the landing ground were well dispersed, so that pilots had to select their own targets. Complete surprise was achieved and neither fighters nor A.A. guns engaged the Blenheims which obtained a hit on one S.79 and probably damaged two more.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.10

Enemy Opposition in the Air

M.E. W.I.S.
No.10

The Italian fighter opposition which had been pronounced at the beginning of the month declined by the Middle of August. Night raids against widespread targets continued but the bombing was poor, little attention being paid to course or wind. There was, so far, no indication of the bomber effort being intensified. On 26th August the total strength of the Italian Air Force in Libya was estimated to be 600 aircraft which represented an increase of approximately 169 since the outbreak of war. There was also news of the arrival of German aircraft in connection with the German Air Mission which had been sent to Libya to examine Air Force problems. In the political sphere tension between Italy and Greece increased during August, and on the credit side French Equatorial Africa declared for General de Gaulle.

(1) M.E. W.I.S. gives a total of 56 sorties.
(2) Formation given on 19.8.40. of No.252 Wing F.540.

THE ITALIAN ADVANCE

M.E. W.I.S.
No.12

S.45612 2A

At the beginning of September, it was estimated at Headquarters Middle East that the Italians had probably completed their organisation and main distribution of forces for the opening phase of the war. As the output of the Italian aircraft industry had not yet exceeded a hundred per month, it was not believed that new aircraft had done much more than replace wastage and obsolescent types. The Italian Air Force in Libya, however, enjoyed a marked numerical superiority⁽¹⁾ to the Royal Air Force in Egypt in all types of aircraft, and presumably could without difficulty provide adequate air support for an advance into Egypt. In considering the scale of attack which might be expected the Middle East Joint Planning Staff observed that from the information available to them the enemy apparently had not yet sufficient armoured forces to overrun our defences and establish himself in the Delta.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.12
H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Opsums

202 Group
O.R.B.

Our patrols west of the wire practically ceased at the end of August and the forward observation post withdrew to the Hafid ridge. The enemy then carried out reconnaissance in force in the Sidi Azeiz area before beginning to shell Sollum and Musaid. This was carried out almost daily from 1st to 9th September. Bomber operations were intensified against objectives in Egypt. The principle objective was Matruh which was attacked regularly by formations of twelve to fifteen aircraft. Gladiators usually succeeded in intercepting but were unable to bring the fast enemy to action. On 8th an enemy raid on Matruh in the afternoon dropped fifty bombs, cutting the main railway line and destroying 500 gallons of petrol. Otherwise little material damage resulted. As a counter-measure two Hurricanes and two fighter Blenheims were moved to Bagush. By the end of the first week of September considerable movement was observed in the Bardia - Azeiz area and it was obvious that an attack was imminent.

208 Squadron
O.R.B.
No.202 Group
O.R.B. 6.9.40.

In preparation for a withdrawal towards Matruh No.202 Group reduced and finally withdrew the forward detachments of Nos.208 and 80 Squadron and ordered the bulk of the bomb and fuel dump at Qasaba to be moved to Fuka. To meet the attack the A.O.C.-in-C., already had detailed plans to increase the Air Force in the Western Desert by moving⁽²⁾ No.84 Squadron from Iraq to the Western Desert, No.6 (A.C.) Squadron from Palestine to Shineifa and establishing the newly arrived No.3 R.A.A.F. Army Co-operation Squadron at Gerawla.

Nos.55 and
211 Squadrons
O.R.B.

Nos.55 and
113 Squadrons
O.R.B.

During the period between the passage of the convoy to Alexandria (4/9) and the first indications that the actual advance had begun (9/9), the R.A.F. reduced its activities to the minimum in order to prevent wastage and build up serviceability. However, on the 9th September the three Blenheim Squadrons carried out raids on airfields, motor transport and supply points. Tobruk harbour and the town airfield, which was now being used as an M.T. Depot, were attacked by twenty-one aircraft. Several explosions resulted. On this day the enemy undertook a fighter sweep of twenty-seven aircraft in the Buq Buq area. Counter Air Force operations were, therefore, resumed with attacks⁽³⁾ on the landing grounds at Tmimi, El Gazala and Derna⁽⁴⁾ and also the slipway at Bomba. The same objectives were again attacked on the following afternoon by single

/aircraft

- (1) Calculated by A.C.M. Longmore to be 4 : 1 - AML/12.
- (2) Moved on 22/10: two flights only.
- (3) by 11 aircraft
- (4) 1 aircraft attacked the harbour.

aircraft or aircraft in pairs. In addition stores at Bardia and aircraft at El Gubbi were bombed by individual aircraft. That evening (10/9) a reconnaissance aircraft reported seven hundred M.T. moving eastwards towards Amseat. No.113 Squadron was despatched to bomb them and although darkness prevented some of the aircraft from attacking, the remainder managed to set fire to some of the vehicles. The enemy now began low level attacks on our troops and continued for several days.

Attacks on these motor transport Groups were the principal contribution which the Royal Air Force made to resisting the enemy's advance. In these formations motor cyclists usually provided an advanced screen, bravely drawing our fire while behind them came the main columns of lorried infantry headed by groups of tanks. The lorries moved in clusters with infantry in the centre supported by field, machine and A.A. guns. At night the columns formed into leaguers protected by guns, lights and barbed wire pallasades. In this wise Marshal Graziani's invading columns lumbered eastwards across the frontier harassed on the ground by our covering forces and from the air by the Royal Air Force. This panoplied procession which lacked only the colourful costume of a tattoo was continually observed by reconnaissance aircraft which were able to provide information for the briefing of the bomber pilots.

No.211 Squadron O.R.B.

On 11th September, No.113 Squadron reported two large groups of M.T. near Sidi Omar, each consisting of some 300 vehicles. The group on the west side was then attacked by nine aircraft of No.211 Squadron with incendiary bombs which caused several large fires. Reconnaissance on the following day showed that the two concentrations were still advancing, the one in the Amseat area the other near Sidi Omar, but the motor transport was now protected by about fifty fighters patrolling in the vicinity. Another attack was carried out against the concentration at Sidi Omar by nine Blenheims at dusk as part of a harassing operation by the Army. Again the pilots reported several fires flaring up as they left the target. The position on the evening of the 12th was that the enemy had concentrated 2,000 infantry and approximately 700 motor transport and armoured vehicles alongside the frontier force between Sidi Omar and Amseat; presumably as a prelude to an invasion of Egypt. Squadrons were warned to be ready to operate from dawn on the 1st, but favourable targets⁽¹⁾ did not develop as the enemy occupied Sollum barracks and began to infiltrate down the escarpment. Instead, a formation of six aircraft was despatched to attack the seaplane base at Bomba.

202 Group O.R.B.

202 Group O.R.B.

Meanwhile the Western Desert Force had taken up their first stations for the withdrawal and were opposing the enemy from positions astride the two tracks running from the foot of Halfaya Pass to the Bug Bug area. During the day of the 14th, enemy M.T. came down the escarpment road north of Sollum in a continuous stream. These columns were attacked on the afternoon (14th September) by Blenheims of Nos.55 and 211 Squadrons protected by fighters. It was now clear that the long awaited advance was under way. No.202 Group ordered all observer posts to retire eastwards on Matruh and the remaining aircraft of the forward detachments were ordered to join their parent squadron. No.202 Group Headquarters itself was split⁽²⁾ into an advanced echelon to control operations and a rear H.Q. composed of the administrative services.

/Throughout

(1) Opsum H.Q. R.A.F. M.E. states 8 Blenheims attacked M.T. at Sidi Omar.

(2) w.e.f. 15/9.

Nos. 211 & 55
Squadrons
O.R.Bs.

Throughout the 15th the advance continued under the harassing fire of the Support Group. By dusk forward elements were within five miles of Buq Buq where they were attacked by a small formation⁽¹⁾ of Blenheims. The enemy was easily found as the lorries had their headlights on and bombs were seen bursting among the vehicles starting fires which were still visible when the aircraft were forty miles away. As the enemy approached Sidi Barrani on the evening of 16th September, two squadrons of Blenheims attacked the columns in pairs. All crews reported intense fire from small arms, A.A. and pom-poms but claimed to have started fires among the vehicles. By evening the enemy had occupied Sidi Barrani, having concentrated his line of advance along the coastal strip. In order to broaden his front the enemy now pushed forces south-east along the escarpment as far as Sofafi which was reached on 20th. This was a modification of the original plan to advance in two columns from the frontier. The reason for the change given in an Italian press communique was that the opposition on the right wing was greater than expected.

W.C. Narrative

M.E. W.I.S.
No. 13

The enemy Air Force at this point gave increased support to the offensive and was employed with unusual enterprise. Bomber attacks were directed mainly against forward aerodromes and troop positions, principally at Sidi Barrani, Matruh and Bagush. The speed and the long range of the S.79 were exploited by employing it on offensive reconnaissance. Fighters in formations of up to a hundred aircraft operated over the advancing Italian troops and the CR.42 which was previously only used as a fighter was armed to attack our columns with anti-personnel bombs as well as machine gun fire. Particularly troublesome were the small delay action bombs which were frequently dropped on aerodromes at night rendering them unserviceable for several hours. The largest formation yet reported, sixty bombers escorted by twelve fighters, attacked Mersa Matruh on 20th September causing minor damage to the railway line and some motor transport. Having reached the line Sidi Barrani - Sofafi the enemy halted and devoted his energies to consolidating his gains. It had been appreciated earlier that the Army was not in a position to prevent this limited advance and their policy had been to inflict as many casualties as possible, without allowing themselves to be pinned down.

W.C. Narrative

DO AML/2 95A
19.9.40.

The most important consequence of the advance was the loss to the R.A.F. of the advanced landing grounds at Sidi Barrani. The possession of these airfields had enabled our fighters to use an advanced base from which to protect the bombers, to obtain tactical information and to refuel bombers on long distance raids. Those advantages now lay with the enemy. It had also been used as a staging post for reinforcement aircraft flying from U.K. to Egypt via Malta. In reporting this loss to the Chief of Air Staff, A.C.M. Longmore wrote: "You will appreciate that the consequences of the rapid and extensive retirement of our Army eastwards most seriously reduces the effectiveness of our air operations and any further retirement will hamper the operations of even my few long range aircraft. I have therefore deemed it advisable to bolster up the Army defences to the full extent of my available air resources and I must continue to do so until such time as the G.O.C.-in-C., is better able to resist the Italian advance."

Italian Bomber Losses

M.E. W.I.S.
Nos. 13 and
14

The Italian bombers while they were operating intensively against targets in Egypt suffered heavily at the hands of the Royal Air Force. During the period 9th-23rd September thirty-four enemy aircraft were confirmed destroyed of which twenty-five were known

/to

(1) 4 aircraft

M.E. W.I.S.
No.13

to be bombers. A particularly successful engagement occurred over Sidi Barrani on 15th September when fighter Blenheims, Hurricanes and Gladiators encountered two formations of S.79s over Sidi Barrani. At the sight of our aircraft the enemy jettisoned their bombs and fled, hotly pursued by our pilots who claimed hits on a number of aircraft. A later assessment gave a total of seven S.79s confirmed destroyed and one unconfirmed. The two Hurricanes accounted for four of the victims and the fighter Blenheims three.

Attacks on Italian Camps and Communications

In order to hinder the enemy's consolidation at Sidi Barrani and to discourage heavy attacks on our forward troops A.C. Collishaw directed his Blenheims in force onto this target from 16th to 21st September, making a total of sixty sorties. The concentration was attacked frequently by aircraft in small numbers. Despite the severe A.A. and the dispersal of the vehicles pilots reported much damage to transport. After 21st the target was given a respite until 28th September when three Blenheims attacking M.T. reported that dispersal was extremely good and A.A. intense.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Opsum
No.104

Night attacks against military encampments between Sidi Barrani and Derna were undertaken during the same period by Bombays of No.216 Squadron which used Fuka satellite as an advanced landing ground. On the first night (17/18th) one Bombay carried out an armed reconnaissance of the Bardia - Tobruk - Derna road where a convoy of lorries was discovered and attacked. On the following three nights Bombays were despatched in formations of six, two and six respectively against military positions along the road. Reconnaissance on 20th reported a column of some hundred M.T. with headlights on moving from Tobruk to Sollum and also concentrations of several hundred M.T. at Sidi Barrani. These targets were attacked during the night by Bombays as part of an offensive action by the Army in the Sidi Barrani area. A similar motor convoy was attacked on the night of 27th by a single Bombay but definite results were not observed. On two occasions concentrations were bombed for continuous periods of four hours, during one of which 320 bombs were released.

The effort against Sidi Barrani was interrupted on 18th September by a series of operations against enemy airfields in order to suppress air attacks against H.M.S. Kent which had been damaged off Bardia on the previous night by a torpedo released from a S.79 while Italian bombers were causing a diversion. Throughout the next day (18th) H.M.S. Kent was towed slowly back to base under fighter protection⁽¹⁾. While this was in progress the whole effort⁽²⁾ of Nos.55 and 211 Squadrons was directed against some ten landing grounds in Eastern Cyrenaica. Both offensive and defensive actions were successful and H.M.S. Kent was safely withdrawn.

Long Range Bombing

A conjunction of circumstances enabled the Royal Air Force to counter the Italian advance by an increase in long range bombing activity. The moonlight period which favoured the employment of Bombays coincided with the Italians arrival at Sidi Barrani;

/No.113

- (1) Four Blenheims (30 Squadron; Hurricanes (274 Squadron); and Gladiators (80 and 112 Squadrons).
- (2) 29 sorties.

A.M.L./12

No.113 Squadron became fully equipped on the 9th September with Mark IV Blenheims which had arrived by the Malta route(1); and more significant still, six of the long promised Wellingtons from England arrived via Malta. This force consisting of one squadron of long range Blenheims, one of Bombays and by the end of the month one of Wellingtons greatly increased the scope of strategic bombing in the Middle East.

216 Squadron
O.R.B.

On the evening of 16th operations began against the Benghazi area. On that night six Bombays operating from an advanced base at Fuka attacked the aerodrome at Benina where reconnaissance had shown large numbers of planes. Hangars and buildings were hit, and aircraft bombed and machine gunned, photographs subsequently confirming a hangar, buildings and at least four bombers heavily damaged. The raid was repeated on the following day (17th) by nine Blenheims of No.113 Squadron. As only slight opposition was encountered a low bombing attack was made during which a hangar and a petrol dump were set on fire and at least three bombers were burnt out. This second raid was planned in conjunction with the Navy which attacked at the same time shipping in Benghazi harbour with carrier borne aircraft, sinking one Italian destroyer, the Borea and two Italian ships, the Gloria Stella (5,490 tons) and the Maxia Eugenia 4,702 tons. On the nights of 19/20th/20/21st and 21/22nd a formation of Wellingtons operating from Fuka satellite under the orders of 202 Group(2) attacked Benghazi harbour. The A.A. barrage was ineffectual and aiming of bombs presented no difficulty so that on each occasion bombs straddled ships and quays causing considerable damage.

Italian
Admissions
(J.C.N.I.)
Italian
Admissions

70 Squadron
O.R.B.

70 Squadron
O.R.B.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.12

Benghazi was not the first target in the Middle East to be attacked by Wellingtons, they had made their debut on 18th September when they bombed aerodromes in the Dodecanese. Maritza airfield the landing ground at Callabo Bay on Rhodes, and the hangars at Port Largo Bay, Leros, were attacked, the main object of the raid being to discourage enemy bombers from continuing their increasingly frequent operations from the Dodecanese against Palestine and Alexandria. The Fleet Air Arm had previously made two successful attacks from the carriers Illustrious and Eagle against the Rhodes aerodromes on the 4th and 6th September. The raids, however did not deter the Italians from bombing Alexandria and Haifa which suffered considerable damage on 21st September; Cyprus which had hitherto been spared was also attacked.

Of the ports in Eastern Cyrenaica Derna(3) and Bardia(4) were attacked by the Fleet Air Arm, and Tobruk by a total of fifty-one Blenheims on 23rd, 25th and 30th. All crews reported "heavy and accurate barrage over Tobruk", but direct hits on buildings and near misses on ships were claimed. One ship was admitted damaged in an Italian communique.

Counter Air Force Operations

A small force of Blenheims attacking Menastir on 20th September successfully bombed fighters on the ground. One fighter attempting to take off flew into the bursting bombs and was believed destroyed. A subsequent reconnaissance showed that the number of fighters on the landing ground had increased to

/seventy

- (1) Unfortunately six were lost en route.
- (2) No.70 Squadron Wellingtons normally based at Kabut.
- (3) 16th September.
- (4) 21st September.

Nos.55 and
211 Squadrons
O.R.Bs.

No.55 Squad-
ron O.R.B.

seventy. Taking advantage of this concentration Air Commodore Collishaw ordered a dozen Blenheims to attack at dusk on 22nd. The failing light made observation difficult but bombs were seen to fall across the aerodrome. On 26th this was to have been a raid on a group of fifty tents previously identified as Italian Army Headquarters, but no tents could be found by the Blenheims despatched during the afternoon and the flight broke company, three attacking the landing ground where three aircraft were hit⁽¹⁾ and three a group of huts near Sollum.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Opsum
No.112

In order to provide a diversion while the Fleet Air Arm attacked a convoy off Gezira El Maracheb in the Gulf of Bomba, a Blenheim bombed the nearby landing ground at Gazala. As the pilot was over his target he saw two explosions among the convoy, followed by columns of smoke.

202 Group
O.R.B.

The last counter air force operation of the month was on 30th when seven Blenheims successfully attacked thirty-eight S.79s at Maraua landing ground in Apollonia where the feebleness of the enemy defences justified a low bombing attack. The squadron claimed to have demolished two buildings, set fire to one and blown up two of the bombers. On the homeward journey at a point some sixty miles off Tobruk the formation was intercepted by fifteen CR.42s. A general engagement ensued during which two of the enemy machines were destroyed and a third fell in flames. One Blenheim was shot down by the Italian fighters.

The Threat to Siwa

With the enemy's advance to the Sidi Barrani-Sofosi line the probability of an attack on Siwa was much increased. If this contingency arose the A.O.C.-in-C., was anxious that No.202 Group should take every opportunity to hit the advancing columns. On 19th September, the Army suspecting that an attack was imminent, placed a British company under orders to move to Siwa. After consulting with G.O.C., Western Desert, Air Commodore Collishaw decided to detach two Lysanders from No.208 Squadron to Siwa. From there the Lysanders could keep a close watch on Giarabub and report any advance by the southern route in time for No.202 Group to arrange a bomber attack at the right moment. The flight became operational at Siwa at 1100 hours on 21st September and tactical reconnaissances were immediately begun. Despite regular sorties no traffic was observed until the 26th when enemy movement towards Giarabub was reported. This was confirmed on the following morning when a column of approximately seventy vehicles was sighted by a Lysander between Fort Maddalena and Giarabub. An attack by two squadrons of Blenheims was ordered for the afternoon, crews being particularly warned against bombing holy places. No.211 Squadron⁽²⁾ found the target and scored hits on what were, judging by the fires and explosions, petrol and ammunition lorries. The other squadron, No.55, being unable to find the convoy, attacked the Fort at Giarabub. Two of the aircraft failed to bomb on the first run over the target and so bombed on the second run. By doing so, they fell behind the formation, became stragglers and were engaged by seven CR.42s. During the fight which followed one CR.42 was definitely shot down but a Blenheim was caught in the enemy's fire from the rear. The air gunner was seen to jump by parachute before the plane came down. In the hope of finding him on the next day a pilot from the squadron

/searched

(1) Confirmed by photographs.
(2) 9 Blenheims

searched the area without success. Reluctant to return quite empty handed he dropped a load of small bombs on Fort Maddalena on his way home.

No.208 Squadron O.R.B.

Although small convoys of M.T. were subsequently reported in the Giarabub area, no armoured units were observed and signs of an attack did not develop. Neither on this southern flank nor at Sidi Barrani did the enemy show signs of advancing further into Egypt. Stores were brought up and camps defended⁽¹⁾ but Marshal Graziani evinced a marked tendency to rest on his laurels. Offensive action was confined to high sounding proclamations over the Rome Radio.

Dispositions of the Air Force after the Withdrawal

DO AML/2

Pt.II 18A

Our forces in the Western Desert at the end of September were concentrated between Bir Kenakyis and Matruh with screening forces holding a series of defended positions along the line of a wadi which stretched southward from a point a few miles east of the fortress at Mersa Matruh. Armoured formations to the south carried out systematic patrols in order to meet any outflanking movement by the Italians. Eastwards from the front to Daba, Air Commodore Collishaw had disposed the squadrons of No.202 Group along the coastal strip; Nos.80 and 112 Gladiator Squadrons, No.33 Hurricane Squadron, No.113 Squadron with Blenheims IV which in addition to bombing provided long distance strategical reconnaissance for the Army, and Nos.211 and 55 Squadrons still with Blenheims I. Under the operational control of the G.O.C. Western Desert were No.208 Squadron and a flight each of No.6 and 3 R.A.A.F. Squadrons. No.6 Squadron flight had arrived on a six weeks attachment to No.208 Squadron in order to give the pilots experience of the Western Desert so that they might operate if the need arose. It was intended that the other flights should be sent on similar attachments. For the same reason a flight of No.3 R.A.A.F. Squadron, whose personnel had just arrived from Australia, was attached to No.208 while the main part of the squadron was training at Helwan.

To the west and south-west of Alexandria and for its defence as well as the canal zone were Nos.30 Fighter Blenheims and 274 Hurricane Squadrons. These were controlled by No.252 Wing from the Combined Headquarters and Air Raid Centre, but from time to time detachments of aircraft from both squadrons were sent to the Western Desert. Also on the order of battle were No.1 Egyptian Gladiator squadron at Almaza and half of another at Suez, but it was not known whether they would really attack enemy formations as their country was still non-belligerent.

Heliopolis was still the base for No.216 Squadron's bombing and communications activities and at Kabrit, the first of the Treaty aerodromes No.70 Squadron was gradually re-equipping with Wellingtons⁽²⁾.

Effects of the Withdrawal

No.202 Group O.R.B.

The advantages which the Italians gained by their advance to Sidi Barrani were few. Their maintenance problems were greatly increased as they were now obliged to construct a road from the frontier to their new positions. Their advance along the coastal

/plain

- (1) M.E. W.I.S. No.16 estimated that there were approximately 1,600 M.T., 100 tanks and probably 60,000 troops.
(2) There were 10 Wellingtons on 13.11.40.

II J6/17/2

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
26.9.40.

plain depended for its supplies partly upon the existing coastal road which at certain places was most vulnerable from the sea, a condition which Admiral Cunningham continually exploited by directing harassing fire against the Italian road convoys. They gained no port facilities of any importance and no pronounced geographical advantage, the Halfaya pass being only a hazard of local value. The main advantage as has already been mentioned was the capture of the Sidi Barrani landing grounds from which the Italians could, if they chose operate fighters to protect their bombers. Full use, however, was not made of their acquisition and the effect was rather to deny to us the use of a forward fighter base and so expose our bombers to a heavy scale of fighter opposition without our being able to give them adequate protection. This factor restricted A.C.M. Longmore's ability to carry out "fumigation" operations against enemy airfields when units of the Mediterranean Fleet were operating off Cyrenaica. To continue operating on the same scale under the new conditions would be to risk unduly the available bomber force.

202 Group
O.R.B.
22.9.40.

Another serious result of our withdrawal was the disorganising effect which it had upon the air raid warning organisation at a time when it was required to be particularly efficient. Military precautions prevented air observers being placed far forward of Matruh. Consequently although our fighters were constantly active against the Italian bombers very few interceptions were made. As a temporary measure No.202 Group ordered Nos.80 and 112 Squadrons constant patrols over Matruh from 0800 until 1930. This placed a considerable strain on the fighter force, which was already hard pressed trying to cope with the Italian air offensive against our forward positions. During the week following the capture of Sidi Barrani the enemy bomber effort was maintained⁽¹⁾ but his fighter activity showed a decided increase.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.14

In the political sphere, the withdrawal had made the Egyptians even less convinced that Britain would win the war; on the other hand they were impressed by the successes of the R.A.F. in England and to a lesser degree in Africa. The Government was in the main now well disposed to the British cause, but the King and his immediate entourage were dangerously pro-Italian.

DO AML/2
Pt.II 18A

(1) Some 20 raids involving over 120 bombers.

PART III

THE BRITISH CONQUEST OF CYRENAICA

PREPARATIONS FOR THE COUNTER STROKE

Expansion of the Forces

A more cheerful sign, although no bigger than a man's hand was the beginning of a regular reinforcement of aircraft, the first which were already trickling into Egypt. But the routes by which they came were long, involving a heavy wastage calculated at the time to be over 10%. The arrival on the 10th November of the first Wellingtons, which were to serve the Middle East campaigns so well and for so long, extended the scope of our night bombing. As evidence accumulated of the passage of German mechanised forces through Italy, so it became increasingly important to direct as much of the R.A.F. bomber effort against Benghazi. Optimistic views concerning the results which could be obtained with such a small bomber force against a target so far distant, were entertained in high places. "If Benghazi could be made unusable", signalled the Chiefs of Staff to A.C.M. Longmore, "any plans for large scale Axis advance against Egypt would be seriously delayed, if not entirely dislocated." Shades of Namsós haunted the corridors of Whitehall. Benghazi which had hitherto been undisturbed except by Blenheims on reconnaissance had now become a regular Wellington target, which could also be reached by Mark IV Blenheims operating at extreme range. With the existing resources the scale of attack was limited to three Bombays and three Wellingtons each night. As soon as further long range bombers arrived A.C.M. Longmore intended to increase the pressure against the Italian ports in North Africa. For the present the scale of attack was as great as resources permitted. A proportion of No.216 Squadron also operated against Benghazi, but its essential communication commitments were so great that the whole squadron could not be devoted to bombing.

The Hurricane re-equipment programme was beginning to take shape. The new squadron No.274 was now formed and operating. At the end of September there were sufficient Hurricanes to re-equip a flight of No.33 Squadron. On 22nd September this squadron was moved from Helwan to Fuka satellite, from where it was able to provide protective patrols over the Matruh area. The flight of nine Hurricanes arrived on 3rd October. At the same time arrangements were being made to provide No.208 Squadron with a flight of Hurricanes for reconnaissance work. Experience both in France and the Middle East had shown that the Lysander required strong fighter escort for reconnaissances of even very limited depth into enemy territory where fighter opposition might be expected. The employment of Lysanders, therefore tied up a larger proportion of the fighter force than the value of reconnaissance normally justified. It was principally the difficulty of allocating sufficient fighter protection that prevented the R.A.F. from meeting the full demands of the Army for reconnaissance. In August it was agreed with the War Office to abandon the traditional tactical reconnaissance methods and to employ the same type of aircraft as for close support whenever fighter opposition was probable. For this reason No.3 R.A.A.F. Squadron was given fighter aircraft. Another measure for the improvement of reconnaissance was the despatch to Middle East in September by the Takoradi route of three Hurricanes modified for photographic reconnaissance. These aircraft and three Glen Martins 176 were to form the nucleus of a Photographic Reconnaissance Unit at Heliopolis.

DO AML/2
Pt.II 4A

DO AML/2
Pt.II 10A

DO AML/2
Pt.II 11A

No.33 Squadron
O.R.B.

DO AML/2
Pt.I 81A

S.49342 1A
and 2A

The withdrawal on Matruh had once again emphasised the need for the mobility of the squadrons in the Western Desert to be improved. On 13th September the Expansion and Re-equipment Policy Committee in London agreed that three fighter and three bomber squadrons in Egypt should be put on a mobile basis.

Future Prospects

At the beginning of October the future of the Middle East forces was very much to the fore in the ground strategy which was being planned in Whitehall. The Ministerial Committee on Military Policy in the Middle East had forcibly reminded the War Cabinet that our Air Forces were inferior to the Regia Aeronautica in Africa and that if the German Air Force arrived on the scene the whole position would be imperilled. The Committee urged that the existing rate of reinforcement was insufficient and emphasised that new squadrons could not operate unless the necessary ground staffs preceded them. The time had come for a serious reconsideration of Imperial policy towards the Middle East in the light of the new circumstances which now obtained.

The successful outcome of the Battle of Britain and the deterioration in the weather as winter approached had reduced the likelihood of a German invasion of Britain. As the threat to England lessened there were indications that the Axis powers were directing their attention towards south eastern Europe and the Middle East. German troop movements through Italy had already been observed, tension between the Italians and the Greeks was mounting and German tourists were seeping into the Balkans. The signing of the Tripartite Agreement between Germany, Italy and Japan, which was countered by the reopening of the Burma road gave an oriental slant to strategic deliberations. On the credit side Great Britain had gained three valuable months during which she had not only strengthened her defences, destroyed a large number of German aircraft, and subjected the homeland of her enemies to air attack, but also she had secured a greater measure of material help from the United States. With these considerations in mind the Prime Minister informed the Chiefs of Staff that the time had come to decide between the rival claims of the Home Defences and the Middle East.

COS.(40)819

COS.(40)817

Conflicting Claims of the Home and Middle East Establishments

Any reinforcement of the Middle East inevitably meant a corresponding reduction in the allocations made to the Metropolitan Air Force. The consequences of diverting resources to Egypt were manifold; production in the United Kingdom had been seriously affected by enemy action, so that the air forces in England would immediately feel the pinch if aircraft and crews were diverted to Middle East. A.D.G.B. was still short of seventeen squadrons out of the authorised eighty-five and the strength of Bomber Command was as yet quite inadequate. On the other hand R.A.F. Middle East would only benefit after an appreciable time-lag, during which the aircraft would be in transit and out of action. Experience had shown that there was no method of reinforcing Egypt which was short and at the same time safe; and this was no time to be taking unjustifiable risks with our slender resources. Experience had also shown that hurried arrangements to rush reinforcement aircraft out to Middle East through Malta might result in heavy wastage in personnel and material. The loss of the landing grounds at Sidi Barrani had made high wastage on this route even more probable. Moreover the route through Malta might serve for a programme of re-equipment or limited expansion of existing units, but it could not be used for sending additional squadrons which would need a

S.21299 6A

/full

E.R.P.45

full establishment of ground crews and technical vehicles of which R.A.F. Middle East were particularly short. These had to take the long sea route round the Cape of Good Hope.

DO AML/2
18A 14.10.40.C.O.S.(40)
817 Annex V

Against these risks had to be set the dire need of the Middle East air forces. In the face of an air force which was now estimated to be some seven hundred aircraft strong, Air Chief Marshal Longmore had gallantly protected the Army and the bases in Egypt from serious damage, and despite the odds had even established a moral ascendancy over the Italian pilots. Unstinted praise for these achievements of the R.A.F. were frequently given by the G.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, but success under these conditions could not be assured without substantial reinforcements, and for these General Wavell, Admiral Cunningham and Mr. Eden joined A.C.M. Longmore in pleading to Whitehall; a technique of collective bargaining which was particularly distasteful to the Air Ministry.

S.21299
10.10.40.

In the conflict of claims the decision went in favour of reinforcing the Middle East. It was a courageous decision and subsequent events proved it to be correct. For reasons which have already been given, substantial results could not be obtained immediately, but the way was now clear for a firmer and more encouraging programme of aircraft deliveries to Egypt. The needs of the Middle East air forces were now paramount and the home commands were told that Middle East's demands for crew reinforcements were to be regarded as having first call on their resources "whatever effect they may have upon their immediate operations."

Increases in the Middle East Establishment authorised

The principal methods of putting into effect this decision were to accelerate the re-equipment and expansion of the squadrons in Egypt with more modern and powerful types, in preference to the more exacting and lengthy task of shipping out whole new squadrons. In the matter of re-equipment the substitution of Hurricanes in fighter squadrons was to be augmented by American fighters. The delivery of Wellington bombers was to be hastened so that there would be as soon as possible, two squadrons of an initial equipment of twelve aircraft and some reserves. It was then proposed to effect an immediate expansion of the present initial equipment of bomber squadrons from twelve to sixteen, so that the overall gain for the Middle East bomber squadrons would be fifty-six aircraft⁽¹⁾. The initial equipment of the R.A.F. fighter squadrons was already at sixteen, but the South African squadrons were still at twelve; these were to be raised to sixteen.

C.O.S.(40)
827

S.21299 6A

The Air Staff was not in a position to make precise recommendations concerning the raising of additional squadrons for the Middle East. An undertaking had already been given to the War Office that there would be four fully mobile Army Co-operation squadrons in the Middle East by the spring of 1941. Additionally plans were being discussed to raise three new fighter squadrons by using as a nucleus existing flights and the South African pilots which had been offered by General Smuts. These measures amounted approximately to an increase of six squadrons. A.C.M. Longmore's most urgent need was for the three fighter squadrons which he wanted immediately to counter the Italian Air Force in Libya. In emphasising the urgency to Air Ministry he contended that frequently the Italians allotted to one patrol a number of fighters which exceeded the total⁽²⁾ of R.A.F. fighters in the forward area.

/Closely

- (1) Existing squadrons 2 H.B. + 12 M.G. = 168 a/c at 12 I.E.
At 161 E. = 224 a/c.
- (2) i.e. I.E.

Closely bound up with reinforcements for Egypt was the air force in Malta whose air defence was dependent on a flight of Hurricanes and the island's guns. Until the scale of defences was increased Malta could not be used as an offensive base, neither for the air force nor the navy. To attempt offensive action prematurely would be to invite a measure of counter attacks which might neutralise our forces there. Preparations were, therefore, being made to send as soon as possible ground personnel and servicing equipment for four Hurricane squadrons to Malta. With strong defences at Malta the Fleet could return and together with aircraft operate against the Italian lines of communication to Libya, thus reducing the scale of attack which could be directed against Egypt. The employment and reinforcement of Malta was treated as an integral part of Middle East strategy.

C.O.S. (40)
343rd Mtg.
10.10.40.

Visit of the Secretary of State

The Secretary of State for War, Mr. Eden, who visited the Middle East at the beginning of October was able to investigate the needs of the Middle East on the spot and so impress upon the War Cabinet the weakness of the air forces in Egypt. He found that weakness in the air was causing anxiety among the Army Commanders who felt that with the reinforcements they had now received the Western Desert Force had sufficient strength at Matruh to oppose and defeat the Italians, provided adequate air support was forthcoming. British offensive operations were now being planned, the date being dependent on the arrival of certain equipment. Meanwhile our armoured cars, mobile artillery and infantry were harrassing the enemy as he strengthened his new positions between Sidi Barrani and the frontier. The R.A.F. supported the general plan of preventing the Italians from amassing sufficient strength to advance further by attacking all lines of communication eastwards from Benghazi. This was having considerable success, but when it came to a land offensive the discrepancy between the rate of land and air reinforcements would be most marked.

C.O.S. (40)
837
16.10.40.

In summing up the situation Mr. Eden paid tribute to the R.A.F.

"Liaison between the Army and Air Force is excellent and the R.A.F. are giving support for which no praise can be too high within their limited resources. But both C.-in-C., and A.O.C.-in-C., are emphatic that present strength of air force in Middle East does not permit of that support being given to the Army which is essential for success. Reinforcement of the R.A.F. is the pressing need of the hour here and will, I am convinced prove to be the decisive factor."

C.O.S. (40)
837
16.10.40.

The weakness of the R.A.F., Mr. Eden pointed out, would have disastrous political consequences if it was unable to prevent heavy air bombardment of Egypt's densely populated cities. So far the Royal Air Force had maintained by brilliant tactical skill a bluff which might be called at any moment. It was largely due to the intervention of the Secretary of State and the authority which his first hand knowledge gave him that reinforcements of aircraft were obtained from England and the plan for the offensive only postponed until December, rather than shelved.

Telegram
AE/9/22826
from Cairo
16.10.40.

ILJ 6/48

Operations during October

During the first half of October the Western Desert front remained static. The enemy achieved a wide dispersal so that targets in the forward area were poor. It was however discovered that the enemy was supplying his forward troops by means of a

/pipe

M.E.W.I.S.
No.16

pipe line from a system of storage tanks at Buq Buq. This was successfully attacked by Blenheims and Hurricanes, the latter now being used with good results for ground attack. But apart from this target the operational effort was directed mainly against the Italian supply ports in Cyrenaica in order to hinder their chain of supply by destroying the facilities for disembarking men and material. The Italian reaction to these raids was to protect these areas frequently with standing patrols, especially during the hours before sunset. This practice contained a substantial portion of their fighter force.

M.E.W.I.S.
No.17

Offensive action by the Italian air force was confined at this time to attacks by single aircraft at low level. Of a total of about twenty raids in the second week of October only three were reported to have caused damage. Both sides took advantage of the moon period in the middle of the month. The Italians carried out a night offensive against our forward landing grounds and raid communications, mainly Matruh, Fuka, Daba and Qotofia. The R.A.F. also took the opportunity afforded by the moonlight to operate three Wellingtons at night and one Bombay from Fuka against Benghazi, Tobruk, and when the moon was full, the Dodecanese.

M.E.W.I.S.
Nos.18 and
19

By continued attacks on Tobruk the R.A.F. attempted with some success to prevent the disembarkation of tanks there and so oblige the Italians to move them up by road from Benghazi. As a result most of the tanks arrived in the forward area with their tracks worn out and other maintenance troubles. This became apparent during the December operations when the enemy was handicapped by tank failures.

Diversions to Greece

Counting on the reinforcements which he had recently been promised from England, Air Chief Marshal Longmore turned his attention towards the support of an offensive against the Italians in the Western Desert. Operations in October were successful in denying any additional advantage to the enemy and it seemed probable that the aircraft supply position would be appreciably improved by the opening of the Takoradi route with its theoretical delivery of forty-eight Blenheims, twenty-four Hurricanes and other types each month. But the horizon which was beginning to brighten, threatened to be obscured by the rapid deterioration of Italo-Greek relations which by the end of October plunged into a state of war.

From the first it was clear that Britain would have to provide assistance to the Greeks as she was pledged to do. It was in the air that the quickest aid could be given, and it was assistance in the air which was most acceptable to the Greeks. Realising this, Sir Arthur Longmore was faced with a difficult situation. He already regarded his forces in the Western Desert as insufficient for the offensive which the Army hoped shortly to undertake. He feared that if forces were despatched to Greece on the ground that reinforcements for Egypt were on the way, a dangerous hiatus would be created which might fatally compromise air support for the Western Desert Force. From the British Ambassador in Athens and from the authorities at home he was pressed to assist the Greeks. As Air Chief Marshal Longmore pointed out situations such as this - and they were likely to recur - demanded that there should be available within the Command a reserve on which he could draw air and ground crews, aircraft and a nucleus staff for new commitments.

DO. AML/9
41A

DO. AML/2
37A

DO. AML/2
29A

Despite these grave objections Sir Arthur Longmore decided that he must send as a political necessity a token force to the Greeks who had been exhorted constantly by our Minister to resist the Italians. On the 31st October he ordered one squadron of

/Blenheims I

Blenheims I to Greece. He chose No.30 Squadron which was equipped half with fighters and half with bombers. It was also the least indispensable as for some weeks there had been no daylight raids or reconnaissance over Alexandria. This decision was acknowledged with approbation by the Prime Minister.

C.O.S.
telegram
No.23
4.11.40.

Sir Arthur had only anticipated the Chiefs of Staff by a few days. But the one squadron which he had sent was the thin end of a substantial wedge. On 4th November the Chiefs of Staff telegraphed to the Commander-in-Chief, "It has been decided that it is necessary to give Greece the greatest possible material and moral support at the earliest possible moment". The diversion from our air forces in Egypt was to be three Blenheim squadrons and a Gladiator squadron, followed later by a second Gladiator squadron. Steps were being taken, the A.O.C.-in-C. was assured, to replace these squadrons from England. Thirty-four Hurricanes and pilots were to be despatched by aircraft carrier, thirty-two Wellingtons via Malta and the necessary ground personnel and stores through the Mediterranean. In addition a bomber force was to be maintained at Malta of twenty-four Wellingtons, personnel and stores being sent by cruiser. But inevitably there would be a dangerous gap between the departure of the squadrons for Greece and the arrival of the reinforcements in Egypt.

DO A.M.L/2
Pt.II 48A

Sir Arthur Longmore voiced his apprehensions to the Chief of Air Staff; "There is naturally consternation particularly with the Ambassador", he wrote, "over the removal of what constitutes a large proportion of the air force in Egypt, more particularly after having gained approval for three additional fighter squadrons as the minimum possible to make things less dangerous here I have reiterated the great danger of over optimistic forecasts of when air replacements and reinforcements actually arrive." He then stressed the immobility of the R.A.F. squadrons compared with the Italians who worked a garage system. He was also doubtful whether Malta was yet in a position to operate as many as twenty-four Wellingtons. Hitherto Wellingtons consigned to the Middle East as reinforcements had been held at Malta for strategic bombing raids against targets in Southern Italy. Some success had already been achieved.

46A

DO AML/2
Pt.II 48A

These operations were carried out under the control of Air Ministry, but with the extension of Malta's bombing effort to support the Greeks, both Air Ministry and Middle East with occasional suggestions from the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean made demands on the Wellingtons. When Sir Arthur Longmore pointed this out to the Chief of the Air Staff, he was instructed on the 6th November to assume control of bomber operations from Malta immediately⁽²⁾, and to concentrate their effort to support the Greeks. This Wellington detachment continued to operate on a temporary basis until early in December when A.O.C. Malta asked that it should be formed into a distinct and permanent unit. The reason for his request was that the lack of unity and the temporary nature of the detachment were proving detrimental to morale.

51A

72A

This reduction of the air forces in Egypt precluded the launching of an offensive in the Western Desert in November. The date was postponed until the end of the first week in December provided the air situation was then such as to make it possible.

/Stocktaking

DO AML/9
76A

- (1) E.T.A. 2.12.40.
(2) On 8.11.40. A.O.C.-in-C. countermanded this order and instructed Malta that Air Ministry would resume control. This was reversed by C.A.S. on 11.11.40.

G.181954

Stocktaking of the Middle East Air Forces

Sir Arthur Longmore's predicament occasioned in Whitehall a stocktaking of the number of aircraft which the A.O.C.-in-C., had at his disposal. The subject formed the basis of a sustained argument between the staffs in London and Cairo for a matter of years. The greater part of the misunderstanding concerned the proportion of serviceable to unserviceable aircraft; it was upon the latter category that the discussion thrived. Behind the serviceable aircraft, whose numbers could be assessed fairly accurately on any particular day, there ranged innumerable categories of aircraft which were not available for operations. There were aircraft undergoing minor repairs or inspections, there were aircraft returned to maintenance units for complete overhauls, aircraft awaiting spares, aircraft waiting to be scrapped, aircraft used for training and communications, aircraft still in crates awaiting erection, aircraft on the high seas. The number or pieces of aircraft not available for operations could be represented as very high, depending on the use made of the various definitions.

The Air Staff in London presented to the Prime Minister a statement of the number of aircraft at the disposal of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief. The figure was formidable. Confronted with the total the Prime Minister who was making every effort to speed up the arrival of Hurricanes et cetera to the Middle East was prompted to write to the A.O.C.-in-C., in critical terms: "I am astonished to find that you have nearly a thousand aircraft and a thousand pilots and sixteen thousand air personnel in the Middle East excluding Kenya. I am most anxious to re-equip you with modern machines at the earliest moment, but surely out of all this establishment you ought to be able, if the machines are forthcoming, to produce a substantially larger number of modern aircraft operationally fit". The implication was that the Middle East repair organisation could do better. The repair organisation, however laboured under many crippling disadvantages. It was short of technicians, equipment and spare parts; it had no industries behind it on which it could draw; it had to collect and despatch its aircraft over vast distances; it was faced with difficult climatic conditions dominated by all pervading duststorms and as yet it was only beginning its growing pains. Before condemning the Middle East repair organisation - and this is no defence of it - it should be established that it had the tools to do the job. As an instance of the unnecessary burdens imposed on it by Air Ministry, No.73 Squadron reported that tremendous trouble and confusion was caused through their stores and equipment and those of Nos.37 and 38 Squadrons all being marked identically without anything to show to which squadron any particular case or box belonged. It was estimated that it would take three weeks to sort out these stores.

Explaining the high figures to the Prime Minister, Sir Arthur Longmore emphasised that a large proportion of the aircraft were non-operational and that although he was satisfied that everything was being done at home to reinforce Egypt, the fact remained that those measures took a considerable time to become effective in Egypt. In an aside to A.O.C., Aden he added "Promised reinforcements are taking much longer than the Prime Minister is lead to believe from what the Air Ministry tells him. The consequence is that we shall always have very much less than he thinks we have got when deciding on assisting Greece, Turkey or any other doubtful neutral within reach". Indeed it is clear that Sir Arthur Longmore feared that plans might overreach our capabilities. In warning the Chief of the Air Staff against extensive plans in the Balkans which could not be met by the existing rate of reinforcements he stated: "Even our existing commitments are right

DO AML/2

No.73 Squad-
ron O.R.B.
5:12.40.

DO AML/2
Part iii 8A

/out

out of step with our air strength even with what is immediately in sight, yet we are already being asked what immediate assistance can be given to Turkey in the event of her being involved. Operation Compass will need every available operational aircraft in Egypt to support it if the British Army is to avoid being badly mauled by the Italian air force in Libya whose morale through vastly superior numbers should not be under-rated."

Shortage of Fighter Aircraft

The despatch of two fighter squadrons to Greece created a critical situation in Egypt where there remained two squadrons only of Hurricanes complete with reserves, one in the Western Desert and one defending Alexandria. The proposal to convert Blenheims to fighters was still baulked by the disappearance in June of the necessary equipment which had not been seen since its trans-shipment at Gibraltar. In Sir Arthur Longmore's opinion the fighters had been reduced below the safety margin; a state of affairs he expected to last two months. The possibility of drawing on Malta for fighters was doomed by the catastrophe which overtook the dozen Hurricanes flown off the aircraft carrier Argus. Eight were lost in the sea. The departure of the Gladiators made it impossible for the A.O.C.-in-C., to continue his policy of combining in fighter formations the speed of the Hurricane and the manoeuvrability of the Gladiator, a technique which had proved very effective but which Sir Charles Portal felt could be achieved by Hurricanes alone. At first the Hurricanes had found that the CR.42s were able to out-maoeuvre them at low heights, whereas the Gladiators were more than a match for the CR.42 in this respect. Later the Hurricane pilots developed appropriate tactics by using their speed to climb above the CR.42s and deliver a diving attack. Eventually these tactics were very successful.

The risks involved in denuding Egypt of fighters were realized at home and orders were given for the carrier Furious to proceed at full speed to Takoradi with thirty-four Hurricanes and pilots. The necessary ground crews were despatched to arrive at the same time (26th November) in Egypt. By this means Sir Charles Portal hoped to raise the Hurricane strength in Egypt to between eight and ninety aircraft by the time offensive operations began in the Western Desert.

Meanwhile the A.O.C.-in-C., had to fill the gap as best he could. The only course open to him was to damp down operations in other theatres and move their aircraft to Egypt until the promised reinforcements arrived. On 21st November he ordered Nos.11 and 39 Squadrons to move complete from Aden and No.45 Squadron from the Sudan to Egypt. This left the Red Sea route in danger, "but", remarked Sir Arthur, "we are already taking such colossal risks that I am really becoming shock-proof."

In order to distract the attention of the Italian fighters in the Western Desert the A.O.C.-in-C., suggested to Air Commodore Collishaw that it might be advisable in the event of an offensive to depart from the previous policy of keeping fighters high up to engage fighters; and instead to use Hurricanes for ground strafing of motor transport and motorised infantry on the move behind the front. (see Appendix XXII). In this way large numbers of CR.42 aircraft might be persuaded to dissipate their efforts chasing Hurricanes ineffectively. Sir Arthur Longmore hoped to relieve the situation by sending out the new Hurricane squadron due from England in early December. He offered Air Commodore Collishaw the comfort of the reflection that "big risks are being taken and our resources are very slender, but we are used to that now after six months and the situation is not much worse than before".

DO AML/2
Pt. II 58A

DO AML/2
Pt. II 95A

DO AML/4
31A

DO AML/5
32A

S.49342 6A . So acute was the shortage of fighters that when the first Hurricane equipped for photographic reconnaissance arrived in Egypt, orders were given for it to be converted back to a standard Hurricane with two cameras in place of two of the guns. When the modification had been completed the aircraft was despatched to No.208 Squadron as the first of the Hurricane flight.

DO AML/9
Pt.II 11A

A further contribution to the fighter strength in Egypt was made by Air Headquarters East Africa who after discussion with the G.O.C., agreed to send five Hurricanes and four Gladiators from Kenya. These resources from within the Command were augmented by skilful use of the Takoradi route along which twenty-seven Hurricanes out of thirty-four, flown off Furious on the 28th November, in company with five Blenheims, reached Heliopolis by the 8th December.

Operations preliminary to General Wavell's Offensive

Operations in the Western Desert from the entry of Greece into the war until the beginning of General Wavell's offensive against the Italians in Libya were directed principally against ports and bases in Cyrenaica in a continued attempt to prevent the enemy accumulating sufficient supplies to renew his advance. The number of sorties against this type of target⁽¹⁾ were approximately twice that against aerodromes⁽²⁾ or camps and lines of communication⁽³⁾. It was necessary to maintain pressure against Italian aerodromes, particularly during the first half of November when their bombers and fighters showed greater activity against forward troops and our bombers. Berka aerodrome was principally attacked and good results obtained, including fires among the building and barracks, and the explosion of an ammunition dump.

The Italian Army was now well established in a number of perimeter camps in the areas Sidi Barrani, Tummar, Sofafi and Sollum, where according to intelligence sources their forces consisted of Nos.1 and 2 Libyan divisions. Against these camps and motor transport concentrations in the vicinity a number of daylight bombing and front gun attacks by a total of forty aircraft including Lysanders and Hurricanes were made between the 4th and 7th November.

M.E. fort-
nightly
Operational
Summary No.1

The enemy air forces were grouped in two areas; the bombers being disposed in the Benghazi-Tmimi area with fighter defence at each aerodrome; the reconnaissance and fighter aircraft were further forward in the area Tobruk, El Adem, Gambut. The enemy were now closely escorting their bombers against our fighters, but still they suffered heavy losses. On 31st October fifteen S.79s escorted by eighteen CR.42s attacked Matruh, Gerawla and Qasaba when they were intercepted by a formation of a dozen Hurricanes and ten Gladiators which together destroyed eight enemy aircraft and damaged four others. The R.A.F. maintained a steady air effort until mid-November when the diversions to Greece began to be felt. Although the number of objectives attacked was not reduced, raids were normally confined to single or pairs of aircraft.

On 7th November, No.6 Squadron Flight, which had been attached to No.208 Squadron since September, was replaced by another flight from the Squadron H.Q. in Palestine. This

/arrangement

- (1) 98 Sorties
- (2) 52 Sorties
- (3) 58 Sorties

arrangement was in accordance with the policy of giving the pilots experience in Western Desert operations (see page 63).

M.E. fort-
nightly.
Operational
Summary No.1

The protection of the Lysander, which had proved so vulnerable, required that fighters should be diverted from their independent role to escorting these aircraft. Already Gladiators had been issued to No.3 R.A.A.F. squadron instead of Lysanders and on the 6th November, No.208 Squadron received some Hurricanes. These fighters proved outstandingly useful for reconnaissance and they frequently sought out and engaged enemy fighters in the area. Despite handicaps the Lysander fought well as was shown on the 16th November when a single aircraft of No.208 Squadron on reconnaissance was intercepted by three CR.42s. Although out gunned and out manoeuvred, the Lysander fought off the fighters for some time and shot down one of them before it was itself destroyed, the pilot and the gunner escaping by parachute to be picked up later by our forward troops. Strategical reconnaissance was still carried out principally by No.113 Squadron (Blenheims IV) throughout these operations, in addition to the long distance bombing sorties, with assistance from time to time from No.55 Squadron.

Opsum 164

On the 20th November a strong formation was sent up to obtain photographs of the enemy's forward camps. Lysanders of No.208 Squadron in company with a Blenheim of No.113 Squadron and protected by nine Hurricanes and six Gladiators carried out a reconnaissance of the Sidi Barrani to Giarabub area. About sixty enemy fighters, CR.42s, took off from El Gubbi, El Adem, Minastir and Sollum to prevent the reconnaissance, most of them climbing to attack the Hurricanes. The remainder attacked the Lysanders and were engaged by the Gladiators which shot down six and probably destroyed three more. Meanwhile the Hurricanes shot down one before breaking off the engagement to avoid being out manoeuvred. Our aircraft emerged from the combat with all the photographs required and without loss to themselves. The information obtained showed that the enemy had constructed almost complete lines of anti-tank obstacles round most of his camps.

During November the efforts of the Wellingtons were devoted principally to supporting the Greek campaign. The detachment at Malta continued to operate against ports used by the enemy for supplying troops in Albania, particularly Bari and Brindisi. Naples was considered as a secondary target only and the reason why Naples and Taranto received so much attention was that bad weather frequently prevented operations over the east coast of Italy. Naples was raided four times from Malta between the beginning of November and the 9th December. On each occasion the main targets were oil refineries and the railway junction where fires and explosions were reported. Taranto was raided on 13th November and Catania, which was used for flying aircraft to Libya, and Augusta were also successfully raided as alternative targets. The weather in fact prevented the major effort being directed to support the Greek campaign.

Opsum 181

Immediately before the opening of the offensive in the Western Desert the Wellingtons made two destructive raids on Italian aerodromes in the rear. On 7th December Wellingtons from Malta attacked Castel Benito aerodrome near Tripoli. Seventeen tons of G.P. and three of incendiary bombs were dropped, five hangars hit and it was estimated that much damage was done. The attack was a complete surprise and the Wellingtons were able to come down low setting fire to eight aircraft on the ground with incendiary machine-gun fire. Only one CR.42 rose to the attack and damaged one Wellington.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.25

On the following night after an attack by nine Blenheim IVs during which a hangar was burnt out, twenty Wellingtons from

/Egypt

Opsum 182

Egypt bombed the aerodrome at Benina inflicting further damage. Air Chief Marshal Longmore considered that these two attacks had considerable effect in reducing the scale of the attack at the beginning of the British Offensive. Apart from these raids, bad weather, and severe sandstorms restricted normal air operations against Libya during the fortnight before the offensive. Nevertheless Air Commodore Collishaw continued to attack targets over a wide area in order to disperse the Italian fighter force in fruitless standing patrols and so keep them on the defensive. On the 4th December a night raid was carried out against El Adem aerodrome. With the exception of these operations there was little bomber activity during the first week in December.

THE FIRST BRITISH OFFENSIVE IN THE WESTERN DESERT

The Plan

The offensive was originally planned to take place on 14th November but two days beforehand it was decided that dumping arrangements were not sufficiently advanced and that certain Army and Royal Air Force units would have to be sent to the Greek theatre. Commanders were then told that the most probable date would be in the second week of December when the moon was favourable for night operations.

The original plan which was conceived before the Italian advance intended the capture of Giarabub and Bardia with a further advance to Tobruk. This was forestalled by the Italian move, but by mid-October when the enemy had been stationary for about a month General Wavell was already considering a swift counter stroke which would last about five days with the limited objective of Sidi Barrani. He asked General Wilson to consider an attack at both ends of the Italian line but after discussion with General O'Connor, G.O.C., Western Desert Force, the plan was adjusted in order to concentrate the attack in the centre, as the Sofafi camps were considered too strong to be taken by a frontal attack. The object was now restricted to the destruction of the Tummar and Nibeiva camps and to raid enemy installations in the Bug Bug area, where lay the water and supply centre, and the Sidi Barrani position.

The R.A.F. plan was to bombard heavily the various defended camps during sustained operations immediately before the attack by our Army. The numerical superiority of the enemy air force made concealment and deception an important part of the plan. Land forces were to be filtered into the forward area before the attack as unobtrusively as possible. During this period it was essential that the R.A.F. should maintain local air superiority in the forward area. Secrecy before 9th December was well kept because no single individual was informed of the plan a moment before it was necessary for him to be told and even then only such information as was essential was imparted at any stage in the preparations. The absence of written orders was a new and outstanding feature of the planning. Practically nothing whatever was put on paper. The reason given for troop movements was the relief of a forward division and the enemy was encouraged to think that we had been seriously weakened by withdrawals to Greece.

The only instruction given by the A.O.C.-in-C., to Air Commodore Collishaw was to try and put the Italian fighters on the defensive by using Hurricanes for low flying attacks on Italian lines of communication immediately in the rear of their forward troops, and as soon as within range, to use them for low attacks on the fighter

/aerodromes.

aerodromes. For the rest it was left to him to arrange with General O'Connor how best he could employ his force to give full support to the Army.

Although the objectives of the offensive were modest, General Wavell made it clear that bold action to exploit any advantage would be fully supported by the High Command and the War Cabinet, himself suggesting that it might be possible to convert the enemy's defeat into an outstanding victory. However he did not hold out extravagant hopes for the operation. The final instruction on 12th December to General O'Connor set the task as the capture of the Nibeiwa camps, followed by a thrust northwards to secure Sidi Barrani and cut off Maktilla. The full support of all the existing resources of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force were promised for the battle.

Additional Air Force Units for the Offensive

II J1/7/1

In order to make good some of the withdrawals for the Greek campaign, Sir Arthur Longmore placed No.11 and No.39 Squadrons from Aden and No.45 from the Sudan under the orders of Air Commodore Collishaw. To provide some reserves for the Gladiators he moved 'K' Flight from the Sudan to Heliopolis where it was held to make good losses in the battle. By 8th December there were three Wellington squadrons in the canal zone in addition to No.216 Bombay Squadron at Heliopolis; these aircraft were frequently placed at the disposal of No.202 Group for attacks on targets in Libya, when they used advanced landing grounds in the Western Desert. At the expense of the defence of Alexandria No.274 (Hurricane) Squadron complete was moved from Amiyra to Sidi Heneish where it operated under Air Commodore Collishaw. Only in this way was it possible to provide the Army with adequate air cover and support for the operation. The consequent risk to Alexandria and the Delta had to be accepted despite the disconcerting estimate that the Italian Air Force in Libya, in addition to 250 bombers, had approximately 250 fighters as compared with some sixty-five fighters on the British side. Fortunately the latter included thirty-five Hurricanes whose strength had been raised by aircraft carrier operations to Takoradi, including the planes for No.73 Squadron which began to assemble in Egypt on 8th December.

Organisation for the Offensive

Air Commodore Collishaw was in complete charge of air operations in support of the battle. His resources in No.202 Group amounted to ten squadrons, to which were added two Army Co-operation Squadrons under the operational control of the G.O.C., Western Desert Force and at the discretion of the A.O.C.-in-C., control of the heavy bomber squadrons. Operations were directed from Headquarters No.202 Group whose staff was kept as small as possible, amounting to some thirty-two officers in all. For convenience of liaison, it was situated near the headquarters of the Army Commander who himself had at Corps Headquarters, a small staff of two R.A.F. officers, for the operation of the two Army Co-operation Squadrons.

The position of the Squadrons commanded by Air Commodore Collishaw was some distance from the front line, but were near his headquarters. Bomb and petrol stocks were kept to the rear of the aerodromes. This policy, although wasteful in engine hours, kept the aircraft out of the way of enemy short range fighters at a time when A.A. protection was very thin. In detail the squadrons concerned in the offensive were:-

DO/AML/2
Pt. III 16A.

No. 33 Squadron	- Hurricanes
No. 274 Squadron	- Hurricanes
No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron	- Gladiators and Gauntlets
No. 208 Squadron (Army Co-operation)	- Lysanders and Hurricane
No. 6 Squadron (" ")	- two flights of Lysanders - attached No. 208
No. 113 Squadron	- Blenheims IV
No. 55 Squadron	- Blenheims + Detachment of No. 11 Squadron
No. 45 Squadron	- Blenheims + Detachment of No. 39 Squadron

There was also the remains of No. 112 Squadron from which Gladiators had been provided for Greece.

Directly under the control of Headquarters R.A.F. Middle East were:-

No. 37 Squadron - Wellingtons
No. 70 Squadron - Wellingtons
No. 38 Squadron - Wellingtons
No. 216 Squadron - Bombays

This total gave a theoretical strength of two hundred and twenty aircraft.

On the 8th December, No. 73 Squadron began to arrive and was held temporarily for the air defence of the Delta.

The Opening of the Battle

Opsum 182

During the day of the 8th December Gladiators and Hurricanes (33, 112 and 274) maintained offensive patrols in the forward area to protect the assembly of the British forces for the attack. Except for a few reconnaissance sorties Italian aircraft were inactive over the forward area and the enemy apparently remained ignorant of our intentions; fears that our Army would be subjected to severe air attack during this critical phase were not realised. At dusk the tank group began its march to its rendezvous⁽¹⁾ while a Bombay flew overhead to drown the approach of the tanks, the wind being in the direction of the enemy.

M.E. W.I.S.
No. 25

II J6/3

Opsum 183

It was a cold night, but the moon was good, giving visibility up to two hundred yards. In the rear of the enemy the raid against Benina was taking place. Simultaneously Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm and an R.A.F. Blenheim co-operated with three naval units in a bombardment of the enemy position at Maktila⁽²⁾ and Sidi Barrani in order to cause a diversion. Also in support of the Army's attack four Bombays each with six hundred twenty-pound bombs attacked defended camps at Bardia and Sidi Barrani, with the object of hindering the enemy sending reinforcements into the Buq Buq area. These various operations were designed to confuse the enemy concerning our precise intentions. The attack came as a complete surprise when tanks advanced on the enemy, followed by an infantry assault whose way was paved by bomber attacks on the defended camps at the appropriate times.

M.E. W.I.S.
No. 26

The preliminaries having been carried out with due consideration for the conservation of aircraft against the battle periods, the Royal Air Force embarked on a full scale offensive of increasing severity against enemy airfields, ports, supplies, troops and transport. Despite great inferiority in numbers air superiority

/was

(1) Point 587349
(2) Leaflets were also dropped.

was obtained from the outset and nearly four hundred sorties were flown in the first week for the loss of only six aircraft and three pilots whereas the enemy casualties amounted to thirty-five confirmed destroyed and twelve unconfirmed.

During the first three days of the offensive the main bomber effort of the Air Force was directed against the Tobruk group of aerodromes to prevent the Italian aircraft interfering with our advance. No.33 Squadron ground strafing along the roads as far as fifty miles beyond Bardia obtained valuable information for the G.O.C., concerning enemy movements and strength despite bad visibility which was sometimes down to three hundred yards. Lysanders of No.208 Squadron were constantly employed on the southern edge of the battle, leaving deep reconnaissance to the Hurricanes.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
Jan. 1940,
App.56

The Italians on the other hand failed throughout these operations to bomb our lines of communications and British troops suffered very few casualties from the air. CR.43s were sometimes very active but were successfully countered by Hurricanes, now using diving tactics.

Opsum 183

Although the first day was overcast the Army successfully captured Nibeiwa camp in the forenoon and Tummar East camp fell in the afternoon to an attack on the northwest corner which air reconnaissance showed to be the weakest place. In addition to the close support given by the Hurricanes, Gladiators carried out offensive patrols over our advanced troops, and successfully prevented interference from the enemy who devoted his efforts as soon as the battle began, to harassing the British Army with bombs and machine gun fire from large numbers of fighters. Air Commodore Collishaw's plan was to have a constant stream of fighters penetrating the enemy's defences and so induce a break down in his air force and his supply system. At peak periods, R.A.F. fighters made four sorties each day. In countering the enemy's activity No.274 Squadron Hurricanes, twice encountered formations which during the day ranged from single S.79s to some thirty strong escorted by CR.42s, on the first occasion forcing the enemy to jettison their bombs. In his pre-occupation with the land battle the enemy almost completely neglected counter air force operations as well as strategic bombing. This was most fortunate since the air defence of the Delta for the past ten days had been sacrificed for fighter strength in the forward area. However with the arrival from Takoradi of the Hurricanes of the additional fighter squadron, No.73, the situation was eased.

II J6/1

DO AML/2
Pt.III 16A

The results of the first day's operations both on land and in the air were encouraging. Air Chief Marshal Longmore wrote to Sir Charles Portal, "At present we seem to be doing better than I expected with our small air force in support of the Army offensive in the Western Desert which started successfully yesterday".

Opsum 185

Early on the second morning Tummar West camp fell. Under cover of a heavy dust storm, which hindered our reconnaissance and air support, the enemy withdrew before our advancing tanks which by 1640 hours had captured Sidi Barrani. On the 11th December the 1st Libyan Division which had been garrisoning the Maktala camp on the coast surrendered to the Matruh force, thus securing the victory at Sidi Barrani. Although the main weight of attack from the air during these three days was focussed on the enemy's aerodromes priority was given on the 11th to bombing enemy columns retiring from Sofafi area towards Halfway House.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
Dec. 1940,
App.18

Italian fighter opposition now stiffened and the A.O.C.-in-C., strengthened No.202 Group by sending forward a flight of Hurricanes of No.73 Squadron. By 12th December the 7th Armoured Division Headquarters was eight miles east of Bir Sofafi, with

/the

the 7th Armoured Brigade collecting prisoners in the Buq Buq area, while the Support Group watched the passes through the escarpment. Already the Royal Air Force had begun an intensive bombardment of Bardia, which was the next objective, and to a lesser degree Tobruk.

From 12th to 16th December the Army exploited the advance in the expectation that the enemy might withdraw from Bardia. The military situation remained fluid, making it difficult to determine the exact position and movement of troops. Often Army calls for assistance were the first indications of their positions. The Italians now held the area Sidi Omar-Sollum-Bardia, and their Air Force was concentrating on sustained bombing attacks supported by fighters against our troops. R.A.F. fighters tried to intercept them and indeed several air battles took place, but the number of fighters was limited and constant patrols could not be maintained, so that an interval of about three hours usually elapsed. Owing to the numerical superiority of the enemy and the need to conserve, Air Commodore Collishaw ordered fighters to patrol at 20,000 feet⁽¹⁾.

II J6/1

This was the only serious attempt on the part of the Italian bomber force to dispute our advance by intensive attacks on our armoured vehicles between Capuzzo and Sidi Azeiz. By operating fighters singly but frequently against the bombers, both outward and homeward bound, Air Commodore Collishaw managed to inflict such casualties on the S.79s that they were not again employed in strength during the campaign.

In the hope of reducing Bardia at once the air force, in co-operation with the Royal Navy, concentrated on bombarding the defended area and its approaches in an attempt to make it untenable, the most severe raid being on the night 15/16th December when five squadrons joined with a detachment of the Fleet Air Arm, making a total force of thirty-six aircraft. It then became clear that the defences of Bardia were strong and that both the army and the air force would have to establish themselves further forward for the assault.

M.E.W.I.S.
No.26

The Success of the Advance

Despite this failure to rush Bardia far more than had been expected had already been achieved. All enemy troops had been driven out of Egypt with the loss of the great part of five Italian divisions. Large quantities of war material had been captured including over half of their only armoured group in Egypt. In the first week the R.A.F. had destroyed seventy-four enemy aircraft confirmed and a further eighteen unconfirmed, and had fully maintained air superiority. Bardia and Tobruk had been heavily bombed, according to the standards of the day and both were reported to have been burning for several days in succession. In addition to their victories the fighters had repeatedly and with marked success machine-gunned troops and transport in the battle area where large numbers of the enemy made fruitless attempts to catch the Hurricanes (for Policy see App. XXII). Further afield Wellingtons from Malta bombed Naples, the assembly port for convoys, and the Fleet Air Arm attacked Tripoli harbour, the main port of arrival in North Africa. Writing to Sir Arthur Longmore the Under Secretary of State, Captain Balfour parodied the Prime Minister "Never has so much been done with so little equipment by so small a force".

M.E.W.I.S.
No.26

M.E.W.I.S.
No.26

/The

(1) It was the practice of the enemy bombers to fly at 6,000 feet dropping to ground level after releasing their bombs, while their protecting fighters kept watch at 13,000 feet.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
December 1940
App. 37

DO AML/5
77A

The shortage of fighter aircraft was still acute. The A.O.C.-in-C. wrote on the 13th December to Air Commodore Collishaw, "Our reserves of Gladiators are now practically exhausted. You must consider adjusting your operations according to the fighter situation, relying if necessary on night bombing. This in fact had to be done. No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron which had provided close support for our troops by offensive patrols against motor transport and troops, had to curtail their operations after 13th December owing to increasing unserviceability of the Gladiators for which there were no reserves, there not being sufficient to maintain Nos. 80 (in Greece), 112 and 3 R.A.A.F. Squadrons. As a matter of policy, however, Air Chief Marshal Longmore decided that he must keep up supplies to No. 3 Squadron as the Australian Division was now in the front line. He proposed therefore to withdraw the flights of No. 112 Squadron and rearm it with Hurricanes as soon as these arrived.

DO AML/16
14A

Meanwhile congratulations on our victory poured in. General Wavell replying to the Prime Minister said, "the operation could not have been executed without the magnificent support given by the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy". To this co-operation between the services the General attributed our initial success; the effect of surprise and the fighting qualities and leadership of our forces being the two other principal factors. Now the advance was to be exploited, but difficulties of maintenance and of air support increased the nearer established enemy air bases were approached and the further we moved from our own.

DO AML/2
Pt. III 26A

Sir Arthur Longmore described the situation on the 15th December to the Chief of the Air Staff. Italian air resistance in the vicinity of the Libyan frontier had stiffened and our armoured cars southwest of Bardia were getting heavily bombed. Sidi Barrani had already been brought into use as an advanced landing ground with great advantage to the fighter force which had disposed of nineteen enemy aircraft on the 14th. In order to keep up with the advance the air force had also to improvise advanced desert landing grounds which suffered from the lack of signals communications.

DO AML/2
Pt. III 31A
M.E.W.I.S.
No. 27

Our casualties so far had been light but unserviceability had risen not only as a result of the intensity of operations but also due to enemy explosive bullets. For instance nine Blenheims in a raid on Bardia on 14th December encountered a patrol of fifty CR.42s. Although only one Blenheim was lost, seven were damaged. Fighter reserves were particularly low. As has been shown Gladiators were beginning to run out and the Hurricane programme was not sufficient to maintain both fighter and army co-operation squadrons. The prospect was not made any lighter by a secret intelligence report that large reinforcements of aircraft were reaching Libya and the rumours of German troops and aircraft in Italy.

DO AML/16
16A

In order to alleviate the situation Air Ministry gave instructions for a further forty Hurricanes to be sent by aircraft carrier to Takoradi where they would be due to arrive in the first half of January.

The Reduction of Bardia

DO AML/2
Pt. III 28A

In his congratulations on the victory at Sidi Barrani the Prime Minister added an exhortation "to maul the Italian Army and rip them off the African shore to the utmost possible extent. I feel convinced", he continued, "that it is only after you have made sure that you can get no further that you will relinquish the main hope in favour of the secondary action in the Sudan or Dodecanese... but neither of them ought to detract from the supreme task of

/inflicting

inflicting further defeats on the Italian army". And he added a special message for the A.O.C.-in-C., "Pray convey my compliments and congratulations to Longmore on his magnificent handling of the R.A.F. and fine co-operation with the Army. I do hope most of the new Hurricanes have reached him safely. Tell him we are filling up Furious again with another even larger packet of flyables from Takoradi".

Table of
Ops.

While forces were being brought against Bardia during the next week (16th-22nd) over a third⁽¹⁾ of the bomber effort was directed on to the fortress, troop concentrations in the vicinity and the supply dumps in the wadi northwest of the town. But compared with the first week of the offensive our operations on both sides were on a smaller scale - less than half the effort of the previous week.

DO AML/2
Pt. III 31A

M.E.W.I.S.
No. 27 &
No. 28

In view of the bad weather conditions on the Adriatic, the A.O.C.-in-C. gave Tripoli and Benghazi, which were more important at the time, as the primary objectives for the Wellingtons at Malta. Of the two Benghazi was the more likely to have an immediate effect on the Libyan offensive. Unusually large concentrations of aircraft⁽²⁾ were reported at the Benghazi airfields and were attacked on 17/18th December by nineteen Wellingtons in a raid on Benina and on 19/20th by nine Wellingtons in a raid on Berka. In the main these were reserve aircraft waiting to relieve Italian units further forward. On the following night nine Wellingtons bombed Castel Benito while Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm attacked Tripoli.

The enemy now employed his fighters mainly as escort for bombers and during the few engagements which took place showed greater determination in his attacks, always provided that numerical superiority was in his favour. His bombers continued to attack our forward troops and regularly bombed Sollum just after moonrise, in an attempt to neutralise the harbour which was now being used to supply the army by sea. These attacks were sometimes supported by naval gunfire. On the 16th a particularly heavy air attack developed against our armoured units in the Sidi Omar - Azeiz - Bardia area when fifty-seven S.79s escorted by thirty-six fighters bombed A.F.Vs.

RDM/3

On 20th December the XIth Hussars found Gambut evacuated. It was to this regiment that the A.O.C.-in-C. had attached twelve of the vehicles and crews of No. 2 R.A.F. Armoured Car Company which was at that time based in Palestine. The regiment which was usually well forward had recovered several R.A.F. pilots who had baled out in the Western Desert. The attachment of R.A.F. armoured cars provided the regiment with vehicles which were badly needed and the crews with operational experience.

Preparations for the Assault

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E.
Dec. 1940
Admin.

For some time past Sir Arthur Longmore had been pressing for a Deputy A.O.C.-in-C. who could relieve him of much of the routine work in connection with the air forces in Egypt and so leave himself freer to direct the various campaigns in the Middle East. To this the Air Ministry agreed, appointing Air Marshal Boyd to the post. Unfortunately the aircraft in which the Air Marshal was travelling to Egypt force-landed by mistake in Sicily and he was taken prisoner. The next choice fell on Air Vice-Marshal A.W. Tedder, C.B., then Director General of Research and Development at the Ministry of Aircraft Production. He arrived safely in Cairo on 10th December, having inspected the Takoradi route on his way to Egypt.

/Shortly

(1) 50 Sorties.
(2) About 200 aircraft (H.Q. R.A.F. M.E. F. 540 - December App. 35)

Shortly after his arrival when our forces were preparing to capture Bardia, Air Marshal Tedder temporarily relieved Air Commodore Collishaw who was sick. During the week that followed (23rd - 30th) air operations were on an even smaller scale, bomber sorties amounting to a bare fifty, the majority being at night. No bombing was carried out on Christmas Day. The greater part of the effort was against the enemy's three main landing grounds from which the Italians were then operating strong formations of bombers and escorts, Gazala principally, Derna and Tamimi. Already El Adem and Gambut were reported to have been evacuated, but there were signs that Martuba was being taken into use in order to accommodate the units which had been withdrawn.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
Table of Ops.

M.E.W.I.S.
No.28

There was no increase during the week in the enemy's bomber activity which was almost entirely devoted to attacks on shipping and the harbour at Sollum. Raids consisted of five to ten escorted bombers and in one instance torpedo aircraft took part. The fighters were now being used extensively to protect bombers, the proportion usually being about two to one. The attack on 24th December was particularly accurate. In order to deal with this problem an Advanced Fighter Wing Headquarters was formed at Sollum under No.202 Group, its function being to control operational fighter squadrons⁽¹⁾ in the forward areas of the Western Desert. The Wing consisted of a Wing Commander, three controllers with three assistants, an Adjutant and signals staff.

S.50489/Org.
H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
December
M.E.A.M.
Order No.206

Despite the small scale of operations the initiative in the air remained with the Royal Air Force. This was strikingly demonstrated on Boxing Day when eight Gladiators on a protective patrol during an artillery reconnaissance met ten S.79s escorted by forty CR.42s. When the Gladiators attacked, the main Italian formation turned and made off while their top escort engaged the Gladiators, using their usual acrobatic tactics which cost them two aircraft confirmed destroyed and possibly two more. The Gladiators suffered no losses.

M.E.W.I.S.
No.29

After three weeks operations in support of the advance Air Chief Marshal Longmore took stock of his reserves of medium bombers. Of Blenheim IVs he informed the Air Ministry, there were nineteen in reserve but only six were serviceable. The total reserve of Blenheim Is amounted to twenty-six of which all but two were undergoing overhaul or extensive repairs in depot. This reserve - if such it can be called - was intended to cover not only the Libyan theatre but the rest of the Middle East Command. In part the reason lay in the failure of reinforcement Blenheims to arrive in sufficient numbers. Counting in shipments up to 19th January, 1941, the flow was deficient of ninety-one aircraft. Another reason undoubtedly was the inability of the existing repair organisation to cope with operational wastage, and the wear and tear of the Takoradi route (see narrative on Repair and Maintenance). On the 27th December the A.O.C.-in-C. reported that Nos.11 and 39 squadrons had only three and four aircraft respectively. In these circumstances it was out of the question to increase as the Air Ministry had suggested the Initial Equipment of the medium bomber squadrons.

DO AML/9
Pt.III 30A

The Assault on Bardia

As had already been shown during the first attempt to rush its defences, the fortress of Bardia was formidable; impregnable the Italians claimed. The configuration of the terrain made ground reconnaissance of the fortifications difficult, but comprehensive

/air

(1) i.e. Nos.33, 73 and 274.

II J6/3

W.C. Narrative

air photographs were taken of the defences, whose perimeter ran from its base on the sea northwest of Bardia for seventeen miles along a flat dusty plain. The forward defences were covered by an anti-tank ditch with sheer sides; behind the ditch was a thick wire fence some twelve feet wide and further behind were two lines of fortified posts with a switch defence line in the southern sector. In the western sector the defences lay along a flat plateau for about a mile and then the country was broken up by wadis stretching down to the cliffs. In these wadis the enemy concealed M.T. and stores which were constantly attacked by the Royal Air Force.

W.C. Narrative

A careful study of these positions was made by Air and General Staffs. The G.O.C. Western Desert then planned to penetrate the defences at the weakest point, some 4000 yards south of the Tobruk-Bardia road, then to push south-west while a diversionary demonstration was carried out against the southern defences and the armoured formations moved forward to prevent relief reaching the fortress from the west. In detail the plan intended that engineers should clear an approach in the enemy's minefield while the Royal Air Force delivered sustained heavy bombing and fighter attacks against the point of entry, advantage being taken of the division caused by the large wadi in the centre of the defences which isolated one half of the defended area from the other. In support of the Army, the Royal Air Force undertook to deliver bombing attacks immediately in front of our troops at each stage of the advance. To hinder reinforcement from the Tobruk area that port was bombed and fighters constantly attacked the line of communication between it and Bardia. Some counter Air Force operations were carried out against Gazala, Derna, Martuba, Tmimi airfields principally on the day of the land attack, but the principal target for the Air Force was Bardia and its approaches against which nearly a hundred sorties were flown between New Year's eve and the 4th January. Both day and night sorties were made against the harbour, the town, ammunition dumps, stores and artillery posts, but the main target was troop concentrations inside the northern defence line and M.T. west of the camp. Photographs showed direct hits on tanks and transport, considerable damage being done in the Wadi. There was much anti-aircraft fire but it was mostly accurate.

M.E. W.I.S.
No. 29

While aircraft were engaged on softening up the defences, the Royal Navy carried out daylight bombardments of the northern defences on the 1st and 2nd January.

RDM/3

H.Q., R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
7.1.41.DO AML/2
Pt. III 46B

In the early hours of 3rd January our guns moved into their prepared positions, taking their targets from air photographs and correlating them to the gun positions. At 0530 the attack opened with a predicted artillery barrage after a night of heavy attacks by Wellingtons and Bombays⁽¹⁾. The barrage then lifted as the infantry advanced successfully through the wire and across the ditch. During the attack Hurricanes and Gladiators maintained offensive patrols over Bardia, while a Lysander co-operated with the artillery. The Hurricanes were despatched singly every ten minutes with instructions to dive over Bardia for reconnaissance information. Having prepared for the advance by sustained bombing which was calculated to wear down the enemy's resistance, the medium bomber force turned its attention to enemy aerodromes in order to prevent the Italian Air Force from interfering with the military operations. This effort of the Blenheims at Bardia resulted in considerable damage to aircraft which were hard to replace; the danger of operating Blenheims in daylight without cloud cover was becoming very clear.

/Twice

(1) 30,000 lbs. of bombs dropped.

Twice during the day H.M.S. Terror, joined in the morning by a squadron of capital ships and destroyers, carried out bombardments and twice she was attacked by enemy aircraft. On the second occasion three were destroyed and one damaged by a Hurricane. The object of the naval bombardments was to neutralize and harass the sector north of the main Bardia-Tobruk road in which large concentrations of mechanical transport and tanks had been reported and so prevent the formation of a counter-attacking force while the Army and the R.A.F. attacked Bardia from the west and south. The bombardment succeeded in suppressing all movement in the area and diverted part of the fire of the heavy guns from their proper targets.

W.C. Narrative

Meanwhile the attack against the Wadi El Maatred in the south was launched. Fierce fire was encountered and confused fighting lasted for the rest of the day when about two-thirds of Bardia was occupied. The Australian Division regrouped on the 4th January and attacked again so suddenly and so swiftly that the enemy collapsed neglecting to destroy the water supply and harbour. On the following day the Royal Tank Regiment attacked the southwest corner of the defences and the enemy surrendered at 1300 hours. Throughout the operation the main feature was the close combination of the action of all three services.

208 Squadron
O.R.B.

On the conclusion of the Bardia battle, General O'Connor sent the following message to the Officer Commanding, No.208 Squadron: "I would like to convey to you my appreciation of the work carried out by the squadron under your Command during the operations against Bardia. The reconnaissances carried out, both tactical and artillery were of a very high order and contributed largely to the ultimate success of the land operations."

DO AML/2
Pt. II 51A

The Prime Minister also was warm in his congratulations for the brilliant support which the Air Force had given to the Army and its victory over the Italian Air Force in spite of the heavy numerical odds; an achievement which he suggested was of great importance and might be "cardinal for our affairs". Looking further ahead Mr. Churchill dwelt on the importance of sustaining the Greek Army, warning the A.O.C.-in-C., that probably four or five squadrons would be required for Greece, even while supporting the Army's advance in Libya.

DO AML/9 53A

In the belief that on our support to Greece depended the favourable attitude of Turkey, Russia and the United States, the British Government decided on 10th January that assistance to Greece must take priority over all operations in the Middle East once Tobruk was captured. This did not preclude an advance to Benghazi if the opportunity occurred. In terms of squadrons this meant sending three Hurricane and two Blenheim IV squadrons to Greece. The A.O.C.-in-C.'s first reaction was to oppose strongly the proposal as most dangerous to the Army's protection and as inviting the resurgence of the Italian Air Force in Libya. The order however was repeated by the Prime Minister with the observation that he expected and required prompt and active compliance with his decisions. Taking all things into consideration the A.O.C.-in-C., decided to send Nos.11 and 112 squadrons which were accordingly withdrawn.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.30

Prisoners taken at Bardia were carefully interrogated concerning the effect of our bombing. An assessment of their evidence shows that considerable disorganisation was caused, the effect being moral rather than material. General de Guida, commanding the 63rd Cyrene Division described how before the final assault the defending units had been harassed from the air by day and night, their morale being so reduced when the final

/assault

assault came and they were hemmed in by artillery pounding them from the front and rear, naval guns from the sea and bombs and machine-gun fire from the air that they were reduced to utter helplessness. The General himself was attacked from the air while hiding unceremoniously beneath some desert scrub; a strategem which preserved his life, whereas of the two captains with him, one was killed outright, while the other overcome by the stress of these circumstances died of heart failure.

THE OCCUPATION OF CYRENAICA

The Investment of Tobruk

Before Bardia fell the Commanders-in-Chief had agreed that Tobruk should be attacked and already the Air Force had turned its attention to that fortress carrying out fifty-six sorties between the 4th and 6th January. It was estimated that the Italian forces remaining in Cyrenaica were now centred on Tobruk with a nucleus division at Meckili which was reinforced towards the end of the month.

The perimeter defences of Tobruk ran from Marsa El Sabal on the coast to Dahar Matauua, thence back to the sea at Wadi El Zeitun. Southeast of Tobruk the ground rises gradually to a ridge nine miles from the town; to the north the ground slopes away to a steep escarpment with a second running parallel to it. These escarpments were impassable to tanks except by the few passes connecting Tobruk with Derna, El Adem and Bardia. The organisation of the defences were similar to, but not so complete, as those at Bardia with wire, ditch and posts, behind which the forts, Pilasterno, Solaro and Marcucei protected the harbour.

Following the capture of Bardia the 7th Armoured Brigade moved on 5th January westward without opposition and occupied El Adem whence it operated to prevent the Italians escaping from Tobruk. The aerodrome at El Adem, already familiar to both bomber and fighters pilots, was the principal enemy airfield and repair depot in Cyrenaica and on it were captured some eighty-seven damaged aircraft⁽¹⁾, most of which had been shot up or bombed, the Italians being unable to repair them. On the following day the 3rd Hussars took Acroma and later Tmimi and the 11th Hussars, Bir El Gobi. This thrust by our armour forced the enemy to abandon his aerodromes between Derna and Tobruk, thus putting his Air Force at a great disadvantage during the attack when our local air superiority prevented interference by their aircraft.

Meanwhile the 6th Australian Division moved into position east and southeast of Tobruk, and with the Support Group patrolled the defences from the 11th to 20th January. The R.A.F. bases were at this time about 150 miles behind the Army. Unexpected difficulties were experienced when squadrons began to move to aerodromes near Bardia because supplies of petrol and bombs could not be obtained from Sollum where the harbour was receiving much attention from the enemy Air Forces. The situation was later aggravated by the advent of a detachment of the German Air Force at Benina whence they bombed Sollum, Bardia, Malta and our shipping and mined the Suez Canal and the harbour at Sollum. The latter in particular

/held

(1) A.C.M. Longmore in his despatch gives forty aircraft damaged at El Adem and a further thirty-five at Gazala.

R.D.M./5

held up supplies so that R.A.F. had to employ motor transport over the bad roads from Mersa Matruh. Nevertheless on the 10th January, No.202 Group together with the Western Desert squadrons began to move forward. By the middle of the month Headquarters No.202 Group was at Sollum in the police barracks near the airfield, the bomber and fighter squadrons in the Sollum-Bardia area, and the Army Co-operation squadrons forward at Gambut. As the advance progressed, the supply lines became attenuated and administrative problems increased, particularly the provision of bombs for the Blenheims.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
10.1.41.

The bombing of Tobruk was suspended on 10th January in anticipation of its early capture, but was resumed as soon as it was clear that determined resistance was being offered. On the 12th the Wellington effort available to A.O.C., No.202 Group was reduced to six aircraft each night, as the remainder of the force was now required to assist the Greek campaign.

II J6/3

The plan of attack on Tobruk was again based on a comprehensive mosaic photograph of the defences. The Army and the Air Staffs agreed that the Australian Division should penetrate the defences in the south at a point three miles east of the Tobruk-El Adem road, supported by the bulk of XIII Corps Artillery, while a demonstration was made against the eastern perimeter and the west and southwest defences.

II J6/3

R.D.M./3

In the preliminary stage the R.A.F. assisted the armoured Brigade in isolating Tobruk by bombing lines of communications to the fortress. During the week before the assault over a third of the bombing effort was devoted to the Tobruk area. The A.O.C.-in-C., directed that the other main targets should be Benghazi with its aerodromes Benina and Berka, to which the enemy had been forced to withdraw his bomber force, and Derna which was still in use. But it was already clear that the aircraft losses inflicted on the enemy both in the air and on the ground were reducing his activity in the air. From now onwards the R.A.F. operated with comparative immunity. The main reason for the collapse of the Italian Air Force, given by Air Marshal Tedder, was the effectiveness of our attacks on its aircraft on the ground - a technique which the Germans claimed we had learnt from them, and which they could be expected to use against us when they were sufficiently established in Africa.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Air
O.R.B.
25.1.41.

Malta's Contribution

Wellingtons from Malta played an important part not only in damaging Italian aircraft out of range of bombers from Egypt but also in hindering the establishment of the Luftwaffe in Sicily. From the beginning of the offensive on the 9th December to the fall of Benghazi on the 7th February over twenty-five operations were carried out by Malta's Wellingtons (see Appendix XXI). Between the 14th December and 7th January, Tripoli and Castel Benito were the main objects of attacks. Two raids on the aerodrome resulted in damage to buildings, hangars and parked aircraft; four attacks on the port itself repeatedly caused fires and explosions which damaged jetties, buildings, ships and seaplanes at anchor. Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm at Malta twice attacked the same target and caused considerable damage inflicting much damage particularly on shipping and the seaplane base. On the 8th and 9th January No.148 Squadron, as the Wellingtons on Malta had now become, attacked the port of Naples and the Sicilian ports of Messina and Palermo, the Swordfish repeating the Palermo raid on the 10th. Shipping, naval units and harbour facilities were reported to be damaged. The main object of these raids was to cause a diversion, requested by the Commander-in-Chief,

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. O.R.B.
Air App.13
Jan. 1941

/Mediterranean,

Mediterranean, from an important convoy sailing to Greece.

From 12th to 27th successful attacks from Malta were made on Sicilian aerodromes where German Air Force units had been reported since the beginning of January. These operations were intended not only to discourage German intervention on the Libyan front but also to counteract the new threat to Malta constituted by the German bombers in Sicily. Another raid by No.148 squadron against the German Air Force on the night of the 13th had the special object of minimising attacks on H.M.S. *Illustrious* which was then in the Grand Harbour. The precision of the squadron's raid was greatly assisted by the arrival in January of a Photographic Reconnaissance Spitfire.

The last two raids of the period were carried out on the 31st January and the 2nd February against Tripoli and Castel Benito where the enemy was collecting the scattered remnants of his bomber force. At the harbour more shipping was damaged and a seaplane destroyed; explosions and fire enveloped the jetties and seaplane hangars. At the aerodrome at least seven parked aircraft were destroyed and a hangar blew up. Apart from the material damage done, these flank attacks were highly disconcerting to all arms of the Italian forces and were a real threat to the security of their communications to Africa. It was for this reason that the Luftwaffe appeared in Sicily as protector of the Italian sea lanes and disputant of Malta's offensive air power.

The Fall of Tobruk

Between the 14th and 21st January, when the attack began, operations were not on a heavy scale due to the movement of units after the fall of Bardia and to bad weather aggravated by dust storms lasting up to four days which caused the postponement of the assault for one day and which severely reduced Hurricane service-ability. The R.A.F. therefore concentrated on the principal objectives, Tobruk itself, the ports and airfields of Benghazi and Derna. There were no raids during this week from Malta against Libyan targets.

M.E. W.I.S.
No. 31

On the 16th January the G.O.C., Western Desert Force requested that the maximum air effort should be directed against Tobruk before the attack in order to reduce resistance and our casualties. Accordingly on 17th January priority for the Wellingtons was again given to Western Desert targets. On the nights previous to the attack Tobruk was bombarded by the R.A.F. and on 19/20th and 20/21st by the Royal Navy whose targets were Palestino, the road out of Tobruk and the areas in the northwest.

H.Q. R.A.F.,
M.E. Air
O.R.B.
16.1.41.

On 21st January R.A.F. Wellingtons carried out a bombardment of Tobruk from 0300 to 0600 hours to cover the assembly of the tanks. Bombs were directed against the outer and inner defences, artillery batteries, the San Giorgio and military buildings. At dawn the British attack began with a creeping barrage and the R.A.F. concentrated on bombing the Sidi Mahmud road junction to prevent the movement of troops to the threatened area. The Italians in the defence posts, where the breach was made, resisted strongly every advance.

II J6/48

II J6/3

Throughout the day eighty-eight Blenheims as well as Hurricanes and Lysanders gave direct support ahead of the attack, while fighter cover was provided by Gladiators (No.3 R.A.A.F.) and Hurricanes (No.73 and 274). The R.A.F. bombardment was particularly valuable in maintaining pressure while the heavy artillery was being brought up. By mid-day the bulk of the artillery had advanced within the perimeter and by 1845 the 17th Australian Infantry Brigade held a

RDM/3

II J6/3

W.C, Narra-
tive

/general

general line along the top of the escarpment. The Italian Air Force hardly put in an appearance over the battlefield and only one engagement took place, the R.A.F. having complete control of the air.

At dawn on 22nd the Australian Division continued their advance, entering Tobruk at 1019 hours. By noon all resistance had ceased and the number of prisoners amounted to nearly 30,000.

The part played by the R.A.F. in the victory was considerable. Throughout the preparations and the battle itself valuable reconnaissance information and photographs had been provided concerning the minefields and defences, without which casualties would have been higher. Aircraft had participated in breaching the defences and co-operated closely with the artillery shoots. As at Bardia the greatest damage done by bombing was when warehouses were hit. At Bardia a warehouse of food had been destroyed and many prisoners were suffering from acute hunger as a result; at Tobruk, there was a general breakdown in supplies. As far as casualties were concerned more were caused by machine-gun fire from aircraft than bombs. The San Georgio and some eighteen other ships were found sunk in the harbour. The jetties were also severely damaged. In the two nights and a day before the fall of the town the R.A.F. dropped sixty tons of bombs on Tobruk in about a hundred sorties, but the sum of the damage was accumulative over a period of six months continual operations.

M.E. W.I.S.
No. 32

The German Air Force in the Mediterranean

Since the Chiefs of Staff decision that after Tobruk was captured support to Greece should be paramount, two new factors had arisen. The Greeks unwilling to provoke the Germans had refused British assistance at Salonika; and secondly the long dreaded arrival of the German Air Force in the Mediterranean had been confirmed. It was now doubtful whether the risks taken in the face of the Italian Air Force would be justifiable in the presence of the German. With German bombers over the Delta the air defence of the back areas which hitherto had been so thin now became precarious. The Chiefs of Staff therefore revised their previous policy and decided that the capture of Benghazi was now of the greatest importance so that it could be developed into a strongly defended naval and air base. Supply along the coast by sea could then take place of the long overland route. To eliminate the threat to our communications to Greece and Turkey, constituted by the presence of German bombers in the Dodecanese, plans were to be made to capture the islands and a strategic reserve created for Turkey or Greece. But the transfer to Greece of Nos. 11 and 112 squadrons under the previous policy was to take place and No. 33 held in readiness. It was added that the first duty of the A.O.C.-in-C., was to make the Air Force at Malta sufficient to sustain the island's defence. Moreover plans were also required for the capture of Sicily. This rather outsize in strategic pills was sugared with the announcement that H.M.S. Furious would make a third voyage to Takoradi with a consignment of fighters. Even so it was indeed difficult for Sir Arthur Longmore to see how, with his present Air Force, he was to support three campaigns and possibly a fourth, capture the Dodecanese and then Sicily, defend Malta and the long African seaboard against German and Italian air attack.

DO AML/2
Pt. III 73A

DO AML/3
Pt. III 82A

The State of the Italian Air Force

Admittedly the Italian Air Force in Libya showed a marked shrinkage since the beginning of the year; some units had disappeared presumably by absorption into the depleted ranks of the

M.E. W.I.S.
No. 31

/others

A.M. W.I.S.
No.76

M.E. W.I.S.
No.32

A.M. W.I.S.
No.76

others, thus producing in the new units lack of unity and efficiency and inducing demoralisation; and the percentage of unserviceability was high, resulting not only from damage during air attacks but also from a poor maintenance organisation, which was aggravated by the failure of the Italian air frames and aero engines to stand up to the stress of war conditions. All the airfields on the flat ground between Sollum and Derna were being denied the enemy and he was already withdrawing his bombers west to Castel Benito with advanced aerodromes at Benghazi and Maraua. As Cyrenaica swiftly fell to the British armies, the Italians were forced to abandon approximately eighty aerodromes and landing grounds, thirty of which were known to be operationally suitable. As they drew west of Derna and into Tripolitania the number of prepared aerodromes decreased.

The Commanders-in-Chief reviewed the situation. They agreed that the capture of Benghazi and the reduction of the Dodecanese were of the utmost importance. But they stressed the danger of extending our commitments in the present situation. Previously risks had been justifiable when dealing with an unenterprising enemy. Even then the war had been conducted on an irreducible minimum force which was in fact well below the danger line.

Already the air defence problem was formidable. Malta, Cyrenaica (when the occupation was completed) including the base at Benghazi, whose retention might well depend on adequate air protection, were in the van of the air frontier; Egypt, Haifa and Suez were threatened from the Dodecanese. Until the latter was captured the fighter defence of Egypt would have to be maintained. The A.O.C.-in-C., found it difficult enough to stretch the fighter resources to meet the commitments he already had to cover land bases and sea lanes.

73 Squadron
O.R.B.
29.1.41.

Accepting that Malta must be buttressed against the German air attacks from Sicily, six Hurricanes with long-range tanks, flew on 29th January from Egypt after being delayed for several days by bad weather.

The Capture of Derna

It was suggested by General O'Connor during the second week in January at a conference in Cairo that after the fall of Tobruk, El Mechili should be attacked as an immediate threat to the Italian positions in the hilly coastal belt. The Brigade Group at Melchili with a hundred and sixty tanks and the 60th Division east of Derna comprised the remainder of the Italian forces in Cyrenaica. The plan adopted was to contain the enemy at Derna until the force at Mechili was eliminated. Orders were therefore issued on 23rd January for the 7th Armoured Division to advance on Mechili while the 6th Australian Division invested Derna.

R.D.M.10

R.D.M.3

No.202 Group had now moved forward to establish its headquarters at Sidi Mahmoud with Nos.73 and later 274 fighter squadrons at Gazala, and No.3 R.A.A.F. and No.208 Army Co-operation squadrons at Tmimi. One of the great difficulties of moving forward was to obtain sufficient supplies of petrol and bombs. The arrival of the German Air Force had made precarious the use of Tobruk, Bardia and Sollum, and enemy mines hampered our use of the ports. Air Commodore Collishaw also complained that the bombs and petrol for the R.A.F. were loaded at the bottom of the ships, making it more difficult to obtain these items quickly. The R.A.F. consequently resorted to bringing petrol and bombs up the long route from Mersa Matruh to the Tobruk area. Fortunately large quantities of Italian aviation petrol and bombs were captured. These windfalls were immediately appropriated by the R.A.F.

/By

By agreement between General Wavell and Air Chief Marshal Longmore the operations of No.202 Group were directed wholly against enemy aerodromes during the week following the fall of Tobruk. Maraua landing ground was principally attacked, also Derna, Apollonia and Barce, where on 25th January enemy fighters made one of their rare appearances and effectively prevented our bombers reaching the target, El Magrun and Solluch. But the effort was small; less than that expended during the first day of the attack on Tobruk.

A.M. S.I.S.
No.74

On 23rd and 24th January the enemy strongly reinforced Mechili with armoured troops, bringing the estimated total up to 9,000. Air photographs of the position were taken and it was found that there was an incomplete perimeter camp north of the fort and a defensive knoll to the west. On the night 26/27th the Italians unexpectedly withdrew from Mechili, managing to elude the 7th Armoured Division, thus leaving Derna exposed and the route to Benghazi open. Air reconnaissance on 27th January, having indicated that the bulk of the enemy's force was withdrawing along the El Mechili-El Faidia track, R.A.F. harassed the retreating Italian columns during the evening. Meanwhile the 6th Australian Division increased pressure on Derna which the Italians evacuated by dawn on 30th January although they still held their positions on the Wadi Derna for a short time.

IIJ 6/48

On 30th January and 1st February, Elenheims concentrated on bombing Barce aerodrome, carrying out twenty-eight sorties in the two days. On most occasions A.A. was non-existent and damage was inflicted on the airfield and hangars.

M.E. W.I.S.
No.33

The Rout of the Italians from Cyrenaica

Air reconnaissance on 3rd February provided definite evidence that the enemy was withdrawing further. Large columns of M.T. protected by A.A. were moving westward in the Slonta area and photographic reconnaissance showed about sixty tanks entrained at Barce. A marked lull in enemy air operations suggested that the aerodromes south of Benghazi were being abandoned. Further west strategic reconnaissance revealed continuous westward movement on the roads, indicating that a full scale enemy retreat from Cyrenaica had begun. There was scarcely any shipping in Benghazi harbour and Benina aerodrome was practically empty of aircraft, and there were no signs of any ground defences for the town. On this evidence it was decided at a Command Conference at Bomba to put into operation at once the plan to move an armoured force across the desert to cut the road south of Benghazi. General O'Connor therefore despatched the 7th Armoured Division towards Msus with all available resources, so that it could operate from there either against Soluch or Agedabia. Meanwhile the Australian Division advancing on Benghazi secured a line through Cyrene and El Faida, but the enemy had broken contact.

R.D.M. 10

R.D.M. 7

A.O.C. No.202 Group fully supported the proposal to continue the advance to Benghazi without a halt. He was anxious to establish Air Forces in the Benghazi area whence important military objectives in Italy and also Tripoli the only North African port remaining to the Italians could be bombed from the air. From the point of view of air defence our occupation of the whole of Cyrenaica would place the Italian Air Force in Libya out of range of the Delta. Air Commodore Collishaw believed that these considerations outweighed the shortage of petrol, ammunition and rations in the forward area. The R.A.F. therefore had to rely to an increasing extent upon captured enemy petrol and bomber squadrons had to remain at their existing bases owing to the difficulty of transport and moving bombs forward.

R.D.M./7

/The

M.E. W.I.S.
No.33

Table of
Ops.

The R.A.F. were already bombing and strafing with fighters all movement on the roads between Derna and Benghazi to hamper the retreat. The railway at Barce was bombed on the 3rd by three aircraft to prevent the movement of the tanks which had been observed and again on the 4th by four Blenheims as the enemy began to withdraw. From 2nd to 4th February, the road and rail communications centering on Faida, Maraua and Barce were repeatedly bombed, nearly forty sorties by Blenheims being made in the three days.

On 4th February a composite Flight from No.208 Squadron, made up of Hurricanes and Lysanders went to Mechili to operate with the 7th Armoured Division which was approaching Zouiet Msus. Already it was clear from air reconnaissance that the enemy were now moving in large numbers from Benghazi southwards. Although the Armoured Division was so short of ammunition, petrol and food, a flying column was despatched to intercept the enemy escaping down the Benghazi-Agedabia road. This column, despite the heavy going and the narrow margin of supplies, pressed forward until it was astride the coastal road on the 5th February, while the R.A.F. bombed Jedabaya airfield at the southern end of the route to prevent the enemy Air Force interfering. The force had not long to wait before an unending stream of transport, some five thousand strong were sighted, approaching Beda Fomm, about thirty miles south of Sollum. The Italians were completely surprised, but after the first shock they tried to break through, supported by strong armoured formations. The engagement continued fiercely through the 6th February, a day of squall and blinding rain, and for a while the issue hung in the balance, but on the following day the battle went in our favour and the Italians surrendered. As a result of the action the 4th Armoured Brigade destroyed fifty-one tanks and the force captured eight thousand prisoners. The battlefield afterwards presented an endless panorama of mutilated vehicles and abandoned equipment.

W.C. Narra-
tive

Meanwhile the 6th Australian Division had moved forward from Barce toward Benina, Berka and Benghazi which were attacked from the air by Wellingtons on the nights of the 4th and 5th February. Bombs fell amongst aircraft and vehicles and on hangars and barracks, and on the return journey, columns of M.T. were raked with machine-gun fire. In the late afternoon on the 6th a small party of British and Australian troops entered Benghazi with demands for surrender. Further south the 11th Hussars continued down the coastal road occupying Agheila at noon on the 8th. This completed the British advance into Cyrenaica begun two months earlier during which a force which never exceeded two divisions had virtually destroyed nine Italian divisions.

II J6/48

To the support of this remarkable victory the R.A.F. in Egypt had brought every available aircraft from Hurricanes to Gauntlets, Blenheims and Lysanders. The important bases in the Delta had been stripped of their air defence which was dependent at its thinnest period upon a few sea Gladiators of the Fleet Air Arm and aircraft in reserve, or on a fighter squadron assembling after its passage to the Middle East or another awaiting orders to leave for Greece. Even when the German Air Force began laying mines in the Suez Canal and the danger from the Dodecanese was increasing there was only one squadron, No.33, in a defensive role protecting Alexandria and the Suez Canal.

DO AML/2
Pt.III 95A

The achievement of the Middle East Air Forces

Apart from the successful advance on land in which the R.A.F. could justly claim a share, there was much to show purely from the Air Force angle, that the R.A.F. had achieved a victory of its own. Throughout the advance as airfields and ports fell into our hands, there was ample evidence of the material destruction wrought by the

/Royal

R.M.D./7

Royal Air Force, often in conjunction with naval bombardment. At Tobruk, Air Commodore Collishaw reported nineteen ships found out of action, several of ten thousand tons or more. On enemy aerodromes between Sollum and Derna more than a hundred aircraft were found abandoned. (Many of these could have been repaired if the means had been available, but lack of engineering facilities in the field and lack of protection against dust conditions prevented the Italians raising their very low degree of serviceability). In the open desert there were remains of scores of others which had crashed after combat with the R.A.F. At the seaplane base at Bomba which had frequently been raided by our bombers; the wreckage of a large number of seaplanes, destroyed by bombs and machine-gun fire, were found. When the landing grounds at Cyrene, Apollonia, El Faidia, Glonta, Maraua and Barce were captured more than sixty damaged enemy aircraft were counted by No.202 Group; at Benina over a hundred Italian aircraft were taken and at Berka some fifty odd. Most of these aircraft had been damaged during R.A.F. attacks and the enemy had not been able to repair them. In addition a large number of enemy aircraft were found crashed between Derna and Benghazi. In all, a total of 1,100 damaged Italian aircraft fell into our hands during the advance into Cyrenaica. These losses alone crippled the Italian Air Force, but there were other factors. The aggressive quality of our pilots soon gave to them a moral ascendancy over their opponents; the destruction which they wrought in the air and on the ground undermined the fighting spirit not only of the Italian air crews but also in some measure of the troops. Despite their great numbers the Italian Air Force was at a very early stage forced on to the defensive, an attitude which became increasingly prevalent as R.A.F. successes increased and the Italians neglected to exploit their Air power. This moral weakness was in no way counteracted by any attempt at leadership, although on isolated occasions a few individual pilots showed determination. When reverses came, firstly on the Greek front and later in the Western Desert, Italian morale declined rapidly. To some extent this was a state general to the Italian Empire. Reports of defeatism were received continually from Italy itself and following the resignation of Marshal Bagdolio and two other senior generals, it was believed that there might be a rift in the Fascist structure. Mr. Churchill broadcast an appeal to the Italian people to disown their administration. Attacks were made on Northern Italy by Bomber Command. But the Italian dictator took heed. Changes were made in his entourage and he seemed to scramble back into the saddle; albeit at the end of a German leading rein.

The defensive policy forced upon the Regia Aeronautica involved the maintenance of endless fighter patrols over bases and lines of communication to meet the demands of the Italian generals for air cover. Exploiting the situation Air Commodore Collishaw employed his fighters singly over a wide area to attack transport on the main roads and aircraft on the ground. Italian attempts to intercept these raiders involved the consumption of an enormous number of engine hours with very little result. The practice of our fighters of crossing the coast from seaward at maximum height and radius and then losing height at high speed on the homeward journey to shoot up enemy transport columns, prevented the Italians having any important success. The policy of using fighters individually might have resulted in serious casualties at the hands of an enterprising opponent. As it was fighter squadron casualties were light. The part played by the fighter squadrons in hampering movement along the enemy's lines of communication was an important factor not only in the relegation of their air force to a protective role, but also in reducing the enemy's ability to withstand our advance.

/The

The outstanding success of the bomber force was that it succeeded in preventing the Italians from using to any great extent ports between the frontier and Benghazi, thus compelling them to use the roads which became increasingly strenuous and dangerous. On the experience of the campaign, it seemed that the destruction of warehouses produced the best return for aerial bombing. Material damage otherwise was generally small in comparison with later years and the destruction of aircraft when well dispersed was better achieved by gunfire or by small bombs. On the other hand the moral effect of sustained bombing from the air even with such a small force was great, particularly when continued through the night.

Conclusions

This first eight months of war in the Western Desert was a brave period in the best chivalric traditions, a period when single aircraft took on scores and held their own, a period of fearful odds overcome by fearless pilots, commanded by an enterprising and sagacious A.O.C. who matched the circumstances in which the R.A.F. found itself in 1940. Later when the organisation grew and the Germans appeared in Africa other qualities perhaps mattered more, but at this time the offensive spirit of No.202 Group which was typified by the A.O.C. laid the foundations of a great air force.

Success had been achieved despite grave disadvantages; without the help of the Air Forces of the French Republic or the use of their airfields in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. A whole skeleton air force had been virtually destroyed by a small R.A.F. Group such as could be housed on three wartime airfields in England; a signal demonstration of the importance of quality over quantity.

The principle underlying the air force strategy was the same as that of the early plans - to concentrate the full available air power against the objective best calculated to ensure success in the battle. Admittedly there had been an Air Component under command of the Army, but the successful employment of fighters for army co-operation and the very shortage of this type already pointed towards their incorporation in the main air force. The combined operations of the three services had worked out well, but there was still much for each to learn concerning the employment of the other arms, not least of the correct role of air forces.

This midget British air force had turned to good account the trial round of Mediterranean operations, while the Italians loitered beneath the African sun. But by the time our troops reached Agheila the first Stuka bombing raids were beginning, the first contingent of the Afrika Corps were already being shipped to Tripoli, the German blitz on Malta had begun and Illustrious lay crippled in the Grand Harbour. The place of the defeated Regia Aeronautica - and it never fully recovered - was being taken by a more formidable opponent who was not so easily surprised and would not let an offensive be marshalled beneath his very nose without interfering from the air, who could hardly be expected to allow his tanks to be captured while their crews slept, who would use his air force to prevent the free movement of our forces behind the lines and who could carry the air battles to our own aerodromes.

Risks could be taken against a demoralised enemy as had been shown in the last stages of the Great War. In future risks would have more serious consequences, bluff less effect and ruses were less likely to succeed.

The main lesson of the campaign was the urgent need to increase the mobility of our squadrons. Air Marshal Tedder in a covering

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CS.8981 letter to A.V.M. Elmhurst's Report on the Operations in the Western Desert (August 1940 - February 1941) observes:

"The most marked defect is perhaps the inherent immobility of our operational units as at present organised. This is no doubt due in part to the fact that the basis of our Royal Air Force organisation had been the building up of a "Home Defence" Air Force organised for economy reasons on a station basis. In consequence the Army Co-operation Squadrons have proved to be the only squadrons reasonably organised for and trained in operating independently. In the Western Desert campaign as in the operations in other theatres of war in the Middle East, it has been necessary to move units forward over long distances over very bad roads or over desert, and also to push forward flights or even whole squadrons to refuel and operate from advanced landing grounds for particular operations. The organisation of our squadrons is quite unsuited to such conditions. They have neither the transport (air or M/T) nor the personnel to operate efficiently. The C.O.'s flight commanders and crews under present conditions have to perform administrative and maintenance duties which impose far too heavy a burden on them when added to active operations. What is needed is an administrative and maintenance organisation which will relieve the flying personnel and operational staffs of administrative and maintenance responsibilities."

Warning Organisation

"A second point which emerged was the need for the maintenance in the front line, whether in advance or retreat, of a reporting and warning organisation and sector control for the operation of fighters, and A.A. defences. Again and again the lack of such an immediate organisation was apparent at Sollum, at Tobruk and finally at Benghazi. Wireless observation units and R.D.F. facilities and fighter sector control should always be in a position on the front line whether in advance"

Air Vice Marshal Elmhurst who was commissioned to report on the instructive aspects of the campaign confirms that the enemy were never allowed to get into their stride. Their air force and their supply system were consistently hammered both by day and by night up to the extreme limit of endurance of the Royal Air Force aircraft and crews. The failure in morale and the subsequent collapse of the Italian Air Force was due mainly to this hammering, and later to the daily fear that their aerodromes might be surprised and captured by the British Army.

Throughout the operations every effort was made by No.202 Group to mystify, mislead and surprise the enemy. These efforts were obviously successful in the tactical sphere and also in making the Italians believe that our air forces were much larger than they were. The arrival in December of the few additional Hurricanes caught the Italians unawares and they were unable to organise any successful counter-measures, a failure which had disastrous effects on their morale.

It was a remarkable achievement that the R.A.F. squadrons were able to continue operations at very high pressure even when they were separated by distances of over a hundred miles from their supply bases. Credit for this rests both with the pilots and the ground staffs (including Air Stores Parks and Repair and Salvage Unit) who made desperate efforts to keep the aircraft supplied with petrol and bombs in spite of the strain. In this connection the Heavy Bomber Wing, which was established on a non-mobile basis in the canal zone, experienced difficulties in providing adequate services at the advanced landing grounds, which they were compelled to use for refuelling, rearming and servicing the Wellingtons, as well as defending, supplying, housing and feeding ground staff and visiting crews.

These lessons of mobility, organisation, of army co-operation in which the difficulty of knowing where our troops were and identifying them was a considerable problem, of communications and anti-aircraft defence were only beginning to be explored. But this first campaign provided some of the experience on which improvement could be based; for these operations had exercised our ingenuity and restricted resources to the utmost limit.

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PART IV

THE BRITISH RETREAT FROM AGHEILA TO THE FRONTIER

FEBRUARY - APRIL 1941

SECTION I

INTRODUCTORY - SITUATION FOLLOWING THE CONQUEST

OF CYRENAICA

Tripoli or Greece?

The fall of Benghazi on 6 February 1941, and the establishment of a line at El Agheila to the south-west of the port marked the end of the first British offensive in the Western Desert.⁽¹⁾ Since the beginning of the advance on 9 December 1940, the results achieved had far outstripped even the most optimistic forecasts. In two months the Italians had been forced to abandon their strongholds and air-fields in Cyrenaica and had been driven back over three hundred miles from the Egyptian frontier. As the British pressed steadily forward, capturing large numbers of vehicles, armour, stores and prisoners, and as objectives further and further to the westward came within their grasp, the possibility of continuing the advance to Tripoli began to be recognised.

This project was not to be attained however. Events on the northern shores of the Mediterranean had already made their impact on the Desert war, when, in November 1940, R.A.F. Squadrons had been sent to aid Greece in resisting an Italian invasion. Early in 1941 a new threat to the Balkans became apparent, when German troops began massing along the Greco - Bulgarian frontier. The British forces in the Middle East were the only ones available to provide assistance and a choice had to be made between continuing the Desert offensive and sending troops to the Balkans. The latter alternative was chosen, and, after Benghazi, the advance was called to a halt.

Growth of Pro-Greek Policy

Reports of German troop movements along the Bulgarian frontier of Roumania had just reached London early in January, when the British forces in the Desert had yet to take Tobruk. It was thought probable then that the Germans would make an advance on Thrace through Bulgaria in the near future. On 8 January, the Chief of Air Staff warned the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East that the Prime Minister was contemplating the dispatch of further air assistance to Greece, and on the 10th the Commanders-in-Chief were informed that His Majesty's Government had decided it was essential to give the Greeks the maximum possible assistance, with the object of ensuring that they resisted German demands by force.

War Cabinet
Hist. Series
B.I. (Final)
(36)

Ibid. (40)

(1) For dispositions see Map 6.

This decision was made very largely for political ends. It was considered that the extent and effectiveness of British aid to the Greeks would be a determining factor in the attitude of Turkey, and would influence both the United States of America, and Russia. The Chiefs of Staffs recognized that this decision would mean that assistance to Greece must take priority over all operations in the Middle East once Tobruk had been taken, since help for the Greeks would have to come, in the first instance at least, entirely from the Middle East Command. They considered, however, that this need not prevent an advance to Benghazi, if all went well.

Ibid (42)

The reaction of the Commander-in-Chief to the Government's decision was not favourable. It was suggested in Cairo that the German concentration was a move designed to help Italy by upsetting Greek nerves and inducing the British to disperse their forces in the Middle East, thus stopping the advance in Libya. This suggestion, however, was emphatically refuted by the Prime Minister, who gave, as proof, details of the information available. His instructions to the Commanders-in-Chief were that nothing was to be allowed to hamper the capture of Tobruk, but that thereafter all operations in Libya must be subordinated to aiding Greece.

Ibid (44)

Moderation of Policy due to Greek hesitation and the arrival of the Luftwaffe in Italy

In order to effect an agreement with the Greeks, the G.O.C.-in-C. and A.O.C.-in-C. flew to Athens in mid-January. Directly discussions began, however, it became clear that the Greeks were not convinced that a German attack was inevitable and were very anxious to avoid all measures that might provoke it. Consequently, while they were ready to receive further assistance in the air,⁽¹⁾ in the shape of three squadrons already promised, they were unwilling to allow British troops to land in the Salonika area before a German attack had been launched. This unexpected reception of the British offer of help necessitated a reconsideration of policy since the chances of successful intervention by an expeditionary force would be very considerably reduced if it were not already prepared and in position to repel the attack when it came. The Army and Air Commanders were therefore instructed to accept no commitments involving the dispatch of an expeditionary force to Greece until the War Cabinet had had an opportunity to review the situation.

Ibid (54)

At this moment a general reconsideration of policy was rendered all the more necessary by the introduction of a new factor into the Mediterranean theatre. For some time past reports had been circulating that Luftwaffe units were being established in Italy. On 10 January these reports were confirmed, when units of the Royal Navy escorting a convoy near Malta were heavily attacked by German bombers and Stukas.⁽²⁾

Ibid (62)

The conclusions of the Defence Committee on the new situation were communicated to the Commanders-in-Chief on

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- (1) The R.A.F. had been operating against the Italians in Greece since November 1940.
 - (2) An account of the attack can be found in the A.H.B. Narrative, The Middle East Campaigns, Volume XI, Malta.

21 January. It was decided that the capture of Benghazi was now of the greatest importance, as the port was needed as a strongly defended naval and air base from which attacks could be made on the Italo-Libyan supply routes. Importance was also attached to the early capture of the Dodecanese, since it was feared that unless the British took possession of these islands, the Germans would establish themselves there in force. Finally it was agreed that a strategic reserve must be created in the Middle East with a view to rendering assistance to Turkey or Greece within the next two months.

The End of the Offensive in Cyrenaica

Ibid (71)

Ibid (86)

Ibid (99)

War Cabinet.
Hist. Series.
B.1. (Final)
(103)

Tobruk fell on 21 January, and preparations were made to continue the advance to Benghazi. By 30 January the C.-in-C. estimated that the port might be reached by the end of February, but on 4th, the enemy was reported to be making a hurried withdrawal from Cyrene, and the British advance was accelerated despite incomplete preparations. Benghazi was occupied on 6 February and forward units reached Jedabya to the south on the same day. Many Italian troops were cut off and either killed or captured during the retreat, and the C.-in-C. considered that the extent of the enemy's defeat at Benghazi indicated that Tripoli might yield to a small force if this were dispatched without undue delay.

Ibid B.2 (Final)
(2)

At discussions in London, however, the opinion was maintained that owing to the imminence of a German attack in the Balkans it was essential to concentrate all the available forces in the Delta in preparation for the move to Europe. It was decided that in the Western Desert, Benghazi should be held with the minimum forces necessary for a secure flank for Egypt. Operation Mandibles, the capture of the Dodecanese, was still considered of the first importance and was to be undertaken at the earliest possible moment.

Thus the first British offensive in the Desert was brought to an end. In the advance to Benghazi more than 300 miles from the frontier, all the important ports along the Cyrenaican seaboard had been captured. There still remained, however, in enemy hands, the vital port of Tripoli through which the Axis powers could reinforce and revive the Italian forces. In the existing state of crisis in Southern Europe, however, the risk of an enemy build up in Africa was considered more acceptable than a German occupation of the Balkan peninsula. The bulk of the British forces was therefore withdrawn from Cyrenaica, leaving behind only a small defensive force, and the formation of a reserve for the Balkans was commenced in Egypt.

Reorganisation of the Desert Forces

War Cabinet
Narrative

Following the decision that the advance should not be continued beyond Benghazi, and that all available forces should be formed into a reserve for Greece, it was the first task of the Commanders-in-Chief to reorganise and redistribute their forces. General Wavell estimated that if the enemy were to resume the offensive it would be at least two months after the landing of a German force at Tripoli before an advance could be commenced, and that, therefore, it was unlikely there would be a serious threat to the British position in Cyrenaica before May 1941. Regarding the Italian Air Force, Air Marshal Longmore considered that it had been so depleted as to be incapable of offering any serious threat for the time being.

In these circumstances it was considered strategically sound to carry out large reductions in the Desert forces. The G.O.C.-in-C. considered that a garrison of one armoured brigade and one division would be sufficient as a flank guard in Cyrenaica, and that it would be safe to form these of comparatively untrained and unequipped troops, so long as training and equipping would be completed by May. By that time, it was hoped, at least one Indian division from the Sudan would be available as reinforcement. The army units which had taken part in the advance had consisted of the 7th Armoured and 6th Australian Divisions. The former had been fighting continuously for over eight months, and mechanically, was incapable of further action. The latter had taken part in the Cyrenaican campaign from Bardia to Benghazi, and was seasoned, fully equipped and had not suffered many casualties. It was decided to withdraw both divisions from Cyrenaica, the former for refit and the latter for employment in Greece, and to replace them by the 2nd Armoured Division less one brigade and one support group, and the 9th Australian Division, which had recently arrived in Egypt and was only partially trained and equipped.

A.M. Longmore's
Dispatch
(A.H.B./ILM/8)

Of the air squadrons in Egypt and Cyrenaica several had already been promised to Greece, and it was the intention of the A.O.C.-in-C. to form a 'Balkan reserve' of other squadrons in Egypt. The first move was the withdrawal of No. 202 Group from Sollum to the Delta, together with Nos. 45 and 113 Squadrons (Blenheims) and No. 274 Squadron (Hurricanes) from the Sollum-Bardia area. These were followed, in late February by No. 208 Army Co-operation Squadron (Lysanders and Hurricanes) from Gambut, which was replaced by No. 6 A.C. Squadron of which two flights were already in Cyrenaica, the remainder of the squadron being transferred from Aqir (Palestine).

H.Q. Cyrenaica was formed at Barce on 25 February under the command of Group Captain L.O. Brown, and the squadrons remaining in Cyrenaica in March were subsequently disposed as follows:-

Unit O.R.B.s

No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron which had been rearmed with Hurricanes was located at Benina for the defence of Benghazi, and No. 73 Squadron (already earmarked for Greece), at first located at Gazala, was moved on 14 March to Bu Amud to defend the Tobruk area. These two squadrons were controlled by No. 258 Fighter Control Wing, which had its Headquarters at Benghazi and a rear Headquarters at El Adem, near Tobruk. On 12 March the Headquarters at Benghazi became Advanced Headquarters, and the main Headquarters moved back to Tobruk, absorbing the Rear Headquarters.

The Headquarters and one Lysander Flight of No. 6 A.C. Squadron were at Barce while the Hurricane Flight was at Jedabya co-operating with the 2nd Armoured Division. The second Lysander flight was in the Delta area, but returned to the Desert on 15 March to co-operate with the Australian Army units investing Jarabub. After the capture of that place it joined the squadron at Barce on 28 March.

Radar Defence consisted of two Mobile Radio Units, No. 216 at Benghazi and No. 235 at Tobruk.

The only bomber squadron under the control of H.Q. Cyrenaica was No. 55 Squadron with Blenheim IV's. During March this squadron exchanged six of its aircraft for six fighter Blenheim IV's for low-flying attacks on enemy airfields. Besides being the only bomber squadron available, this squadron was the only one with aircraft of sufficient range to carry out

strategic reconnaissance in Tripolitania, and in this respect particularly its commitments were very heavy.

The Wellington Squadrons of No. 257 Wing (Nos. 37, 38 and 70 Squadrons) were sometimes available to carry out operations in Tripolitania, but they had other commitments, not only in support of the campaign in Greece, but also in operations against the Dodecanese, for it was from airfields on these islands that Axis aircraft were operating against the Suez Canal and against shipping.

For the defence of the Delta there was only one fighter squadron available, No. 274 Squadron, Hurricanes.

German Policy - The Decision to Intervene

The establishment of German Army and Air Forces in the Mediterranean theatre during the early months of 1941, was undoubtedly instigated by the British offensive in the Desert. On 12 November 1940, in Directive No. 18, Hitler stated that intervention by German forces in North Africa would not be considered until the Italians had reached Matruh, and that even then German air forces would not be instituted there until the Italians had set up the necessary air bases. On 10 December however, the day following the commencement of the British offensive, Hitler issued the following orders:-

Fuehrer
Conferences on
Naval Affairs
(A.H.B./IIK/64)

German aircraft formations will operate as soon as possible from the south of Italy in the battle in the Mediterranean, for a limited time.

Their most important task is to attack the British Navy, particularly in the port of Alexandria but also in the Suez Canal, where attacks are to be made on enemy shipping and in the straits between Sicily and the north coast of Africa.

Owing to the critical situation in the Mediterranean, however, it may become necessary to operate in the Ionian or Aegean. For this reason operations are to be carried out with the entire understanding of the Italian High Command.

Since Germany is not at war with Greece it is of prime importance there shall be no operations directed solely at Greece.

Enemy Documents
A.H.B.(6)

During December Fliegerkorps X was moved from Norway to the Mediterranean and its operational Headquarters was established at Catania in Sicily. This was a significant move as the Command had had experience in controlling overseas operations where units were scattered over a wide area. It was led by General Geisler, with Colonel Harlinghausen, the anti-shipping expert, as Chief of Staff. The latter left however in March 1941.

The British had heard rumours of German troop movements into Italy since mid-December, but it was not until early in January that it was definitely known that German aircraft had arrived there. It was then believed that a force was being formed in Sicily comprising up to two hundred bombers, including Heinkel 111 and Junkers 87 or 88. The presence of a

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large force of such bombers in Sicily was confirmed on 10 January, the day of the dive-bombing attack on a convoy near Malta.(1)

The British estimate of the bomber force the Germans intended to build up in Sicily was accurate enough. On 12 January the full strength of Fliegerkorps X was:

	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Bomber and bomber-recce	151	121
Dive-bomber	80	43
Total Bomber	<u>231</u>	<u>164</u>
Fighter	34	16
Grand Total	<u>265</u>	<u>180</u>

By no means all of the Fliegerkorps had completed the move from Norway however,(2) and on 12 January the distribution of German aircraft in Sicily was:

Catania	III/LG 1	1 Ju.88
	II/LG 1	4 Ju.88
	1(F) 121	6 Ju.88
	II/KG 26	28 He.111
Trapani	St.G3	1 Do.17
	St.G 3	44 Ju.87
	KG 26	1 He.111
Comiso	III/KG 26	3 He.111
Palermo	III/ZG 26	25 Me.110
	St.G 3	5 Ju.87
	<u>Total</u>	<u>118</u>

Hitler's
Conferences on
Naval Affairs
(A.H.B./IIK/64)

At conferences on 8 and 9 January, Hitler gave further explanations of his Mediterranean policy. He was determined to prevent Italy from losing North Africa, but he considered it was no longer possible for Italy or Germany to open an offensive against Alexandria or Egypt with any success. However, he stated that German army formations were to be transferred there as soon as possible, equipped with anti-tank guns, mines, heavy tanks, and heavy and light Anti-aircraft guns. These forces were to be put under the command of Rommel.(3)

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- (1) Mentioned on Page 96.
 - (2) The build-up of Fliegerkorps X in Sicily in Jan/Feb is indicated at Appendix XXX.
 - (3) A Hitler directive of 5 February 1941 on the Conduct of German Troops in Italian Theatres of War is given at Appendix XXVII.

Hitler expected good results from the employment of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean, which in North Africa would be stationed as far forward as Benghazi; if Libya was successfully defended by the Axis a large scale offensive against Alexandria might be possible later, but probably not before the winter of 1942. This defensive policy in North Africa was typical of Hitler's attitude towards the Middle East war at that time. The Fuehrer was convinced that the situation in Europe could no longer develop unfavourably for Germany even if the Axis lost the whole of North Africa: an attitude of mind which, doubtless, was greeted with little enthusiasm by his ally. However, the orders given in Directive 22 on 11 January provided encouragement for the Italians. They were:-

Top Level
Directive of
the German
Armed Forces
(A.H.B./1161/67)(A)

- (a) The G.-in-C. Army is to form a regiment designed to combat British Tank Divisions and to render valuable assistance to our Allies in the defence of Tripoli.
- (b) The X Fliegerkorps will retain Sicily as an operational base. Its most important task is to attack English naval forces and sea routes between the west and east Mediterranean.
- (c) In addition, by using intermediate landing grounds in Tripolitania the necessary conditions are to be created for direct support of the Army Group under Graziani, by attacking the enemy's disembarkation ports and supply bases on the west Egyptian coast and in Cyrenaica.

At a conference between Hitler and Mussolini on 19 and 20 January it was agreed it was desirable to dispatch the forces assigned to Tripoli as soon as possible (Operation Sonnenblume). They were to be sent out about 15 February, and on their arrival were to be used immediately in combat against the British armoured divisions, in the final effort to resist the advance. Transports to Albania were cancelled so that the reinforcements to Tripoli could be carried through in the shortest possible time. On 6 February in a Keitel Directive the German Air force was ordered, in addition to the tasks already mentioned above:-

- (a) To attack British supply shipments along the North African Coast.
- (b) To combat enemy forces advancing westwards in Cyrenaica.
- (c) To smash the concentrations of enemy tank and motorised units advancing in Western Cyrenaica by using all available forces and the heaviest bombs.

The directive continued:-

For this purpose, Air Force Units, with their own fighter and A.A. defences can be transferred to North Africa, if necessary withdrawing them from warfare against the British Isles
Furthermore it is the task of the Air Force, together with the Italian Air Force to protect German sea transports against attacks by enemy air and naval forces

The transport of the Army unit designated for Libya is to get under way and be carried out as quickly as possible. Contrary to previous plans the unit is to be reinforced with tanks..... Plans should be made to bring the force up to strength by means of a panzer division reinforced with defence forces.

Halder's Diary
(A.H.B.6)

D.A.K. Diary
A.H.B.(6)

On 7 February shortly before Rommel's departure for North Africa a conference was held between him and Halder, the German Chief of Army Staff, and it was agreed that the main task in the Desert was to make sure that Graziani did not retreat on Tripoli without a fight. On 10 February Rommel left Munich for Rome, and the following day held conferences with the Italian Generals Guzzoni and Roatta, when certain changes of plan were agreed. The most important of these related to the defence of Libya, which was no longer to be based on Tripoli. On 12 February Rommel arrived in Tripoli and German proposals for a more forward defence were examined in detail.

At conferences with General Roatta concerning the employment and command of air forces it was decided that the Italian air forces were to be amalgamated with the German and that requests for their employment were to be drawn up by Rommel and forwarded to the Italian C.-in-C. General Gariboldi. On 21 February the commander of the 5th Light Division, General Streich, and the commander of the Fliegerkorps X, General Geissler, arrived in Tripoli. General Geissler's task was as follows:-

- (a) To move his airfields up as close as possible to the front.
- (b) Primary task: to reconnoitre and discover enemy dispositions and strength in Cyrenaica.
- (c) Prevent the establishment of bases along the coast and close to the front.
- (d) Destruction of enemy air forces in Cyrenaica.
- (e) Prepare to counter the expected enemy attack.
- (f) Close co-operation with Italian air forces.

During the evening of 21 February Hitler's instruction arrived that the German forces in Libya were to be called the German Africa Corps. On the following day co-operation between Fliegerkorps X and the German land forces was discussed, but owing to the absence of orders from Berlin it was not possible to place Fliegerkorps X directly under Rommel. Towards the end of the month plans were made for the forward movement of German and Italian army units early in March, but in the meantime operations were confined to air attacks on British positions in Cyrenaica and patrol activity in the El Agheila and El Nofilia areas. Thus as early as February plans and preparations for a renewed effort in the Desert were underway. It remained to be seen whether or not these would mature within the two months estimated by General Wavell.

SECTION II

THE ENEMY BUILD UP

Early Reconnaissance Reports

The intervention of German air units in the Desert Battle became apparent immediately after the fall of Benghazi, and within another two weeks there was evidence of the presence of German ground forces in Tripolitania. From 10 February onwards machine gun attacks by Me.110's against ground troops, M.T. and airfields in the Benghazi-Agheila area were reported, and enemy bombing attacks against Cyrenaica took place daily. Details of reconnaissance by Nos. 208 and 55 Squadrons are not available up to 18 February, but as early as 7 February, a report had been received that petrol was being laid down at Tamet, and that the Germans would use this airfield as an operational base. On 13 February R.A.F. Headquarters, Middle East instructed No.202 Group that when refuelling facilities were available at Benghazi, Wellingtons should be used for attacks on shipping at Tripoli⁽¹⁾ and airfields in the Tripoli area, particularly those occupied by German units, and on the 17th it was again emphasised that the accumulation of reports regarding the movement of German forces into Tripoli made the regular reconnaissance of Tripoli shipping of great importance.

H.Q. R.A.F.
M.E., O.R.B.,
App. 10
Air Staff

Ibid. App. 23.

On 19 February air reports stated that the road between Sirte and Misurata was congested with troops moving west but on the 25th a Blenheim of No.55 Squadron reported columns of motor transport moving eastwards towards Agheila. On 21,22 and 24 February reconnaissance reports indicated that German light armoured units were operating in the forward area, and on the 24th British Army units near Agheila fired on an enemy patrol which was believed to be German. On 25 February a convoy of 150 to 200 motor transport was reported moving south from Tauorga towards El Gheddahia, and on the 26th 150 motor transport were reported between Misurata and Buerat, another 100 in the Sirte area, 60 in the Nofilia area and 50 in the Hassan area.

Enemy Air Activity Precludes the Use of Benghazi as a Supply Port.

At this stage, far the most serious result of the participation of the Luftwaffe in the Desert battle, was its successful operations against Benghazi harbour, which early denied the port to shipping. The main problem of the British in establishing a base at Benghazi lay in the fact that, because of the withdrawal of air and army units for Greece, there were insufficient defences for the adequate protection of more than one supply port. For this reason, and because the harbour at Benghazi had been badly damaged by our air attacks and could not yet be used fully, Tobruk remained the chief

(1) Only one raid was carried out against Libya by heavy bombers during February. This took place on the night of 24/25th when four Wellingtons of No.70 Squadron attacked Tripoli with nine of No.148 Squadron from Malta. The smallness of the effort was due largely to bad weather. In addition enemy bombing raids on Benghazi in the morning and evening made refuelling very dangerous, so that there were no operations between 15 and 22 February.

No. 257 Wing
O.R.B.

supply port for the time-being. Its air defences included A.A. guns, a flight of No. 73 (Hurricane) squadron based at El Adem and controlled by No. 258 (Fighter Control) Wing, and two M.R.U.s, Nos. 216 and 235. On 6 February, when plans were being made for the defence of Benghazi, No. 202 Group was instructed to move neither M.R.U. from the Tobruk area until the future position of the main supply base had been settled, but on the 10th, No. 3 R.A.A.F. (Hurricane) Squadron moved forward from Martuba to Benina, the main airfield at Benghazi, with the dual task of defending Benghazi and operating in the forward area around El Agheila.

H.Q., R.A.F.,
M.E., O.R.B.
Air Staff
Appx. 10
Feb. 1941

Meanwhile it was the intention of the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean to begin clearing Benghazi harbour as soon as possible, and to run occasional convoys to the port with supplies, and a clearance party, under the command of the Senior Naval Officer Inshore Squadron, reached Benghazi from Tobruk on 12 February. The arrival of the naval vessels was the signal for the commencement of German air attacks on harbour and town, and although on a small scale, these were sufficiently effective to cause the naval commander to press on 14 February for the provision by the military authorities of the maximum possible A.A. for the harbour. On the same day it was decided at a meeting at Headquarters No. 202 Group, to move forward part of No. 258 Wing from Tobruk to Benghazi, and with it one of the M.R.U.s. This left Tobruk with only one M.R.U. No. 235, which at that time had a limited cover of about 90°; however steps were being taken to improve this. On 15 February, General Wilson, General Officer Commanding, Cyrenaica, asked that Benghazi should be made the chief supply port instead of Tobruk, since he was unable to provide adequate A.A. to defend both places. This proposal the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean refused to accept, but he stated that he would run an occasional convoy to Benghazi provided there was sufficient A.A. available while the ships were unloaded. The convoy AC1 had in fact already left Alexandria for Benghazi and was due to arrive on 18 February, and the naval commander at Benghazi therefore again urged upon the military authorities the necessity for providing adequate A.A. by then. The Naval Commander-in-Chief's decision had in fact, brought about a situation in which considerable defences were required for both Tobruk and Benghazi, although it was known that these could not be found without great difficulty.

Naval Narrative.

No. 258 Wing
O.R.B.

Naval Narrative
Admiralty Ref.
M. 0989/42
Operations in
Support of the
Army off the
Western Desert.

On 17 February, the monitor H.M.S. Terror arrived at Benghazi to augment the defences, but in the absence of a radar warning system neither A.A. guns nor fighters were able to achieve any appreciable successes against the enemy raiders, which, although not strong in numbers, were able to deliver their attacks with considerable accuracy. No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron maintained standing patrols over the port as far as was possible, but because of its varied commitments the strength of the patrols was usually limited to one or two aircraft. On 19 February in view of the persistence of enemy air activity the squadron was reinforced by a flight of No. 73 Squadron from Tobruk, and the proposed move of the latter squadron to Greece was cancelled. Meanwhile No. 216 M.R.U. was on its way to Benghazi, but it was not a highly mobile unit, and progress was slow.

Nos. 3 & 73
Sqdn. O.R.B.s.

Because of the unsatisfactory nature of the air defence, the Senior Naval Officer, Inshore Squadron, diverted two of the

Naval Narrative
Admiralty Ref.
M.0989/42
Operations in
Support of the
Army off the
Western Desert.

No 3 R.A.A.F.
Sqn O.R.B.

Naval Narrative

Wavell's Dispatch
(including comments)
A.H.B./1131/27).

Cabinet Series
Hist.(B) 2
(Final) 35.

four ships of convoy AC1 to Tobruk, but when the remaining two arrived at Benghazi on 18 February, no unloading was possible because of the alarm aroused among the local labour by the increasing scale of enemy air activity. Since, under existing conditions it would take eight days to unload the ships, the Senior Naval Officer, Inshore Squadron ordered these also to proceed to Tobruk. The General Officer Commanding was in full agreement with him that while the air situation remained as it was the risk to the ships was not justified. The naval clearing party remained at Benghazi, but the enemy raids continued and at dawn on 22 February the Terror was damaged by dive-bombers. Her Commanding Officer's report stated: 'With no dawn fighter protection as at present, consider it only a matter of time before ship receives direct hit.' This report was not strictly accurate, for a patrol of three Hurricanes was over Benghazi on 22 February from 0645 until 0900 hours, during which a Ju.88 was attacked and damaged, but on receiving the signal from the Terror, the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean withdrew his forces from Benghazi. The Terror was again attacked by enemy aircraft in the evening of the same day while en route to Tobruk, and was sunk. At 2000 hours on this very day, No 216 M.R.U., which had arrived on 21 February, began operating, but the Navy made no further attempt to use Benghazi and supplies had to be carried by road over the two-hundred miles from Tobruk to the forward area.

In his dispatch for this period General Wavell wrote:-
'(German air attacks on Benghazi) began soon after our occupation, (of Cyrenaica), and in the absence of any effective defence, since practically all the available fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft guns were required for Greece, it became hazardous to bring shipping into Benghazi, until effective air defence could be provided'.
Commenting on this dispatch, both Air Marshal Tedder and Air Commodore Brown agreed that the Royal Navy had begun to use the port before radar had been installed, and thus before the air defences had been properly established, and this would appear to have been the case. The Naval Commander-in-Chief took the risk of sending ships to Benghazi knowing that the defences were not yet adequate but that they would shortly be ready. The rapid response of the Luftwaffe to this move showed that it would have been wiser to wait a few days until they had been completed. These first German air operations in Cyrenaica showed clearly both the need for an early warning system as a part of air defence against even small scale air attacks, and the effectiveness of such attacks where defence was inadequate. The Luftwaffe carried out only thirteen attacks on Benghazi between 12 and 22 February, and few of these could be called heavy. Yet the result was a certain amount of material damage and a considerable effect on civilian morale, which together resulted in the British abandoning for the time-being their plans for using Benghazi as a supply port.

On 21 February the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who was in Egypt for discussions on Greece, warned the Prime Minister that the German attacks on Benghazi had left the A.O.C.-in-C. with a much smaller margin of modern aircraft suitable for meeting German attacks than had been estimated, and that even this would decrease as the air force continued to encounter Germans instead of Italians. Moreover his impression was that not all squadrons were up to the standard

of their counterparts at home. Many were tired, and the supply of modern aircraft left much to be desired.

British Appreciation of Axis Intentions.

In view of the arrival of German armoured formations and aircraft in Tripolitania the question of the defence commitments in Egypt and Cyrenaica was reconsidered in London, and on 27 February, the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, was asked to submit a short appreciation of the situation. Despite the arrival of considerable axis reinforcements in North Africa, General Wavell maintained his opinion that the threat of an offensive was negligible. According to the latest information recent reinforcements to North Africa comprised two Italian infantry divisions, two Italian motorised artillery regiments, and German armoured troops estimated at a maximum of one armoured brigade. There was no evidence of motor transport vehicles having been landed although air reconnaissance had shown a considerable increase in motor transport on the Tripoli-Sirte road. The Commander-in-Chief estimated that the enemy must be very short of transport and that this, coupled with the difficulty of maintaining water-supplies and the fact that there was only one road along the coast from Tripoli to the forward area, made the likelihood of an enemy advance extremely remote. While it was possible that the enemy might test the British line at Agheila, and if he found it weak, push on to Jedabya to move up his advanced landing grounds, General Wavell did not think that an attempt would be made to recover Benghazi. Regarding the future, he considered that eventually two German divisions might be employed in a large scale attack, and that these with two infantry divisions would be the maximum that could be maintained via Tripoli: shipping risks, difficulty of communications and the approach of hot weather would reduce the likelihood that such an attack could develop before the end of the summer.

Ibid (67)&(69)

The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief's view of the situation was less optimistic. He considered that although the Italian threat to Cyrenaica was almost negligible, the Germans, who were already well established in the Mediterranean had available for operations against sea communications, Malta and Cyrenaica, and for the defence of their convoys and of Tripolitania, approximately 170 bombers, 90 dive-bombers, 60 fighters, 18 reconnaissance and 180 transport aircraft.(1)

Ibid

(1) From enemy records it is now known that this was an over estimate. The German air order of battle at the end of February was as follows:-

	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Bomber and bomber recce.	109	46
Dive Bomber	73	55
Fighter	61	47
	<u>243</u>	<u>148</u>
Transport aircraft:	92	68

German Records with A.H.B.(6)

All aircraft were on the strength of Fliegerkorps X in Sicily. The transfer of units to North Africa did not begin until March. The strength of the Italian Air Force in Libya at this date is not known.

From bases in both Tripolitania and Sicily heavy scale air attacks were being made on British forward troops, bases, and lines of communication in Cyrenaica. Against this force, in view of other commitments, the British air forces, permanently available to counter German land and air activities against Cyrenaica, and to provide support for the land forces, were not likely to exceed one fighter squadron, one medium bomber squadron and one army co-operation squadron, although the bombing effort might be augmented periodically by heavy bombers working from Malta and Cyrenaica. The defence of Egypt also had to be considered. German aircraft, particularly units operating from the Dodecanese⁽¹⁾ were becoming increasingly active in the Eastern Mediterranean and had succeeded, temporarily, in virtually closing the canal with aerial mines. There was only one fighter squadron available for the whole area, and in order to reduce the air threat to Egypt it had become necessary to divert the heavy bomber effort from other important tasks to bomb the enemy air bases in the Dodecanese.⁽²⁾

A.H.B./IIJ1/183/
138(D), Encl. 5(a).

Despite the build-up of the enemy force in North Africa plans for the dispatch of forces to Greece were continued. In a signal to the Chief of the Air Staff on 7 March, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief agreed that whatever the consequences it was now too late to withdraw the undertaking to give all possible support to Greece in their defence against the imminent German threat from the Balkans. He emphasised, however, that a steady and heavy aircraft wastage would be entailed, and in consequence, a lamentable air weakness, especially in fighters, and urged that his proposals for ensuring an adequate supply of aircraft to meet his commitments should receive immediate consideration. The British were now not only definitely committed to the Balkan enterprise but were faced as well with the task of defeating the German air force in the Mediterranean. To meet such a stiff proposition rapid reinforcement was essential.

D. Ops
O/S Folder
Reinforcements

M.E.Pt.II
8 March 1941.
(A.H.B./IIJ1/243/
9(B)).

In reply the Chief of the Air Staff gave assurances that every effort was being made to get aircraft reinforcements to the Middle East with the utmost speed. The aim was to increase the capacity of the Takoradi route by one hundred and eighty aircraft per month. The opening up of new routes was also under consideration, but it was pointed out that these would not pay dividends for five or six months.

Nos. 6 and 55
Sqn O.R.B.s

During March, evidence of the German build-up in Tripolitania continued to accumulate. Daily reconnaissance flights to the limit of the range of the available Blenheim aircraft of No. 55 Squadron was carried out along the coast as far as Tripoli, and in the forward area. 'A' Flight of No. 6 Squadron, based at Jedabya, carried out an average of three reconnaissances a day in co-operation with the 2nd Armoured Division. This squadron commenced operations in the desert with one flight of Hurricanes and two of Lysanders. There were only four Hurricanes at first, only one of which was fitted with photographic equipment, so that it had to be reserved for this purpose. It was found extremely

A.H.B./IIJ1/183/
22 (A), Encl.
20(b).

- (1) It was believed that German aircraft based in Sicily and South Italy attacked the Canal after refuelling in the Dodecanese.
- (2) Thirty-eight sorties were flown against these targets by Wellingtons between 4 and 17 February.

difficult to provide the required number of tactical reconnaissance sorties in the forward area, and aircraft had to be loaned from No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron in order to maintain the minimum number necessary. No. 55 Squadron observed large numbers of aircraft on the Tripolitanian airfields and much transport movement along the roads, while No. 6 Squadron reported much German activity and observed many German aircraft. (1)

As a result of these reconnaissances, Tripoli, the airfields and smaller bases were attacked by bombers of No. 257 Wing during the month, and on a very few occasions Blenheims and Hurricanes attacked targets in the forward area. The Wellingtons flew thirty-three sorties against Tripoli, and fourteen against miscellaneous targets including rear airfields at Misurata and Tamet, in addition to over thirty sorties in support of the operations in Greece and against enemy airfields in the Dodecanese.

Despite the obvious intensification of enemy activity, it remained the opinion at General Headquarters in Cairo, that there was little likelihood of an enemy attack in the near future. Up to 17 March the Commanders-in-Chief, 'still considered from the evidence available, that an enemy attack was unlikely before the beginning of April at the earliest'. During March however, contact by the forward troops of the 2nd Armoured Division, with enemy units, and reports from other sources, would appear to have placed the presence of German mobile forces in Tripolitania beyond doubt. There was however a conflict of opinion on this point to the extent that although the 1st King's Dragoon Guards had identified German armoured cars as their opponents, Lieutenant General Neame, at a conference in the forward area in the period 27/29 March denied the presence of any German troops in Tripolitania except for a few technical experts. Yet when visiting G.H.Q. Cairo on 8 March he had expressed the opinion that the Germans had not come to Libya for nothing and would not long rest content with a defensive role.

In his dispatch, published after the end of the war, General Wavell stated that owing to the poor intelligence from Italy and Libya and to the scarcity of aircraft available for reconnaissance we remained very much in the dark as regards the enemy's real strength and intentions. Both Air Marshal Tedder and Group Captain Brown (then commanding R.A.F. Cyrenaica) disagreed with this statement. Air Marshal Tedder considered that although reconnaissance was sketchy by later standards there was evidence to show the enemy's intentions, but that at this time the army staffs underestimated the value of intelligence provided from this source. Group Captain Brown was of the opinion that at G.H.Q. Cairo the full significance of the air information provided was not fully appreciated.

Air Force Preparations for a Withdrawal

So grave a view of the situation was taken by Group Captain Brown, that on 22 March H.Q., R.A.F. Cyrenaica issued an operational instruction in which all units were warned to prepare to move at short notice, as it had become apparent that 'any determined effort on the part of the enemy to cut off our

(1) Air reconnaissance reports provided for the Army are given at Appendix XXV.

M.E.F.O.S.
(A.H.B./IIJ1/31/1).

Cabinet Office
Narrative,
Section I,
Chapter D.

Report by
Gen. Neame.

Wavell's
Dispatch
(A.H.B./IIJ1/27)

Comments on
Wavell's
Dispatch
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
27,C/N.10).

Brown's Report
(A.H.B./IIJ/68,
Apps C & D).

forces in the Jebel el Akdar area, by advancing across the desert towards Tobruk, could not be effectively dealt with by the ground forces at our disposal.' Preparations were also made for the rapid evacuation of Benina and the transfer of No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron from there to a landing-ground prepared at Got es Sultan near El Abiar; the unit could not be moved immediately from Benina as the station organisation was at that time dependent on the personnel and some equipment of the squadron, and it was essential to return the use of Benina airfield for long range delivery aircraft. Arrangements were also made for the detachment of No. 6 Squadron at Jedabya to operate from landing grounds at Antelat and Msus.

Army Preparations

War Cabinet
Narrative

On 17 March General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, visited the forward area with General Wavell. Both now realised that a German attack was probable, and minor reinforcements were promised, but General Wavell would not stop the flow of troops to Greece. The Commander-in-Chief authorised Lieutenant General Neame to withdraw if necessary, emphasising that the security of his forces was more important than holding ground. His instructions were that in the event of an attack a delaying action should be fought between the forward position east of Agheila, and Benghazi. Lieutenant General Neame was not to hesitate to give up ground, if necessary as far as Benghazi, and even to evacuate the port should the situation demand; but he was to hold the high ground above Benghazi for as long as possible. His armoured force was to be conserved because no more would be forthcoming till May and without any his whole position would be compromised.

Capture of Jarabub

Since mid-December the enemy force at Jarabub had been watched by British army units in the expectation that the garrison would surrender through lack of supplies. The enemy was being supplied by air, however, and since the British units were needed for Greece, General Wavell decided to attempt to capture the fort. This was successfully accomplished on 21 March.

Axis Ground Activity Begins

Ibid

On 22 March enemy patrols began to take a more aggressive role than hitherto and the following day a patrol of the 1st Kings Dragoon Guards encountered an enemy force at Giofer and was forced to retire under fire. The R.A.F. reported about sixteen hundred motor transport near Ras Lanuf on the same day and other large concentrations moving eastwards at Agheila. On 24 March a patrol of the 1st Tower Hamlet Rifles found the fort at Agheila occupied by Italians while another from the 1st Kings Dragoon Guards, supported by Hurricanes of No. 3 Squadron, had an encounter with an enemy force east of the fort. Both British patrols withdrew to Mersa Brega, and the enemy occupied Agheila fort and landing ground with artillery, cars and tanks.

War Cabinet
Hist(B) 2 Final
(141)

Ibid (144)

On 26 March in a telegram to the C.-in-C. the Prime Minister expressed his concern at the rapid German advance to Agheila and hoped that a counter-stroke by British forces would shortly be made. He asked for an appreciation of the situation, including the state and location of 7th Armoured Division. In reply General Wavell stated that

(10003) 23

as yet there was no evidence that there were many Germans at Aghsila although there might be a small stiffening of Germans in the Italian force. He admitted to having taken considerable risks in Cyrenaica after the capture of Benghazi, in order to provide the maximum support for Greece. On the estimate that the Italians in Tripolitania could be disregarded, and that the Germans were unlikely to accept the risk of sending large bodies of armoured troops to North Africa, in view of the inefficiency of the Italian Navy, he had arranged to maintain only a small armoured force and one partly trained Australian Division in Cyrenaica. After the Greek liability had been accepted however evidence had begun to accumulate of the arrival of German reinforcements in Tripoli, and the commencement of heavy air attacks on Malta had prevented the bombing of Tripoli from there, on which he had counted. German air attacks on Benghazi, which prevented the supply ships using the harbour had also increased his difficulties. The result of all this was that the army in Cyrenaica was weak, and no reinforcements of armoured troops, which were the chief requirement, were available. The next month or two portended to be an anxious time, but the Commander-in-Chief considered the enemy had an extremely difficult problem, and was convinced his numbers had been much exaggerated. Steps to reinforce Cyrenaica were in hand, but at the moment he could not afford to make bold use of his small armoured force.

War Cabinet
Hist.(B) 3
Final (8)

On 29 March in a telegram to the Chief of Air Staff the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, expressed the hope that the Cyrenaican situation should not be allowed to deteriorate to the extent that the Germans obtained the use of the Benghazi airfields. He foresaw that if this happened it would:-

- (a) Be difficult to retain the use of Tobruk as the main sea supply base.
- (b) Render the reinforcement of Malta with Hurricanes very difficult.
- (c) Threaten the Fleet and convoys proceeding to the Aegean and Malta.
- (d) Increase the threat to Alexandria and the canal.

With so many commitments it was difficult to outline a long term policy and improvisation had to be made to meet new situations as they developed. He considered it of the greatest importance however that the Germans should be prevented from creeping eastwards along the North African coast and capturing airfields from which to attack our main bases and lines of communication.

German Intentions in Cyrenaica

In spite of the considerable reinforcements which were arriving in Tripolitania, in March 1941 the Axis had as yet formulated no plan for a large-scale offensive in Cyrenaica. At Army Headquarters in Germany it was considered that, apart from remaining on the defensive, two courses were open to the Axis forces in North Africa:-

- (a) A major offensive from Jedabya with the main thrust direct at Tobruk.
- (b) Several minor offensives in sectors along the coast. For the former, however, it was considered that more reinforcements would be necessary. On 17 March Hitler agreed to the forward shift of the defensive front in Cyrenaica, and gave orders that the preparations in hand must be such as to enable

Halder's Diary
(A.H.B.6).

the Axis to pass to the offensive as soon as favourable balance of strength had been attained. On 20 March, Rommel's view of the situation was that the British were passive and thinking in terms of defence only. The British armoured units had apparently been concentrated around Benghazi, the area to the south around Jedabya and Solluch being treated as 'No man's land'. This indicated the British intention to defend the Jebel area, which offered favourable tactical conditions. The Axis forces could not make a drive towards Tobruk until the enemy had been defeated in the Jebel area, and the Afrika Korps was not yet strong enough to do this. Rommel therefore advocated the policy of occupying 'No man's land' and making preparations for an advance in the direction of Tobruk in the autumn.

German Afrika
Korps Diary
(A.H.B.6).

On 21 March German plans for May were recorded in the Afrika Korps Diary. They included reconnaissance in force to Mersa Brega, and the occupation of Jalo as a base from which to undertake the relief of Jarabub, (1) followed by the recapture of Kufra. The object of the latter project was the protection of the right flank of the forces aiming at the encirclement of Tobruk. It was intended to occupy Jalo on the completion of the Marsa el Brega operations, using the units holding Marada, together with reinforcing units.

On 26 March the German appreciation of the situation was that the British loss of Agheila had resulted in the concentration of reinforcements in the Jedabya area. The strength of these reinforcements was believed to be approximately three battalions, one armoured escorting regiment and two artillery batteries. It was assumed that Jedabya would be held at all costs.

The main Axis land force operating in the forward area during the last week in March consisted of the 5th Light Division (German) at Agheila, the Brescia Division (Italian) in a defensive position west of Agheila, the Ariete Division between Marada and Agheila, and smaller German and Italian units.

By 22 March the strength of Fliegerkorps X in Sicily and North Africa was as follows:-

	<u>A/C Type</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Service- ability</u>	
Enemy Documents (A.H.B.6).	Long Range Recce	Ju.88	29	16	
	SE. Fighters	Me.109	53	46	
	Night Fighters	Me.110	7	4	
	T.E. Fighters	Me.110	15	11	
			North Africa	33	25
				48	36
	Bombers	Ju.88	Sicily	94	56
		He.111		48	21
				142	77
	Dive-bombers	Me.109/Ju.88	Sicily	12	7
	Ju.87		79	45	
	Ju.88/He.111		5	2	
			96	54	
	Ju.87	North Africa (2)	68	55	
			164	109	
Transport	Ju.52	Sicily	77	60	
	Totals (All Types)	Sicily	419	268	
		North Africa	101	80	
	Grand Total		520	348	

(1) However the fort was captured by the British on that day (21 March).

(2) According to the Afrika Korps Diary a squadron of Stukas was recalled from N. Africa on 26 March.

SECRET

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No information is available regarding the Italian air strength in Libya at this date.

British air strength in the Desert had not changed since early March except for the addition to No. 257 Wing of No. 248 Squadron which had been moved from Malta because of heavy enemy air attacks.

SECTION III

THE RETREAT THROUGH CYRENAICA (1)
(1 - 8 April)

The Initial Move.

War Cabinet
Narrative,
Section 1,
Chapter D.

No.55 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

The enemy advance began in the early morning of 31 March. At 0630 hours elements of the 2nd Armoured Division saw a small force of enemy tanks, followed by lorries and guns, proceeding eastwards along the main road from Agheila, and, at the same time, contact was made with a body of enemy tanks north of Maaten Giofer. By 0800 hours R.A.F. reconnaissance had reported two hundred enemy cars and tanks, with swastika markings, moving east towards Mersa Brega, while a Blenheim of No.55 Squadron reported two hundred motor transport at Agheila and twenty-four 5 miles north of Giofer. At 1100 hours tanks, artillery, and infantry in carriers were advancing on British positions three miles south of Mersa Brega and a heavy dive-bombing attack was made on the British troops defending the town. Similar attacks were made at 1245 hours, 1600 hours and at 1745 hours, none of these raids being intercepted by the Royal Air Force.

Sqdn.O.R.Bs/

R.A.F. offensive activity (2) included a morning attack by five Blenheims of No.55 Squadron against Misurata airfield, from which enemy aircraft were operating in support of the offensive, and four sorties by the same squadron against enemy motor transport at Com El Melah. Bombs were seen to burst in the target area on both occasions, although enemy documents reported no damage. At 1015 hours twelve Hurricanes of No.3 Sqdn. took off from Benina on an offensive patrol towards Jedabya. On approaching the town two Me. 110's were sighted, apparently about to make a dive-bombing attack. A combat took place but although both sides claimed one enemy aircraft shot down, neither side suffered any loss.

War Cabinet
Narrative,
Section 1,
Chapter D.

During the afternoon the Royal Air Force saw 200 motor transport between Bir Cahela and Ras Lanuf, 800 dispersed in groups between Ras Lanuf and Ras El Aali, and 370 between Ras El Aali and Agheila. Fifty more were seen at Agheila, 45 heading south from Agheila, and 40 dispersed at Maaten Giofer. At 1430 hours there was a continuous procession of enemy motor transport, possibly as many as 300 vehicles, moving east between Agheila and Mersa Brega, and 200 Armoured Fighting vehicles, apparently stationary, were in the Mersa Brega area.

Withdrawal of the British beyond Jedabya

During the night of 31 March/1 April the 2nd Armoured Division withdrew from Mersa Brega and established its Headquarters at Maaten El Baghlia. During the following day the General Officer Commanding Cyrenaica visited the Headquarters and it was decided that the task of the Division, with the

(1) See Map No.7.

(2) A detailed analysis of R.A.F. activity during April is given at Appendix XXIX.

2nd Support Group, should be to delay the enemy advance up the Benghazi road for as long as possible. The axis for the withdrawal was to be Jedabya - Antelat - Er Regima. Preparations for the evacuation of Benghazi were ordered.

No contact was made between the opposing ground forces during the day of 1 April, but air reconnaissance reported enemy columns on both sides of the Agheila - Marsa Brega road. At 1330 hours six Ju.87's dive-bombed the Headquarters of the 3rd Armoured Brigade, without interception by the R.A.F. although Hurricanes patrolled the Jedabya and Benghazi areas during the day. Six aircraft of No.55 Squadron attacked the landing-ground at Ras Lanuf during the afternoon claiming five aircraft damaged, but the enemy lost only two twin-engined fighters and one dive-bomber on this day. In readiness for the possible evacuation of Benghazi, transport of No.3 Squadron, R.A.A.F. was employed during the night of 1/2 April in carrying petrol and oil stocks from Benina to the landing-ground prepared at El Abiar. One flight of No.73 Squadron at Tobruk was ordered to reinforce No.3 Squadron R.A.A.F. on the following day, to assist in operations in the forward area.

On 2 April Field Marshal Rommel gave orders for an advance towards Jedabya and Zuetina, and in the face of the enemy attack the 2nd Support Group, and the 3rd Armoured Brigade were both forced to withdraw from Jedabya to the Antelat area during the day. Jedabya and Zuetina were both captured and the R.A.F. units at Benina were ordered to be prepared to move at short notice. Air reconnaissance continued to report large concentrations of enemy motor transport both in the forward area and near Ras Lanuf. Blenheims made two attacks on concentrations in the Marsa Brega - Jedabya area during the day and a night attack by three Wellingtons was made on the En Nofilia road, but the enemy reported no damage, although bombs were seen to burst on the targets.

Axis and British Appreciations of the Situation

At this time the attitude of the Italian High Command towards the measures and plans of the German Afrika Korps was hesitant and full of doubt. In a memorandum of 1 April the Commander-in-Chief General Gariboldi expressed his fear of 'Becoming involved in too large an operation too early, in view of the strong enemy opposition and before all the necessary reinforcements had arrived'. Even in Germany, the news of the capture of Jedabya was received with cautious enthusiasm, and approval of Rommel's seizure of the initiative was tempered by leanings towards a more moderate policy. Hitler, while recognising the achievement of the Africa Korps, warned them not to be reckless, particularly because the German Air Force units were being withdrawn from the theatre and because the arrival of the 15th Armoured Division was likely to be delayed. A further argument in favour of caution was that the Italians needed to employ all their strength against Yugoslavia,(1) and had nothing left for North Africa. Under these circumstances there was danger of a British counter-attack on the Axis flank and the Fuehrer ordered that a further advance was to be undertaken only if it could be ascertained that the British Armoured Units had been withdrawn from the area(2).

(1) Germany invaded Yugoslavia and Greece on 6 April 1941.
 (2) See Keitels Directive. Appendix No. XXVIII.

Group Captain
 Brown's
 Report (A.H.B./
 ILJ6/68)

German Afrika
 Korps Diary
 (A.H.B.6).

Cabinet Series
Hist. (B)3
(Final) (25).

Ibid (50)

General Wavell's view of the situation was that considerable withdrawal might prove strategically necessary owing to the poor mechanical condition of the Armoured Brigade. This unit was suffering from frequent break-downs, and since no armoured reinforcements could be made available for at least three weeks, it was essential to keep the brigade in being to prevent the whole British position from being compromised. He had therefore instructed Lieutenant General Neame, General Officer Commanding Cyrenaica to preserve his armoured force even if this meant a withdrawal beyond Benghazi. The Prime Minister however deprecated the policy of giving up ground other than for purposes of manoeuvre and considered that a withdrawal from Benghazi would be a great misfortune. He considered that in view of the difficulty of maintaining a large force by the waterless coastal road from Tripoli, there could not be as yet much weight behind the German attack, and urged the Commander-in-Chief to cut off the forward enemy force. The Military situation continued to deteriorate, however, and on 3 April General Wavell submitted to the C.I.G.S. that in view of the apparent strength of the enemy, the continued reports of German reinforcements to Libya and his apparent intention to make a large scale offensive towards Egypt, the Western Desert front ought to be re-established as quickly as possible. To do this it would be necessary to cancel the transfer of 7th Australian Division to Greece, and to send it to the Desert, and to establish from such armoured units as could be made available a mobile force at El Adem which could be moved forward to meet the enemy if necessary. This would necessitate the postponement of Mandibles.⁽¹⁾ These proposals were immediately accepted by the Chiefs of Staff.

Withdrawal of the 2nd Armoured Division towards Benghazi

On the night of 2/3 April the 2nd Armoured Division was still in the Antelat area, with a flight of No.6 A.C. Squadron, while the 2nd Support Group was withdrawing along the Benghazi road. Its orders were to hold the Benghazi road for as long as possible, but when forced to withdraw to proceed by Esc Sceleidima, to cover the left flank of the 9th Australian Division which was in the Benghazi area. In the early morning of 3 April, in accordance with these instructions, but without informing No.6 Squadron's attached flight, the 2nd Armoured Division moved to Esc Sceleidima half way to El Abiar. Later in the morning the flight discovered that the Divisional Headquarters had left, but could obtain no information as to its whereabouts, and it was not until noon that a message was received giving the location of the Headquarters as thirty miles west of Msus.

Harding/Brown
Report
(AHB/ILJ6/78).
See App. 31 to
this narrative.

By this time, having discovered by means of reconnaissance that the enemy was advancing from Jedabya towards Antelat, and being unable to locate any British units in the Antelat area, the flight had moved to Msus airfield; here a Free French garrison was in charge of the fort and of an important Army petrol dump. At about 14.00 hours, the officer commanding the flight ordered a quick reconnaissance along the road towards Antelat, and the pilot of the reconnaissance aircraft reported enemy columns of armoured and transport vehicles five miles to the south of Msus and moving towards it. Later in the day a strategic reconnaissance aircraft of No.55 Squadron reported that at 1830 hours there was a force of a hundred tanks and motor transport at Msus.

(1) The proposed operation for the capture of the Dodecanese.

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When it seemed clear that the enemy was approaching Msus, the flight withdrew and the officer commanding the Free French garrison issued orders for the petrol dump to be blown up. As a result of this report many changes were made in the orders for the withdrawal and the movements of Army units became very confused. General Headquarters Middle East later claimed that the air reports were 'false', and that the columns were in fact British and not enemy. (1)

The 2nd Armoured Division remained at Esc Sceleidima throughout 3 April, but during the night it moved northwards with the 2nd Support Group towards El Abiar. The 3rd Armoured Brigade was ordered to Msus, apparently (2) with the intention of protecting the petrol dump.

Fighter activity on this day met with some success. In the Sceleidima area a patrol of seven Hurricanes of No.3 R.A.A.F. Squadron, with four Hurricanes of No.73 Squadron, encountered a force of Me.110's and Ju.87's. The Hurricanes claimed five Me.'s and three Ju.'s destroyed without loss to themselves. However the enemy admitted the loss of only two Stukas, one Me. and one reconnaissance aircraft on this day. During the morning No.3 Squadron received orders to evacuate Benina, and to move to Got-es-Sultan. This was accomplished in the afternoon, but during the night further instructions were received for the squadron to proceed to Maraua, and by dint of travelling all night it arrived at its destination at 1100 hours on 4 April.

No.73 Squadron
O.R.B.

Bombing activity on 3 April consisted of an attack on vehicles at Jedabya by five aircraft of No.55 Squadron, and during the night Wellingtons of No.70 squadron attacked similar targets between Jedabya and Ras Lanuf. In both attacks bombs were seen to fall among vehicles, and during the night attack a brilliant blue flash was observed which was thought to be an ammunition explosion. Four other Wellingtons attacked Tripoli.

No.55 & 70
Sqdns. O.R.B.s

Rommel Plans a Further Advance

During 3 April, Rommel decided to threaten the British on their southern flank by sending an advance detachment to Ben Gania and a stronger force towards Bir Tengeder. By this move he hoped to discover whether the British intended to hold Cyrenaica. The two detachments set off with instructions to advance further into the British flank and rear towards Tmimi if occasion should arise. These columns were presumably not seen by air reconnaissance until 6 April. Meanwhile the German 5th Light Division at Jedabya was held up by lack of petrol, and all available supply and fighting vehicles were employed in transporting petrol during the night. In the evening Marshal Gariboldi arrived at Headquarters of the Afrika Korps, and in a conference with Rommel he protested at the speed of the advance, and requested that the German forces should not move forward until he had issued the necessary orders. Rommel replied that he could not wait for so slow a transmission of orders, and that he had to be able to deal with the situation as it confronted him at the moment. Towards the end of the conference a radio message was received from Ober Kommandatura Wehrmacht, assuring Rommel complete freedom of action. This greatly eased the situation.

German Africa
Corps Diary.
(A.H.B.6)

(1) This is discussed on page 133
(2) This is discussed at Appendix XXXI

Withdrawal of the British, East and North-east from Benghazi

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Following the confusion of movements on 3 April caused by the report that the enemy was at Msus, the 2nd Armoured Division and the 2nd Support Group were proceeding towards El Abiar, and the 3rd Armoured Brigade was approaching Msus on the night of 3/4 April. During the night however, in view of the weakness of the 2nd Armoured Division, General Neame ordered a general withdrawal to a line Derna-Mekili. The 9th Australian Division was ordered to withdraw to the Wadi Derna, and the 2nd Armoured Division to Mekili where it was to join the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade which had been brought up from the Tobruk area to defend the fort. During 4 April the withdrawal began along the road from El Abiar to Tecasis, and north-east from Barce towards Cyrene. On reaching Msus on 4 April, the 3rd Armoured Brigade found that the petrol dump had been destroyed as a result of the reported advance of the enemy, and thereafter the movements of the brigade were almost entirely dictated by lack of petrol. Meanwhile the 2nd Armoured Division Headquarters moving towards Tecasis, was attacked at 1330 hours and again at 1600 hours, by enemy aircraft, and a supply column sent to carry petrol to the 3rd Armoured Brigade at Msus was totally destroyed by enemy air action at 1300 hours.⁽¹⁾ At 1700 hours an enemy column attacked the rearguard holding the Er Regima escarpment, but this attack was held. Meanwhile a second column was advancing along the Benghazi-Tokra road. During the night the 9th Australian Division withdrew to take up a position on the Barce escarpment, while forward elements proceeded by road towards Barce and Cyrene.

During the withdrawal No. 3 Squadron patrolled over the British formations in the Scheldsidima-Msus area, without encountering any enemy aircraft, and two Blenheims of No. 55 Squadron bombed enemy vehicles at Msus. During the day the squadron was strengthened by the arrival of eight aircraft of No. 45 squadron; the move of this squadron to Greece had been cancelled because of the gravity of the situation in Cyrenaica. Reconnaissance by No. 55 Squadron revealed many enemy columns moving east in the Msus-Antelat-Jedabya area, and instructions were issued for No. 3 Squadron to withdraw to Martuba, No. 55 Squadron to Derna, and No. 6 Squadron to Barce.

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In a signal to Air Ministry, Air Marshal Tedder, Deputy Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief,⁽²⁾ described the situation as somewhat dangerous owing largely to the enemy's armoured advance across the desert towards Mekili. He pointed out that the only immediate means of checking this was by air action, but although in good form the squadrons were thin in numbers of aircraft and crews. To improve this situation No. 45 Squadron had already been ordered to the front, and arrangements were being made for No. 274 Squadron to follow; the Cyrenaican battle was being given priority for all replacements. In his reply the Chief of Air Staff expressed his entire approval of this priority policy, but hoped that

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- (1) This was one of the enemy's more successful air actions. On the whole his air activity was not considered a serious threat to the British troops.
- (2) The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief was away in the Sudan.

to prevent their withdrawal from Greece Blenheims would if necessary be operated over the desert from there.

Rommel continued to press forward his advanced forces as fast as possible. Armed reconnaissance detachments proceeding up the Trigh el Abd were ordered to reach the coast as quickly as possible in order to cut off the British retreat to the eastward, and to dispatch an advanced detachment towards Tobruk. The Italian Ariete Division was instructed to form a strong defence detachment and to advance up the Trigh el Abd and occupy Mekili. The 3rd Reconnaissance Detachment occupied Benghazi. All units were severely hampered and suffered heavy casualties because of the difficult terrain.

In the early morning of 5 April, the 2nd Armoured Division reached Maraua where it was instructed to take up a position in the Ghedir es Schiomar area with a view to retreating through Got Derva to Mekili. Here the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade was to come under its command, and could be brought forward if necessary. At 0930 hours thirteen enemy bombers escorted by fighters, totally destroyed two petrol convoys of the 2nd Armoured Division near Charruba. At about 1200 hours an enemy force approached the 2nd Support Group near Charruba, but was held by accurate shooting until the arrival of the 3rd Armoured Brigade, which proceeded northwards from Msus area to cover the El Abiar-Got Derva track. By 1430 hours the enemy had occupied Er Regima, and at 1540 hours tactical reconnaissance reported a large enemy column proceeding east from El Abiar with the head near El Charruba. As a result of this report it was decided to move Nos. 3 and 6 Squadrons to Martuba and Derna respectively. On arriving at Martuba No. 3 Squadron was given further instructions to move to Gazala East, but as the drivers were exceedingly fatigued the squadron did not proceed further until the following day. At about 2100 hours Brigadier Harding, Brigadier General Staff to the Cyrenaican Force, telephoned from Maraua to say that Army Headquarters had decided to stay at Maraua as the column advancing from El Abiar was British, and requested the return of the fighter and army co-operation squadrons to Maraua. Group Captain Brown immediately interrogated all the pilots who had seen this column, and was convinced that it was an enemy force. Because of the difficulty of moving petrol to Maraua at such short notice, it was decided to send back a small handling party only, and to use the airfield at Maraua as an advanced landing-ground for operations on the 6th. The Army again maintained that as a result of what they termed 'False' air reports by air reconnaissance, when the column from El Abiar was reported as enemy, orders for further withdrawal were issued unnecessarily, causing much confusion which was only dispelled after Army units had confirmed that the column was British. (1)

Operations in the Benghazi Area.

While the 2nd Armoured Division was moving in some confusion through the Jebel el Akdar, north of Benghazi the 9th Australian Division, covered by Hurricanes of Nos. 3 and 73 Squadrons, was retreating up the Barce Pass. During the second patrol of the day fighters of both squadrons encountered nine Ju.87's which were bombing and machine-gunning British troops south of the pass; five enemy aircraft were claimed shot down for the loss of one Hurricane. During the third

(1) This is discussed at page 134.

Afrika Korps
Diary
(A.H.B.6)

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Group Captain
Brown's
Report (A.H.B./
IIJ6/68).

Sqdn O.R.B.s

Nos. 45, 55 &
70
Sqns O.R.B.s

patrol seven aircraft of No. 3 Squadron with two of No. 73 Squadron, attacked twelve Ju.87's south of the pass and claimed nine of them destroyed for the loss of one Hurricane.⁽¹⁾ Enemy documents show a loss of seven dive-bombers destroyed and one damaged. Me. 110's were also active on this day; six machine-gunned Derna landing-ground on their way back from bombing convoys on the Derna-Gazala road, and damaged five Blenheims, two Lysanders and one Hurricane, of which two Blenheims and the Lysanders had to be destroyed on the airfield. Meanwhile Blenheims of Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons attacked the landing-ground at Marble Arch, and enemy motor transport convoys and troops in the Barce and Tokra areas. During the night of 5/6 April, a single Wellington of No. 70 Squadron attacked convoys on the main road at Agheila, scoring direct hits on vehicles.

Enemy Forces Close in on Mekili

During 5 April, Rommel took command in person of the advanced detachments at Mekili. Already the progress of the forward units had been so rapid that supplies had to be transported by air to enable the advance to continue, and even so units were frequently forced to halt to await fuel and food stocks. The final objective of the advance, at this stage, as explained on 6 April, was the cutting of the coast road near Tobruk, the operations at Mekili being designed to screen this.

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On 6 April the British Commanders-in-Chief held a conference at which it was decided to stabilise the battle-front as far west as possible, preferably at the Tobruk defences, where a line could be most easily held. It was estimated that this line might have to be held for two months, after which it was hoped sufficient armoured forces would be ready to launch a counter-attack. In the meantime when, during the day, air reconnaissance reported enemy movement north of Benghazi towards Tokra, and north-east of it, an enemy column advancing eastwards to Mekili from Msus, another advancing north-east from Jedabya, and a third much further south approaching Jalo, it was agreed that a general retirement to a line Mekili-Gazala-Tmimi, was desirable; the 9th Division was to move by lorry to Tmimi while the remnants of the 2nd Division retired immediately along the main Charruba track to Mekili. During the day reports were received of a powerful and rapid German advance across the desert directed towards Mekili and the area to the east of it. Broadly speaking, the enemy routes were:-(2)

- (a) El Abiar-Charruba, outflanking the escarpment position from the south.
- (b) Ghemines-Soluh-Msus-Bir Tengeder-Mekili, to outflank the 2nd Armoured Division position west of Mekili.

(1) Group Captain Brown, in his comments on Wavell's Dispatch, held that these attacks were an example of the enemy's under-employment of air power. See page 132.
(2) See Map 8.

- (c) Jedabya-Bir Tengeder-Mekili, to assist in the attack on Mekili and to send detachments forward to Derna and Tmimi to straddle the British lines of communication.

At about 1000 hours attacks on Mekili began from the east and south, and three hours later the 2nd Armoured Division started withdrawing into the fortified position there. Because of the decreasing supply of communication facilities, the headquarters unit was unable to exercise effective control of its formations, and this, combined with the shortage of petrol and the belief that the enemy was lying across the Got Derva-Mekili track, led to both the 2nd Support Group and the 3rd Armoured Brigade withdrawing by the main Maraua-Slonta road instead of through Mekili. In the afternoon enemy motorised infantry was in the Mekili area, and there were patrols a few miles west of Tmimi, and at 1730 hours the Germans demanded the surrender of Mekili. This was refused, and fortunately a severe dust storm prevented the attack planned by Rommel, while the 2nd Armoured Division was able to take up positions round the fort.

Enemy Forces threaten the Coastal Road

In the coastal area, the 9th Australian Division was withdrawing to the Gazala area during the afternoon, its units moving along both the northern and southern roads from Derna. The 3rd Armoured Brigade had been ordered to assemble south of Derna to march on Mekili, but on reaching Maraua it found there was no petrol available, so that it was necessary that it should proceed to Derna before an advance on Mekili was possible.

During 6 April No. 3 Squadron patrolled the Derna area and Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons attacked enemy troops at Mekili and the airfield at Jedabya. Five sorties were flown against the former target and nine against the latter, fires being started at both places, and a number of vehicles damaged. At Bu Amud, No. 73 Squadron received a report at 0715 hours that there was firing at the British outpost at Aoroma, but it could see no activity from the air. At 1215 hours it was reported that the post was surrounded, and this time an aircraft sent to patrol the area was fired at. British troops later overcame an enemy force which had taken Aoroma.

During the day further withdrawal orders were issued to squadrons. No. 55 Squadron was ordered to Gazala, No. 3 Squadron to Sidi Mahmoud, and No. 6 Squadron to El Gubbi. On this day some members of 'A' Flight, No. 6 Squadron, which had been ordered back to Maraua by the Army, were cut off by the enemy and captured. On the same day No. 257 Wing and its Wellington squadrons, which had been operating from the Tobruk area, were ordered to retire to Sidi Azeiz and Capuzzo, and heavy bombing operations ceased until 10 April. Evacuation operations began at El Adem airfield and at Rear Headquarters, R.A.F. Cyrenaica.

On the night of 6/7 April German forces placed themselves astride the track running from Derna airfield to Mekili. The 9th Australian Division was by this time between Derna and Tmimi, and many of its columns, moving along the desert tracks to avoid the main road, were cut off and captured. The capture in this way of Generals Neame and O'Connor was a serious disaster

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for the Army. The remaining units of the division were clear of Derna soon after dawn on 7 April, but by 1000 hours the enemy seemed to be about to attack the considerable traffic on the Derna-Bomba road. As they reached Tmimi however, the disorganised vehicles were formed into improvised units for the defence of the road through the town. During the morning Brigadier R.W. Tovell arrived at Tmimi where he took command of the situation; a stand was made and the enemy advance guard was repulsed.

Air activity over the Derna area was confined to two patrols by No. 3 Squadron, during neither of which were any hostile aircraft sighted. The evacuation of El Adem continued but was seriously hampered by the shortage of transport vehicles.

The Breakout from Mekili

Brown's Report
(A.H.B./ILJ6/68).

To the south, at Mekili, the enemy continued to close in on the 2nd Armoured Division and the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade. Instructions that these units were to retire to El Adem had been issued at 0630 hours on 7 April, but the message did not reach the garrison until 1700 hours. During the day the exits to the north, south and east of the fort were blocked by the enemy, and the garrison received two separate ultimatums to surrender, one of which was signed by Rommel himself. Blenheims of Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons supported the garrison with frequent attacks on the surrounding enemy, a total of nineteen sorties being flown, in addition Hurricanes of No. 3 Squadron carried out machine-gunning attacks with good results. Both Blenheims and Hurricanes attacked two Ju.52 transport aircraft, parked on a saltpan near Mekili, and the Germans admitted the loss of these aircraft, attributing it to lack of fighter protection. As machine-gunning attacks by fighters was liable to be expensive in aircraft, the decision to employ the Hurricanes in this way had been taken only after assurance had been given by Air Marshal Tedder, that replacement aircraft were being made available. By the end of the day, No. 3 Squadron had only two aircraft serviceable, but information was received that eight Hurricanes had arrived at Matruh, en route for Tobruk. On this day, the main body of No. 45 Squadron arrived from the Delta area, and the remainder reached Tobruk on 8th; thereafter Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons operated as separate units. There was no serious enemy air activity on this day.

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Although British aircraft had been operating in the area during the day, at 2055 hours Headquarters Cyrenaica Command received a message from Headquarters 2nd Armoured Division to say that, in view of the enemy concentration at Mekili, air support was essential. The report added that already a fairly heavy attack had been repulsed, and that bad going would preclude a withdrawal from Mekili by night. Since they had no field guns, (1) the British could not prevent the enemy from digging themselves in in full view of the garrison 3,000 yards from the perimeter defences, and during the night the enemy tightened the ring round the fort. It was finally decided that a breakout should be made to the south-

(1) The War Cabinet Narrative contains no comment on the absence of field guns at Mekili.

east at first light on 8 April. This was attempted, but the enemy had been reinforced with armoured units, and the British came under heavy artillery and machine-gun fire. Showing great courage and resource, some parties managed to escape, notably a detachment of the 1st Royal Horse Artillery, which with some Indian troops, broke away to the south and eventually reached Sollum on 11 April. Another party, consisting of the 18th Indian Cavalry Regiment also made its escape, but by 0830 hours enemy tanks and armoured cars were closing in on the camp. The remainder of the force, including almost the whole of Headquarters 2nd Armoured Division was taken prisoner.

When information was received at Headquarters Cyrenaica that the 2nd Armoured Division was having difficulty in withdrawing, No.258 Wing was ordered to send fighters to its assistance, but the aircraft were unable to carry out their task because of a severe dust storm. However, this storm effectively hindered the enemy's pursuit of these British units which succeeded in breaking through the lines at Mekili.

During 8 April the remainder of the 9th Australian Division withdrew from Gazala to Acroma under cover of the dust storm, the remainder of the 3rd Armoured Division reached Tobruk, and rough defensive positions were dug outside the Tobruk perimeter. The 2nd Support Group remained outside the Tobruk fortifications, in contact with the advanced enemy units.

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SECTION IV

THE ENCIRCLEMENT OF TOBRUK AND THE WITHDRAWAL

TO THE FRONTIER

Re-organisation of the British Forces

Now that the remainder of the Army units had withdrawn into the Tobruk area, in accordance with the decision taken by the Commanders-in-Chief on 6 April to establish a defensive line at the Tobruk defences, it was necessary to reorganise the units available both to defend the port itself, and to prevent a further eastward advance by the enemy. On 8 April, General Wavell flew to Tobruk, where he held a conference and placed Major-General Laverack, whom he had brought with him from Egypt, in command of all troops in Cyrenaica. His task was to hold the enemy at Tobruk for as long as possible, if necessary for two months, while armoured and other units were collected for the defence of Egypt. In case of need he was to prepare a plan for withdrawal from Tobruk. On the same day, the 2nd Support Group, reorganised under the command of Brigadier Gott, moved from Tobruk to El Adem, and was given the task of delaying and harassing the enemy south of the tracks running from Acroma to their junction with the Tobruk perimeter. On the following day the 9th Australian Division, under its commander General Morshead, took command of the Tobruk fortress. On 10 April, in a signal to the War Office, General Wavell announced his intention of holding Tobruk at all costs. His plan was to place a force in the Bardia-Sollum area with as much mobility as possible, to protect communications and to act against the flank and rear of the enemy units attacking Tobruk, while a defensive position was built up in the Mersa Matruh area. His reserves were very limited however, particularly in mobile and armoured units and anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, and he considered that the defence would be a race against time. However, Air Marshal Longmore was building up a reserve air striking force in the Matruh area, and intended to bring the heaviest possible scale of air attack against the enemy as he advanced.

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3 (Final) (84)

With the withdrawal into and beyond the Tobruk area, the air units also underwent considerable reorganisation. Headquarters Royal Air Force Cyrenaica had now lost its raison d'etre, and it was decided, in the event of the loss of the forward airfields in the Tobruk area, or of the encirclement of Tobruk, to place its units under the command of No. 204 Group, which arrived at Maaten Bagush on 9 April. In the meantime the direction of operations remained the prerogative of Headquarters Cyrenaica, which was renamed Advanced Headquarters No. 204 Group, and remained at Tobruk. By this time the disposition of the squadrons was as follows: No. 3 Squadron was at Landing-ground 79, south of Buq Buq, No. 6 Squadron was at Tobruk West, No. 45 Squadron was at Qasaba, No. 55 Squadron at Bagush, and No. 73 Squadron at El Gubbi.

The Air Situation

At this critical juncture in the Desert war, events in the Balkans threatened to increase the strain on the already depleted forces in the Middle East. On 6 April Germany attacked Greece and Yugoslavia, and with this grave

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(A.H.B./ILJ1/
183/138 (D),
Encl. 47 (a))

development the Chief of the Air Staff advocated the policy of giving maximum support to the British Army formations in the Balkan theatre, and retaining in Egypt only the minimum force necessary for the security of the western flank. He supported his proposals with information recently received in London, which had led to the belief that, for the time being, the Germans were unable to reinforce their air units in Libya.

Ibid, Encl.48a

The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, considered that the gravity of the situation in Libya was not fully appreciated. Although it was probable that no large scale attack had been intended by the enemy in the first place, he considered that the early successes by light forces supported by tanks, might encourage his exploitation of the situation in a further advance. In this case, strong air support was likely to be required by the Army, not against enemy air activity, but against fast-moving and enterprising mechanised forces, which the Army had not yet been able to check, and which had already denied the air force the use of El Adem airfield. Moreover, although it might be true that the enemy could not reinforce his air force immediately, because of the extreme mobility of the Luftwaffe through its transport aircraft, he considered that the reinforcement of North Africa from Sicily must be anticipated. His preparations for further operations included the opening of airfields and satellites east of Matruh, from which, in the event of a further German advance, it was intended to operate all the aircraft in Egypt, including obsolescent types. There was by this time a good supply of Blenheims and Hurricanes reaching Egypt via Takoradi, and it was intended to allot these between Greece and Libya, according to the relative urgency of their needs. The first priority however was the security of the bases in Egypt, and this was being ensured where necessary at the expense of Aden, the Sudan and East Africa.

Enemy Forces Approach Tobruk

On 8 and 9 April, Rommel was gathering his forces together after their extensive and scattered advance. In the morning of the 8th, British air reconnaissance reported one hundred vehicles south of Mekili, and a small force of lorries and armoured cars twenty miles east of Gadd el Ahmar. Later, many vehicles were seen on the coastal road, but no contact was made with enemy units in the area south of Tobruk. In spite of a severe dust storm, several air attacks against enemy troops were carried out during the day, Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons flying nine bombing sorties against motor transport and troop concentrations at Mekili, and No. 73 Squadron flying two machine-gunning sorties against the same targets. On this day, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief being away in Greece, his deputy, Air Marshal Tedder, urged Group Captain Brown to use his fighters extensively for machine-gunning enemy transport columns. His advice was supported by information that the fighter situation was likely to be relieved by a reduction in enemy air strength in Cyrenaica, and that H.Q. Middle East now hoped to keep the Desert well supplied with aircraft.

AOC/11 Western
Desert Opera-
tions. (A.H.B./
ILJ1/183/146
(A), Encl. 88
(a))

In the early morning of 9 April, air reconnaissance reported about three hundred motor transport on the track Soluk-Msus-Mekili, two hundred on the Trigh el Abd south-west of Bir Tengeder, and from five hundred to a thousand in and around Mekili. Small parties of vehicles were moving east from Mekili at 0830 hours, and at 1620 hours three hundred were approaching Tobruk along the main road from the west. At 2030 hours there was a heavy air raid on Tobruk, during which

Squadron
O.R.Bs.

No. 73 Squadron destroyed one Me.110 for the loss of one Hurricane. Offensive activity by British air units on this day consisted of only four sorties by Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons against vehicles at Mekili and Gadd el Ahmar, and two machine-gunning attacks by No. 73 Squadron at Mekili, from which one Hurricane failed to return. In addition a Lysander of No. 6 Squadron destroyed a Ju. 52 on the ground at Mekili, while on reconnaissance. This squadron moved to Tobruk West landing-ground on this day, with orders to remain there for as long as the garrison held out. During the withdrawal it had fulfilled every request made for reconnaissance.

On 10 April, enemy columns made tentative advances towards the Tobruk-El Adem road. At 1500 hours air reconnaissance reported vehicles packed tightly all the way along the road from Gazala to Acroma, and several columns advancing along the track from Gadd el Ahmar to El Adem. These withdrew under shell-fire, but at 2015 hours two hundred vehicles were reported by air reconnaissance moving along the Trigh Capuzzo to El Adem. Army reinforcements from Matruh took up defensive positions at Capuzzo for the protection of Sollum from the north-west, the dumps near the frontier wire, and the drinking water pipe from Bardia to Capuzzo. According to enemy documents, on this day Rommel declared to his forces that his ultimate objective was the Suez Canal, and that he was anxious to force the pace to reach it.

No. 45 Squadron made four sorties against enemy vehicles concentrated in the El Adem area; bombs were seen to burst in the target area and fires were started, and as no A.A. fire was experienced a second attack was made with front and rear guns. No. 73 Squadron also attacked this and other concentrations on the tracks between Gadd el Ahmar and El Adem, and between Gazala and Tobruk. As a result of the day's attacks, seventy vehicles were believed to have been destroyed or damaged. No. 73 Squadron lost two aircraft on machine-gunning operations, and it was felt in the unit that these operations scarcely warranted the losses involved. During the night bombing raids were carried out by two Wellingtons of No. 257 Wing, on Derna airfield and on troop concentrations near Tobruk.

The Encirclement of Tobruk

On 11 April, enemy columns cut the Tobruk-El Adem road, and at 1330 hours the left hand column of the 2nd Support Group withdrew towards the Halfaya Pass. Some of the right hand column which was in action west of El Adem was prevented from leaving the Tobruk area by enemy forces which cut the Tobruk-Bardia road at midday. At 1800 hours the first attack on the Tobruk perimeter was repulsed, but in view of the serious situation, the air squadrons in Tobruk were ordered to prepare for any eventuality, and to be ready to fly aircraft out at short notice. Since it appeared that the Blenheims might shortly be forced to cease operating from El Gubbi landing-ground inside the Tobruk perimeter, Group Captain Brown recommended that henceforth bombing should be carried out from the Maaten Bagush area, and that, until a central control had been established at Headquarters No. 204 Group, special bombing requirements should be ordered by signal from Tobruk. Consequently, as from 12 April, the Blenheim squadrons came under the operational control of No. 204 Group, Maaten Bagush.

During 11 April, seven aircraft of No. 45 Squadron attacked motor transport in the Tobruk and Acroma areas, while

AOC/11 Western
Desert Operations. (A.H.B./
IIJ1/183/146
(A), Encls. 103
(a) and 104.(a))

Squadron O.R.Bs
and Brown's
Report (A.H.B./
ILJ6/68)

two aircraft of No. 55 Squadron flew two sorties each against a motor transport concentration at Gadd el Ahmar, and one each against a similar target at Gazala. Hurricanes of No. 73 Squadron, operating in pairs, machine gunned enemy troops throughout the day; an Me. 110 which attempted to interfere was claimed shot down, but this was not confirmed by enemy records. During the night two Wellingtons bombed Msus, Gazala and motor transport on the road south of Gazala, causing fires and explosions. Similar operations were carried out next day.

On 12 April the 2nd Support Group continued its withdrawal towards the Sollum area. Its task was to delay the enemy for as long as possible east of the Sollum-Sofafi escarpment, and then to withdraw to a line at Buq Buq. Air reconnaissance showed a general movement of enemy fighting vehicles and motor transport from the west towards Gazala, and about seven hundred motor transport east of Gazala. An enemy column was moving towards Sollum via Sidi Azeiz, and during the day an enemy force entered and occupied Bardia under cover of a dust storm. On learning that, except for a small holding force the Army had evacuated Sollum, the Officer Commanding No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron at L.G. 79 decided to move his unit back to Matruh. At Tobruk all air force files and documents not required for immediate operations were destroyed by fire. As a result of the change of operational control to Rear Headquarters No. 204 Group, and after consultation with General Headquarters Cyrenaica Command, instructions were issued regarding the transfer of the operational staff from Tobruk and the establishment of an Air Liaison Section there under command of an Air Liaison Officer. Instructions for the evacuation of non-operational airmen and officers from Tobruk, and for the withdrawal of air squadrons and forward units to the area enclosed by the inner defences, were issued to the Air Liaison Officer. The only squadrons now remaining at Tobruk were No. 6 Army Co-operation Squadron, and No. 73 Squadron, which continued to carry out their respective tasks of Tactical reconnaissance and fighter defence. No. 235 M.R.U. also remained at Tobruk to provide early warning of enemy air attacks.

A.H.B./ILJ6/
68, Apps 'J'
& 'K'

The Problem of Maintaining the Air Offensive against Tripoli

With the rapid development of Rommel's offensive the need for cutting the Axis supply lines from Italy to North Africa became more and more urgent, and during early April, much correspondence passed between London and Middle East, regarding the measures to be taken. At first the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean proposed that continuous air attacks against the port of Tripoli provided the best and easiest solution, but Rommel's advance soon made this impossible from Cyrenaican bases. After much discussion, it was eventually decided that a naval bombardment of Tripoli by the Mediterranean Fleet stood the best chance of gaining immediate results, and an operation was planned to coincide with a Malta convoy operation on 20/21 April; meanwhile the operations of naval and air units against shipping at sea and against loading ports were to be continued as intensively as possible.

Cabinet Hist.
'B' Series

The difficulty of maintaining air attacks on Tripoli arose from the loss of the Cyrenaican airfields. Until the enemy threat to the Benghazi area became imminent, Wellingtons of No. 257 Wing, had been able to operate by night against the port, from Gambut and El Adem, using Benina airfield at

D/A.O.C.-in-C.,
C.O.S. Signals.
(A.H.B./IIJ1/9/
183/A),
Encls. 42(a),
43(a) and 47(a))

AOC/11 Western
Desert Opera-
tions. (A.H.B./
IIJ1/183/146
(a), Encl. 106
(a))

Benghazi as a refuelling base for all aircraft without long-range tanks. When Benina was evacuated, the Wellingtons continued to operate against Tripoli, for although the greater distance to the target involved a sacrifice of bomb-load, this was considered a negligible draw-back compared with the difficulties of supply and the risks of loss and damage involved in basing Wellingtons at Malta. (1) When however on 11 April, advanced Axis forces cut the Tobruk-El Adem road, it became impossible to operate aircraft from El Adem, so that there was no longer a base in the Desert from which Tripoli could be attacked. As an emergency measure six Wellingtons were sent to operate from Malta, and the Commanders-in-Chief asked the Chiefs of Staff to consider sending to Middle East, either as a temporary or permanent measure, a squadron of bombers with sufficient range and hitting power to bomb Tripoli effectively from Egypt. However, the Chief of Air Staff considered that it was useless to send non-tropicalised Stirlings or Manchesters 'barely through major teething troubles, and without spares, ground equipment or maintenance personnel', and suggested that the risks involved in operating from Malta should be accepted for attacks on Palermo, Tripoli, and enemy convoys. The fact that a carrier-borne reinforcing operation, Winch, had recently strengthened the fighter defence, was an argument in favour of this policy, and it was accepted. Instructions were given to the Air Officer Commanding, Malta, to operate a force of nine Wellingtons against Tripoli as intensively as possible. A further suggestion, involving the institution of a shuttle service, whereby some Wellingtons should leave Egypt nightly to raid Tripoli, and then land at Malta, while other Wellingtons followed the same procedure in reverse, was turned down. It was calculated that six aircraft operating from Malta could carry the same load as twelve on shuttle service, so that the latter method was scarcely worth the effort involved.

First Assaults on the Tobruk Perimeter

D.A.K. Diary

Following the closing of the circle round Tobruk, on 12 April, the next requirement was to capture the port, but the Africa Corps lacked much vital information concerning the permanent defences, and the Italian High Command proved unexpectedly reticent on the subject. Rommel was determined to capture the port however, and to achieve it, if necessary, by throwing in all his available resources, for it stood in the way of a further advance, for which, from other aspects, the situation seemed favourable. According to reports the British were believed to have no reserves nor any forces fit for action to oppose an advance into Egypt, while German air reports indicated that the British were very weak in the Capuzzo-Sollum area, and that there were no forces in the rear beyond Matruh. Consequently Rommel was anxious to continue his advance as rapidly as possible, in order to defeat any reserves which might be hurried forward, before stronger forces could be transferred from Abyssinia or Greece. After an advance so unexpectedly swift and extensive, however, it was essential to improve the supply situation, and make it secure, before further operations could be undertaken, and the chief requirement for this was the capture of Tobruk. Thus General Wavell's decision to hold Tobruk at all costs was a decisive factor in preventing a further Axis advance in force into Egypt at a time when the Western Desert Force was least able to prevent it.

(1) At this time Malta was still subject to heavy bombing raids by units of the Luftwaffe based in Sicily.

The first attack on the fortress was made on 12 April, by the 5th German Tank Regiment. It approached from the south-east, but was forced to turn back at the anti-tank defence. On this day the British air effort was small. No.55 Squadron had only seven aircraft serviceable and was operating from the Maten Bagush Area, using El Gubbi for refuelling only, while No.45 Squadron had only seven aircraft on strength, and was operating from Qasaba. Consequently only nine sorties were flown against enemy troops outside the Tobruk perimeter. The Blenheim situation improved on the next day, when twelve aircraft were sent forward as reinforcements.

A.H.B./IIJ6/68

A far more determined attack on Tobruk took place at 1800 hours on 13 April, when the 5th Light Division, supported by other units, attempted to seize the cross-roads south of Tobruk, an important starting-point for the attack on the perimeter. An anti-tank ditch and wire defences were captured but the objective itself was not reached, and as a result of the operation the strength of the 8th German Machine-gun Battalion was reduced from fourteen hundred to three hundred men. In the early morning of 14 April, the 5th Light Division launched the main attack on Tobruk, and the 8th Machine-gun Battalion succeeded in piercing the perimeter defences at one point. Subsequently however, the battalion was unsuccessful in its attempts to widen the breach, and the greater part of the unit was cut off in the locality, and either captured or killed. A second attack, planned for the evening, did not take place.

D.A.K. Diary

The morning attack was supported in its initial stages by Stuka attacks on the centre of the town and to the west of it. No. 73 Squadron described the air attacks as most determined, but unsuccessful, and estimated the number of the enemy at about seventy aircraft, the majority of which were Ju.87's, accompanied by Me.110's and in some cases by G.50's. The air attack was intercepted by the Hurricane squadron, which, with only eight serviceable aircraft made thirty-four sorties and claimed one Heinkel, two G.50's and six Ju.87's destroyed for the loss of three Hurricanes. According to enemy records however, the Luftwaffe lost only four Stukas and one twin-engined fighter.

Enemy documents
A.H.B.6

Close Support Bombing at Tobruk

During 13 and 14 April, Nos.45 and 55 Squadrons maintained frequent attacks on enemy motor transport and troops in the forward area, particularly those threatening Tobruk. On 13 April by dint of rearming at El Gubbi landing-ground, these squadrons together flew a total of twenty-four sorties against the Axis units preparing to attack the perimeter. On the next day, when the enemy was concentrating reinforcements west of the breach in the perimeter, preparatory to the second attack, both squadrons again made sustained and heavy attacks with hundreds of small bombs, against motorised infantry and supply columns. It was evident that the enemy plan was adversely affected by the heavy casualties he suffered during these attacks, and that this form of low-level bombing with small bombs, aided by the complete absence of enemy fighters, was producing very profitable results. In fact, although the enemy had launched heavy bomber attacks in the early morning, his air activity was adversely affected by this shortage of fighters, particularly Me.109's. On 14 April the Afrikakorps' diarist wrote:

Nos.45 & 55
Sqdns & No.204
Group O.R.B.s

A.H.B.6 Extract
from Enemy Documents: The Position
of Fliegerfuhrer
Afrika.
Jan-June 1941

'During the entire period since the encirclement of Tobruk, the British had complete air superiority and daily attacked the investing forces with successive waves of bombers The Commander, 10th Air Corps gave the Commander Afrika Korps a verbal undertaking to provide fighter aircraft at an early date.'

Nos. 38 & 70
Sqn ORBs and
No. 257 Wing
ORB

The Blenheim attacks were augmented at night by heavy-bomber raids on enemy positions by Wellingtons of Nos. 38 and 70 Squadrons. On the night of 13/14 April, four aircraft of No. 38 Squadron attacked El Adem and Gambut airfields, while two aircraft attacked Derna. On the same night a single aircraft of No. 70 Squadron bombed the El Adem road, and then machine-gunned the airfield, camp, and transport, claiming one parked aircraft destroyed. On the following night, when four aircraft of No. 70 Squadron attacked the airfields at El Adem, Derna and Menastir, a parked aircraft was destroyed by machine-gun fire at Menastir, and a convoy on the road hit by bombs, while at Derna a large fire was started, tents set on fire, and at least one aircraft destroyed.

With the repulse of the enemy at Tobruk, the impetus of the Axis eastward advance was at last checked, only just in time, perhaps, to prevent serious consequences. Judging from the continued concentration of Axis forces in the area, Tobruk seemed to become the sine qua non for a further Axis advance, activity in the forward area being confined to small-scale operations to secure favourable tactical positions. Equally, however, from the British point of view, the relief of Tobruk was a primary military aim. For while, as an isolated garrison Tobruk offered a permanent threat to the enemy's forward position, and deprived him of a much-needed supply port, at the same time its own position was far from secure. It had to be supplied entirely by sea, it was within easy range of the German airfields in Cyrenaica, as was also a considerable proportion of the sea supply line, fighter defence soon became extremely difficult to maintain, and there was always the possibility of the enemy gathering sufficient forces to take the fortress by storm. Thus, punctuated by patrol activity, and by minor operations to obtain tactical advantages, a lull occurred in the desert fighting, while both Axis and British forces concentrated on building up their strength for further efforts.

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SECTION V

ASSESSMENT OF THE CAUSES OF THE BRITISH DEFEAT

Wavell's des-
patch (A.H.B./
IIJI/27

General Factors

The British failure to hold Cyrenaica appears to have been caused by a number of factors of varying significance. According to General Wavell, the chief of these were the smallness of the ground force, its lack of training, the low serviceability of the mechanised units, the breakdown of wireless communication and of petrol supplies, and the air superiority of the enemy.

The first two factors were bound up with the decision to go to Greece. It had been agreed in February that the Desert Force must be drastically reduced in numbers and that the trained and seasoned troops must be replaced by comparatively raw and untrained units. This decision had been based, however, on the calculation that the enemy was unlikely to commence an offensive until early May, an estimate which proved to be a whole month out. This was perhaps, at so early a stage, a reasonable miscalculation. Less excusable was the tendency at General Headquarters, Cairo, to take into too little account the evidence provided by air reconnaissance and other sources, of a steady enemy reinforcement during March. This under-estimate of the significance of enemy movements observed by reconnaissance resulted in a lack of preparatory measures in hastening training and increasing serviceability. Thus the front line was weak before the battle began.

The shortage of petrol and the breakdown of communications both resulted directly from enemy air activity; the success of Axis air attacks on two petrol convoys, which, as it happened, were vital to the withdrawal, was particularly fortunate for Rommel. An additional and important factor was the demolition by Allied troops of the main petrol dump at Msus. These events resulted in the disorganisation of the British units in the Msus area, which, besides being no longer in touch by wireless were forced to change their plans of retreat in order to obtain petrol. Thus the 3rd Armoured Brigade withdrew to Derna before proceeding to its main objective, Mekili, and was cut off and captured there, while the 2nd Armoured Division at Mekili, expecting the arrival of the 3rd Brigade, delayed the break out from the fortress until the surrounding enemy troops had been substantially reinforced by armoured units.

A factor apparently overlooked by both sides before the offensive began was the weakness of the British position in the event of a successful enemy advance up the Trigh el Abd. Rommel himself had declared that the Axis forces could not make a drive towards Tobruk until the enemy had been defeated in the Djebel area, and although General Wavell had made provision for the defence of the road to Mekili no orders appear to have been given for the observation of the routes further south. In the event however the rapid advance of the German units up the Trigh el Abd and to the south of it resulted in the encirclement of Mekili and the cutting of the Mekili-Derna road, and consequently the capture or destruction of many British troops. If the enemy advance beyond this, to the coastal road near Tmimi, had been made in sufficient strength the main body of the British force

retreating from the Derna area to Gazala might have suffered a similar fate. As it was however the British were strong enough to hold the road open until the troops had gone through.

It would appear then that although successful in his general plan, Rommel undertook to cut off the enemy in the Jebel area without sufficient strength to sustain and win a pitched battle when the chance occurred. Thus the British were able to continue their retreat to Tobruk in considerable force, fortify the port, continue the retreat to the frontier and establish a line there, while the enemy, hampered by greatly extended lines of communications and the continued threat of a sortie by the garrison at Tobruk, found the road to Egypt still barred. The force Rommel had driven from Cyrenaica had yet to be defeated in the field to ensure a final victory in Egypt.

From enemy documents it appears however, that there was no definite plan for an offensive at this time, but that on the contrary there was a strong inclination to await a greater build-up of strength before a determined move was made. It has been seen that the Italian Commander protested to Rommel that the advance was too swift and too extended, and there were ~~that~~ personalities at German Headquarters in Berlin who disapproved of the apparently unpremeditated scope of the offensive. It appears that, urged on by his preliminary success, Rommel alone was responsible for an advance which gained him much ground but ended in no decisive victory over the British forces in the Desert.

The Influence of Air Activity on the Withdrawal

In his dispatch, General Wavell laid considerable emphasis on the effectiveness of enemy air attacks. He maintained that from its beginning on 31 March the enemy attack was supported by a considerable air force, and retained air superiority throughout the operations. In this connection he referred in particular to the breakdown of the communications and petrol supply organisation of the 2nd Armoured Division, which, he considered, was largely due to enemy air action. Certainly, the destruction by Axis aircraft of an entire petrol supply column was, in the circumstances disastrous for the Army, but, as Air Commodore Brown (1) asserted, in his comments on Wavell's dispatch, this and other successful Axis air attacks, of which there were few, did not amount to air superiority. He pointed out that enemy air activity was confined to infrequent 'tip and run' raids in very small numbers on well-dispersed British troops in the forward area; that although lack of radar coverage in the forward area (2) made the interception of these raids a matter of chance, the initiative displayed by the British fighters in devising methods of intercepting enemy aircraft and their aggressiveness whenever they encountered them, had a great effect in reducing the Axis offensive spirit to a degree which made negligible air action against British troops; and that the casualties caused by air action during the withdrawal were insignificant, although Army concentrations provided excellent targets at times.

Comments
attached to
General
Wavell's
Dispatch
(A.H.B./IIJI/
27).

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- (1) Then Group Captain commanding H.Q. R.A.F. Cyrenaica.
(2) No. 216 M.R.U. at Lete, near Benghazi ceased operating on 3 April and remained non-operational until 22 April when it was established at Matruh.

Air Commodore Brown instanced two occasions when the enemy air force was particularly ineffective. These were at Benina and at Tokra, when British troops, in utter disregard of enemy air action, formed very large concentrations at the passes, in their endeavour to get through to the escarpment above. These concentrations were reported by air reconnaissance, and at the request of the Senior Army Staff Officer they were continuously covered by fighter aircraft until they had been dispersed; consequently no effective enemy air attack was delivered, although one or two were attempted and driven off. Had the enemy attacked these concentrations the casualties to British troops might have been considerable, but on no occasion during the retreat did the enemy interfere seriously with the retreating forces. In short, while there was no denying the effectiveness of one or two enemy attacks, these were only isolated and fortuitous incidents.

Nos.
3 & 73
Squadrons
O.R.Bs &
Enemy
Documents
A.H.B.6.

That the fighters could hold their own in combat with the enemy was borne out by the results of the four engagements in which No.3 R.A.A.F. Squadron took part between 31 March and 5 April, assisted on occasion by aircraft of No.73 Squadron. Hurricane losses amounted to only two aircraft destroyed, and three damaged, while the Luftwaffe lost a total of nine dive-bombers and one twin-engined fighter on the days on which engagements took place, although there is no proof that all these losses were caused by fighters. British claims were fourteen Ju.87's and one Me.110 destroyed. No. 3 Squadron was reported to have found the Me.110 easy to deal with at low heights, and pilots reported that their Hurricanes could easily turn inside the Me.110, which appeared to be slow in manoeuvre.

A.H.B./IIJI/
183/146(A),
Encl. 87(a)

Further evidence tending to disprove the theory of enemy air superiority, is provided by the Operations Record Books of the Blenheim squadrons. These show that between 31 March and 14 April inclusive Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons flew 160 bombing sorties against enemy Army formations and landing grounds, an average of ten per day, without loss, and without once being intercepted by enemy fighters. Except on a very few occasions early in the period, when aircraft of No.55 Squadron were escorted by not more than two of the squadron's fighter Blenheims, all these bombing attacks were unescorted.

Nos.
45 & 55
Squadrons
O.R.Bs.

Army Charge of 'False' Reconnaissance Reports.

In spite of the difficulties encountered in the withdrawal, notably, the capture of part of 'A' Flight withdrawing from Maraua on 6 April, and the lack of spares, which resulted in aircraft operating without tail wheels and Hurricanes without hydraulics, No. 6 Squadron continued to carry out tactical reconnaissance for the Army, and not one request for reconnaissance was turned down. The operations of the squadron were warmly praised at the time by the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, but his expressions of appreciation were later overshadowed by the issue raised in his 'Report on the Action of the 2nd Armoured Division during the withdrawal from Cyrenaica'.

No.6 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

Cabinet Paper
W.P.(41)159

In the list of 'Factors which contributed to the Disaster', given at Appendix 'B' of this report, were included 'false air reports on 3 April about the enemy being at Msus', and 'the frequent changes of orders and regrouping consequent

on these air reports, which resulted in the disintegration of formations and units, and the lack of tactical reconnaissance, particularly in the later stages'. In addition, in the main body of the report the following statements were made:-

- (a) (At 2 p.m. on 3 April the G.O.C. held a conference) As the conference was breaking up (plans were changed because) a tactical reconnaissance report was received which stated that enemy Armoured Fighting vehicles were moving towards Msus..... In point of fact the so called enemy Armoured Fighting vehicles moving on Msus were a patrol of the Long Range Desert Group and the 3rd Armoured Brigade Recovery Section, but this was not established for another twenty-four hours. A later air reconnaissance at 6.30 p.m. on the same day estimated the 'enemy' force at Msus at 100 tanks and motor transport.
- (b) On 4 April, 3rd Armoured Brigade at Msus found no enemy, but discovered that the dump, on which they were relying for fuel, had been destroyed the previous evening as a result of the false air information..... Another false air report occurred on the evening of the 5th April when tactical reconnaissance reported an enemy move northward from Msus.

In a footnote it was stated that the primary causes of this misleading information were that the pilots were only partially trained, and that the system of air to ground signals from reconnaissance aircraft was ineffective.

This report was sent to the War office without the knowledge of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East, and was subsequently circulated as Cabinet Paper W.P.(41)159. The Chief of Air Staff was the first to draw the attention of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief to the report when he asked for an explanation of the 'False' reconnaissance reports mentioned in Appendix 'B'. As a result a subsidiary report (1) was rendered by Air Commodore Brown, Air Officer Commanding R.A.F. Cyrenaica at the time of the withdrawal, and Brigadier Harding, Senior Staff Officer to the Cyrenaica forces. This report, together with that of the Commander of the Free French garrison at Msus, is given at Appendix XXXI. These state the case for the Air Force, but while the charge of lack of tactical reconnaissance in the later stages is refuted, it cannot be said that conclusive evidence was found as to whether the columns reported as enemy by air reconnaissance on 3 and 5 April were Axis or British.

More important than the truth about these facts, however, as was later readily acknowledged by the Army Commander, was the principle involved. The production of the Harding/Brown report on 25 July, was followed on the same day by the dispatch of a telegram from the Middle East to the War Office, in which the Commander-in-Chief expressed his regret that the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief had not been consulted about the Army report, and requested that, while false deductions might have been made from air reports, the suggestion that false air reports were rendered by the Royal Air Force be withdrawn from the Report. In a minute to the Prime Minister, dated 7 August 1941, the Chief of Air Staff drew attention to the Harding/Brown Report and to the Commander-in-Chief's telegram. He pointed out that without this report General Wavell's report

(1) A.H.B./IIJ6/78

CAS Folder
(A.H.B./ID3/
744).

C.A.S.Folder
(A.H.B./ID3/
744).

was liable to give a misleading impression as to where responsibility should lie for the confusion on 3 April, and suggested that it should be printed as an annexe to General Wavell's report. He considered it important that the matter should be cleared up because a question of principle was involved. This lay in the fact that while General Wavell's report suggested that false information supplied by pilots as to the identity of ground forces contributed to the confusion which led to the disaster, nevertheless it was a principle accepted by the Army and the Royal Air Force, that an airman on reconnaissance reports only what he sees, and leaves it to the Army Intelligence Liaison Officer with the squadron, or to the Army Formation Headquarters to place an interpretation upon it. He wrote:-

'This principle is based on the fact that recognition of ground forces from the air is a very difficult business under practical reconnaissance conditions; the difficulty was accentuated in Libya owing to the fact that we were using captured Italian tanks and Motor Transport. On the other hand the Army Formation H.Q. or Liaison Officer was informed from a variety of sources to assist in making an interpretation. The R.A.F. pilot is at liberty to give his own views to the Army Liaison Officer, but the responsibility for recognition rests with the latter.'

The Chief of Air Staff ended by saying that it was presumably in recognition of this principle that the Commander-in-Chief Middle East in his signal stated: 'False deductions may have been made from air reports'. In reply the Prime Minister agreed to the circulation of the Report as a Cabinet Paper, but stressed that the disaster had come about because the system was at fault, and that the lack of effective and intimate contact between the air and ground forces called for a drastic reform. Subsequently both the Harding/Brown Report and the Commander-in-Chief's telegram were printed as Cabinet Papers, and were numbered W.P. 201 and W.P. 222 respectively.

Ibid

Conclusions

In assessing the reasons for the British withdrawal the nature of the enemy forces and their leader must not be forgotten. Until the spring of 1941 the British had had only the Italians to combat, and had found this a comparatively easy task. The arrival of German troops not only augmented the Axis force in North Africa, but infused a new element into it. The Germans were well trained, skilled and temperamentally more suited to warfare than their allies, well-equipped and with high morale. Above all they were led by a man who had made his name in France by the daring and unpredictability of his tactics. All this ought, perhaps, to have been foreseen, and errors of judgment at the General Headquarters of the British have been noted: but there is a limit to foresight, and the surprise element in war can never be discounted completely. Thus, the British were caught unprepared and, by a mixture of skill and good fortune on Rommel's part, were thrown into confusion from which they emerged only after losing much ground and suffering considerable losses. They did however emerge in time to avert worse consequences and to avoid decisive defeat in the Desert. It has been shown that this Axis success cannot be said to have profited from actual air superiority, although in the initial stages it owed much to two fortunate air

SECRET

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operations. Rather, as Air Marshal Longmore stated in his dispatch:-

'It would be true to say that the German-Italian success in regaining Cyrenaica was due more to the number, efficiency and mobility of their ground forces than to their numerical air superiority. At no time did the German-Italian air forces completely dominate the situation on this front.'

SECRET

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PART V

ACTIVITY AT THE FRONTIER, APRIL - JUNE 1941,
INCLUDING OPERATION BATTLEAXE

SECTION I

THE FRONTIER ACTIONS OF APRIL AND MAY

General Review of the Situation

After the withdrawal to the frontier, the British had no force with which to launch a counter offensive, and it was even doubtful if there was sufficient strength to resist a further advance by the enemy into Egypt. It was therefore of the greatest importance to prevent the enemy from reinforcing his units in North Africa, until the strength of the Western Desert Force had been built-up. On 14 April the Prime Minister issued a directive to the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East theatre, for their general guidance in the conduct of the campaign in the Mediterranean, with particular reference to the outstanding importance of attacking the enemy's lines of communication particularly through the port of Tripoli, and along the coastal road between Tripoli and Agheila. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, was ordered to stop all sea borne traffic between Italy and Africa by the 'fullest use of surface craft, aided so far as possible by aircraft and submarines'. Heavy losses in battleships, cruisers and destroyers were to be risked if necessary, to achieve this important objective. The harbour at Tripoli was to be rendered useless by recurrent bombardment, and enemy convoys passing to and from Africa were to be attacked by cruisers, destroyers and submarines, assisted by the R.A.F., and F.A.A.(1) Naval forces were also to be based in Malta and protection afforded them by the air force at Malta. To stop the flow of supplies and reinforcements along the four-hundred mile Tripoli - Agheila road the Prime Minister suggested continuous harassing raids should be made by commando forces landed from special 'Glen' ships, and even the landing of a few light and medium tanks to destroy convoys using the road. The Prime Minister approved the Commanders-in-Chief's decision to defend Tobruk with all possible strength but emphasised that it should not be regarded as a purely defensive position, but rather as an invaluable bridgehead for attack on the communications of the enemy.

On 23 April, the Commanders-in-Chief drew up an appreciation of the situation. By this time the position in Greece had become acute and an evacuation was foreseen in the near future. However, although this greatly increased the importance of holding Crete both because the Navy needed the harbour at Suda Bay and because from an air and naval point of view it was essential to deny it to the enemy, resources did not permit immediate or adequate reinforcement.

Lack of resources was also the conditioning factor in the Western Desert. The main deficiency was in armoured troops, and the general plan was to check the enemy by holding defensive areas which would deny him water supplies at Tobruk, Mersa Matruh and Maaten Bagush, while organising light forces to

(1) For some time a plan had been under consideration for a bombardment of Tripoli harbour by major units of the Mediterranean Fleet. This eventually took place on 20/21 April, when Wellingtons from Malta carried out a bombing raid to divert attention from the Naval attack.

D/AOC-in-C
C.O.S. Tels
49A (Tel. 77)
(A.H.B./ILJ1/
94/183(A)).

Ibid
51A (Tel. 78)

observe and delay any enemy advance across the desert area from Sollum to the eastward. The next most pressing need was in anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons; preparations had also to be made for the internal security problem of Egypt.

The Commanders-in-Chief considered that enemy forces operating in the forward area had temporarily outrun their communications and were awaiting reinforcement by the 15th Armoured Division, which was at this time moving forward from Tripoli, and were unlikely to be able to operate other than defensively before its arrival.⁽¹⁾ This might take place in the worst case, early in May. The threat was however, conditioned by the question of whether or not the enemy could make use of a port in Cyrenaica; until then he could only employ his forces, including the 15th Armoured Division, against Tobruk for a limited period. If he could continue to use Tripoli as freely as in the past, together with other ports in Cyrenaica, he would soon be able to build up large German and Italian forces of an offensive in July. The air force was contributing towards preventing this by limited attacks on Tripoli from Malta, and by bombing ports and trans-ports along the lines of communication through Libya.

Concerning naval operations the Commanders-in-Chief emphasised that already the navy was operating fully against enemy sea and land communications. Stress was laid on the fact that Naval forces for these operations had to be on a scale out of all proportion to the tasks or the naval risks entailed, in order to try to meet the air threat of a large superiority in numbers of enemy aircraft. Plans had already been made to land raiding parties from the 'Glen' ships behind enemy lines, but bad weather had prevented them being carried out during the winter months.

The main threat to Egypt was primarily from the German air force, and the Commanders-in-Chief estimated that a total of one hundred and fifty long range bombers might be made available against Egypt from the Mediterranean bases. The enemy was thought to have approximately two hundred and fifty transport aircraft with the assistance of which he could maintain at least four hundred operational aircraft working from aerodromes between Benghazi and Bardia. The threat to the Navy and sea communications was clear, and the possibility of an enemy airborne force against Syria, Cyprus, Crete or Egypt had to be taken into consideration. Against these increased potential dangers to Egypt however, there was available, on one front only, an ever increasing air force experienced in desert warfare, which ought to be able to give effective support to land operations, and by enterprising action neutralise an enemy air offensive against Egypt.

Reorganisation of the British at the Frontier

Following the retreat of the British forces to Sollum and the halt of the enemy's advance at the frontier, a general re-organisation of the desert forces took place in preparation for the defence of Egypt. Of the army units, Headquarters Cyrenaica Command closed down and left Tobruk on 13 April, leaving the fortress in charge of Major General Morshead, commanding the 9th Australian Division. The headquarters unit was re-established at Maaten Bagush as Western Desert

War Cabinet
Narrative,
Section 1,
Chapter D.

(1) This was approximately correct. See page 149.

Force on 14 April and came under the command of Major General Beresford-Pierse on 17th. Under this headquarters the 7th Australian Division became responsible for the defence of Matruh, and 6th Division covered the area El Daba - Maaten Bagush, and 'A' Squadron Long Range Desert Group operated over the area Maddalena - Siwa - Jalo - Bir Tengeder.

No.204 Gp.
O.R.B.

The Royal Air Force operated under No.204 Group at Maaten Bagush which replaced H.Q. R.A.F. Cyrenaica on 14 April. On 12 April Air Commodore R. Collishaw arrived to take command of the group, and on the 14th Group Captain Brown relinquished the command of R.A.F. Cyrenaica and returned to Cairo. The air units under the command of No.204 Group were as follows:-

<u>Squadron</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>IE</u>	<u>IR</u>	<u>Strength</u>
No. 6	Tobruk	Lysander Hurricane	8 4	2 2	
No. 3 R.A.A.F. (1)	Sidi Haneish	Hurricane	16	4	
No.14(2)	Burg el Arab (rear) L.G.021 (Adv.)	Elenheim IV	12	6	
No.24 S.A.A.F. (Det.) (3)	Fuka	Maryland	-	-	8
No.39 (Det) (4)	Maaten Bagush	Maryland	-	-	4
No.45	Fuka	Elenheim IV	12	6	
No.55	Zimla	Elenheim IV	12	6	
No.73	Tobruk	Hurricane	16	4	

Also available for operations in the Western Desert were the heavy bombers of No.257 Wing at Shallufa which had an advanced headquarters at Fuka.

The squadrons under its command were:-

			<u>IE</u>	<u>IR</u>
No.37 Squadron	Shallufa	Wellington	16	4
No.38 Squadron	Shallufa	Wellington	16	4
No.70 Squadron	Kabrit	Wellington	16	4
No.148 Squadron	Kabrit	Wellington	16	4

Policy in the Desert

At General Headquarters, Middle East, it was considered that the enemy advance had been definitely checked at the Egyptian frontier and that the active defence of Tobruk constituted a threat to the enemy's lines of communication which was likely to prevent his further advance. The conclusions of the British Intelligence after the enemy's abortive attack on Tobruk were that the enemy had temporarily abandoned the idea of securing the fortress. It was believed that troops of the Italian 27th (Brescia) and 102nd (Trento)

War Cabinet
Narrative,
Section 1,
Chapter F.

- (1) Withdrawn to Delta to re-equip on 19 April 1941, and replaced by No.274 Squadron.
- (2) Command Operations on 1 May 1941.
- (3) Arrived in Western Desert on 13 May 1941.
- (4) Arrived in Western Desert on 16 April 1941.

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Divisions, with a stiffening of the German 5th Light Infantry Division and elements of the 132nd (Ariete) were in the area Bardia - Sollum. It was considered that eventually Rommel intended to penetrate as deeply as possible into Egypt.

The Army situation, although momentarily improved, promised very little for the future. General Wavell's main problem was the shortage of tanks. He had one weak unit at Tobruk, and one in the Matruh area, against an estimated enemy strength of at least 150 in the fighting line in Cyrenaica. Most of the enemy tanks were in the Bardia-Sollum area, and it was thought that the enemy might be preparing a further eastward move. Although the air force was continually attacking enemy transport and causing loss and difficulty, it could not stop the movement of enemy columns which dispersed widely by day and moved only by night. The most effective way to cut the enemy supply lines was to attack from Tobruk, and this had in fact been urged after the repulse of the enemy on 14 April, but the garrison was not strong enough to undertake such an operation against considerable enemy forces. The only possible course for the time being was to remain on the defensive, holding the perimeter defences at Tobruk and the frontier line at Sollum, and making harrying sorties whenever possible until sufficient strength had been regained to make a counter move.

So great, however, was the desirability of an early counter-stroke in the Desert, that on reception of this report, the Chiefs of Staffs, decided to send a fast convoy through the Mediterranean to carry much-needed tank reinforcements to the Army. The great risks which had to be accepted in undertaking such an operation, when the German Air Force was known to be established in force in Sicily and North Africa, were sufficient indication of the importance attached to assuming the offensive in the Desert for the recapture of the Cyrenaican airfields and the relief of Tobruk.

Like the Army Commander, although the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief considered that the enemy's failure at Tobruk constituted an improvement in the Libya situation for the time being, he was still apprehensive regarding the future. He foresaw that if, as seemed likely, the collapse of Greece took place, German air reinforcements would be sent to the Desert from there. Already the fighting in the Desert absorbed all the available Hurricanes and Blenheims and the wastage rate of both only just balanced with the rate of supply. In these circumstances no margin of strength existed to meet either an increase in enemy air activity in the Desert, or the demands for air protection which an evacuation from Greece would imply. In this dilemma he asked the Chief of Air Staff for instructions whether the Desert or Greece should be given priority in the event of an evacuation from the latter. The policy decision on this matter was communicated to Air Marshal Longmore in a further directive from the Prime Minister to the Commanders-in-Chief, on 18 April. It was then laid down that so far as was possible the air effort should be divided between the two requirements, but, that in the event of a clash in demands the emphasis must be given to victory in Libya.

Meanwhile, it was the task of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief to restore the squadrons in the desert to full strength with the greatest possible speed in readiness for the offensive when it came. This was no easy proposition. With a strength of 86 aircraft, the seven squadrons in the Western Desert under No. 204 Group had, on 7 May only 40 aircraft serviceable.

Cabinet Hist.
Series (B) 3
Final (120)

Ibid
(136)

AOC/11: Western
Desert Ops.
A.H.B./IJJ1/
183/14.6(A)
Encls. 167(a)
& 167(b))

(10003)54

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Air Marshal Tedder reckoned that a week's careful husbanding of the force would see it in more formidable dimensions and enable it to play its full part in supporting a move forward by the ground forces. This proved to be the case in spite of increased enemy ground activity in the Capuzzo area on 12 May, when fighters were called in to support the British ground forces. By 12 May increased serviceability in the Desert Squadrons, the addition of six Hurricanes from Malta, and a flight of No.1 S.A.A.F. (Hurricane) Squadron from Alexandria, enabled the A.O.C. to forecast the serviceability figure in the Western Desert for 13 May as 72 aircraft.

German Intentions

In the German camp, there was considerable uncertainty as to what course of action should be taken next. To follow up his recent success Rommel was anxious to make a drive towards Suez via Matruh, and in this project he received a measure of support from Headquarters in Germany. Halder, however, considered that such a move could only be staged as a raid, as there were neither the necessary troops nor the supply facilities to hold Suez. The C.-in-C. Army wanted to hasten the build-up of a base for Rommel using submarines and an airborne Division. On 15 April, however, Rommel reported that he was meeting stubborn resistance at Tobruk and that this advance was blocked by a strong garrison supported from the sea by naval units. He was being forced to employ two Italian Divisions to tighten the line of encirclement, and was also being attacked on the land side from Egypt. Halder's view was that at last Rommel was constrained to admit that his forces were not sufficiently strong to allow him to take full advantage of the 'unique opportunities' offered by the overall situation, a view which had been held for some time at German Headquarters.

Halder's
Diary
(A.H.B.6)

Unsatisfactory State of the German Forces in North Africa

On 20 April, in a signal to the Supreme Command of the German Air Force Operations Staff, General Waldau, Fliegerfuehrer Afrika, expressed considerable anxiety regarding the situation in North Africa. He wrote:-

Enemy
Documents
A.H.B.6.

The Africa situation is indicated by the state of air superiority of the British. Due to the conditions there, our own airfields are completely occupied, in spite of great expansion in area. Our parked aircraft, quarters, stores, as well as an abundance of totally unserviceable material (aircraft), take up the full extent of the airfield, so that there is still only a limited space left for taking off and landing. Large numbers of columns and army quarters standing along the coastal road are highly susceptible to air attack, which cannot be averted satisfactorily with such small flak defence and such insufficient fighter cover. Rommel's flak detachments are not available for air defence, as they are engaged in the ground battle, to hold the Tobruk position. One A.A. battery was lately destroyed in the ground battle. A.A. ammunition is not coming through, so that defence is severely limited due to lack of ammunition. Up to April 19, four fighters of the I/Fighter Geschwader 27 have arrived at the front. More are being transferred today.

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Italian fighter material is inferior, and, in spite of the readiness of personnel to go into action, it is ineffective, and its condition unfit for ready action. A request for reinforcements was made to Air Officer Commanding Italian Air Force. Only then, and after the engagement of stronger detachments of I/Fighter Geschwader 27, is it likely that a balance can be restored, as the British are reinforcing continuously.

The lack of the aircraft reporting service, Africa is at present partly overcome by the engagement of an advanced patrol troop, which being only limitedly effective can not pick up British Planes approaching over a wide area.

The supply situation in spite of the utmost exertions of the Fliegerkorps X, is coming to a standstill. On 19th April the British attacked the coastal traffic and sank supply ships with fuel and bombs for Derna off Appolonia. (1) Land supplies in Benghazi-Derna area are quite insufficient owing to the lack of columns and Italian columns of the Fliegerkorps X, taken on charge far beyond agreed upon objectives, were yesterday withdrawn. Whether further columns will be given is doubtful, as they are controlled by the Italian High Command.

In Rome, tomorrow, the following requests will be made:-

- (a) Provision of columns for exclusive supply duties to the German Air Force in Africa. Supply urgently required before all concerns of the army, except for a continuous supply of water and food, which seems to be assured.
- (b) All available Italian fighters should move to the front. At the moment they are situated in various locations in southern Italy and Tripoli.
- (c) More pressure on Italian sea forces to ensure safety of the supply to Africa.

I myself consider, that in order to be able to maintain Rommel's position, the following requirements are necessary:-

- (a) 1 further fighter Staffel, 1 Flak Battalion for the protection of ground organisation, 1 A/C reporting company.

1 recon Staffel, long range reconnaissance, which C.-in-C. would have to provide.

1 reinforced Staffel for air-sea-rescue service, and also for the protection of submarines against the increasingly threatened coastal shipping between Tripoli, Benghazi and Derna.
- (b) Engagement of a fully authorised German working group for the consolidation of Benghazi.

(1) On 16 April the auxiliary sailing vessel Yanna was sunk by gunfire from H.M.S. Submarine Truant up to 2 miles north of Apollonia, and on 17th the auxiliary sailing vessel Romagna was sunk by H.M. destroyers Greyhound and Voyager in approximately the same position. Both ships were carrying bombs and fuel to Derna for the Luftwaffe. There are no reports of attacks on coastal traffic on 19 April, so it may be presumed that General Waldau's dates were incorrect.

A further indication of the German view of the situation was given in a signal from the C-in-C. General Staff of the Army Operations to the German Air Staff Operations Staff, in which a protest was made against instructions given to the Fliegerkorps X that shipping targets were to have priority. On behalf of the German Africa Corps, the C.-in-C. pointed out that the operational forces of the Fliegerfuehrer Africa were urgently required for the defence of ground targets, and provided at that moment the only means of holding the Tobruk and Bardia positions, a task which was becoming more difficult every day. He requested that applications for the immediate reinforcement of the German Air Force should be renewed, and added that until then, the Fliegerkorps X would concentrate its attacks on ships in the sea area Tobruk-Bardia-Sollum. Meanwhile the aircraft of Fliegerfuehrer Africa could not be spared for these operations unless the enemy naval ships in this area presented a direct threat to the troops in action.

British Air Policy during the Ground Lull

No.204 Group
O.R.B.

During the first half of April the air units in Cyrenaica had operated for the most part in close co-operation with the Army, and latterly the constant demands for fighter and bomber protection of Tobruk, together with frequent requests for strategic reconnaissance had absorbed a great part of the air effort. With the commencement of a period of comparative inactivity on the ground, there was a return to the policy of concentrating air activity in attacking the enemy's lines of communication. It was appreciated that before the enemy could make any determined effort to continue his advance into Egypt a considerable reserve of warlike stores would have to be concentrated near the Egyptian frontier; at the same time the very extensiveness of the advance had increased the length of the Axis supply routes through the desert to a degree which, at least for the time being, the use of Benghazi and smaller ports as unloading bases could only partly make good. Unfortunately, in spite of the considerable reverse suffered in the Desert, the air force had received little in the way of reinforcement since March, largely owing to the heavy requirements of the fighting in Greece. Until May, only four heavy bomber, three medium bomber and two fighter squadrons were available for operations under No. 204 Group. The high scale of effort maintained by this comparatively small force was an important feature of this otherwise static period in the Desert War.

Collishaw Report
(A.H.B./IIJ6/2).

A particularly important target for air operations was Benghazi. It quickly became apparent that the enemy was experiencing considerable administrative difficulties imposed by a shortage of motor transport, and the long road haul to the frontier area, and that he was endeavouring to overcome them by shipping supplies to Benghazi and distributing them thence to forward bases. The procedure he employed was to land supplies at Benghazi, entrain them to Benina, and thence to distribute them to the forward area by transport aircraft. During the British occupation of Cyrenaica the constant Axis air attacks on the harbour had prevented British ships from using the port, and it was hoped that attacks by the air force would deny it to the enemy.

M. E. F. O. S.
(A. H. B. /IIJ1/
31/3).

The principal air effort against Benghazi port was conducted by the Wellington Squadrons in night operations. In addition Blenheims were sometimes despatched by day, usually to attack ships suspected of convoying petrol to Benghazi; in these attacks the intention was to intercept the ships off-shore when they were remote from the standing fighter patrols operating in the Benghazi area. If the ships could not be found, attacks were made on the harbour. The

Collishaw Report
(A. H. B. /IIJ6/2).

tactics employed by the Blenheims comprised an attack at minimum height with a maximum load of 4lb. incendiary bombs, at an angle of 30 degrees across the ship's track. The large number of 4lb. bombs carried ensured that a good proportion landed on board the target. Considerable success was achieved in these Blenheim operations, several ships being reported on fire, although only one ship was believed to have been sunk.

Air attacks against Axis airfields in Cyrenaica at this time were important not so much as a means of retaining air superiority, but because, with the increasing success of Allied action against his shipping,⁽¹⁾ the enemy began to make increasing use of air transport for lifting supplies to North Africa from Italy, and for flying out sick and wounded. During February and March there had been on average twenty to twenty-five flights per day across the Mediterranean, but during the second half of April this was stepped up to over fifty, with peak days on which well over a hundred flights were made. To help this air lift, two Gruppen of Ju.52's, comprising approximately eighty aircraft in all, were transferred from the Balkans to the Italian air base at Foggia after 25 April. Italian S.82's were also employed. When these transport aircraft were operating, strong fighter cover was provided by the Italian Air Force over the airfields. This was necessary, for whenever the British discovered that a number of Ju.52's had arrived, Blenheims and Hurricanes carried out bombing and machine-gunning attacks on their bases. During May the 'air lift' to North Africa began to dwindle, as transport aircraft were transferred to the Balkans to take part in the operations for the invasion of Crete. In mid-May the average number of daily flights dropped to between 10 and 15, and remained on this reduced scale during June.

In the air offensive against enemy road communications operations were undertaken to attack all thin-skinned vehicles moving in either direction along the roads from El Agheila, through Benghazi, and past Tobruk to the frontier. As the strength of the air force in the Western Desert was already low it was essential to prevent casualties as far as possible, and to conserve the force. Instructions were therefore issued that aircraft operating against enemy motor transport should confine their attacks to moving vehicles, as experience showed that halted columns were able to bring concentrated A.A. fire to bear against aircraft. Although they could not always be avoided in mixed columns, armoured vehicles were generally left alone, as they were not vulnerable targets, and were usually capable of greater retaliation than thin-skinned vehicles. Aircraft crews were however particularly directed to attack the ten-ton vehicles which were known to be bringing up petrol to the forward area; these and troop-carrying lorries were particularly susceptible to machine-gun attacks, and a large number were believed to be destroyed, particularly after the De Wilde incendiary ammunition became available. The enemy countered these tactics to some extent by confining the movement of supply columns to the hours of darkness, and dispersing widely by day, although this in itself must have caused delay and inconvenience.

(1) Owing chiefly to Naval action, sinkings of enemy shipping in the Mediterranean increased from a total of 30,000 tons in March to 41,000 in April.

Enemy Documents
A.H.B.6

Collishaw
Report.
(A.H.B./IIJ6/2).

Lloyd's List
of Enemy
Shipping Losses

Bomber and fighter Blenheims operated between El Agheila and Benghazi, long-range Hurricanes, which refuelled at El Gubbi, between Benghazi and Tobruk, and short-range Hurricanes between Tobruk and the frontier area. The tactics normally employed for low-level attacks, were for aircraft to operate in pairs, proceeding from base to the selected target area at maximum height, until dust-clouds announced the presence of motor transport columns, when the aircraft would descend to attack. Best results were achieved when attacks were made from a very low height, along the length of the column. The Blenheim bombers used very small bombs, preferably the 20lb. anti-personnel bomb, on the grounds that it contained the highest proportion of explosive and provided the greatest chance of hitting vehicles and causing perforation to the oil drums.

Ibid

The fighter Blenheims and long-range Hurricanes operated without fighter cover principally because the areas in which they operated were outside the range of short-range fighters, but there was in any case a shortage of short-range fighters. The Hurricanes operating in the area between Tobruk and the frontier, while employing similar tactics in their attacks, had to be continually on the watch for enemy aircraft, for in this area Me.109's. and 110's. were active. Later on, when more fighters became available it was possible to provide fighter cover for operations in this area. In operating against enemy columns, aircraft frequently expended all their ammunition against the target, thus rendering themselves susceptible to attack by enemy fighters on the return journey. Consequently, to avoid interception, it became the practice for aircraft to make out to sea when they had completed their attack, and to keep well off shore during the homeward trip. Aircraft with spare ammunition returned to base overland, unless or until they found an additional target to attack. Very few casualties were suffered in these low-flying attacks during April.

The enemy's reaction to the air attacks on his road traffic was to rely on a passive system of defence, whereby certain sections of the roads were protected from air attack. Thus the Italian fighter force was spread out in detachments along the route from Tripoli through Benghazi to the Egyptian frontier, while the German Air Force operated in the area between Gazala and the frontier. The Italian defensive tactic consisted of stationing fighter patrols at regular intervals over the main roads, and standing patrols over important points such as Tripoli, Benghazi, Benina, Barce and Martuba. At Benghazi Italian night fighters, particularly C.R.42, were frequently seen by Wellingtons operating at about 8,000 feet over the town, but very few of the bombers were hit by gun-fire from them; however, some of the few Wellingtons which did not return from these raids may have been lost in this way. On the whole the C.R.42 appeared to achieve more success against the Blenheims and Marylands which operated at night against Derna and Gazala airfields. This was probably partly caused by the less efficient night camouflage of the Blenheims and the conspicuous exhaust flames of the Marylands.

Collishaw
Report
(A.H.B./ILJ6/2).

In the forward area shortage of aircraft prevented the Luftwaffe from maintaining standing patrols, so operations were directed with the aid of an air observation system, reporting to Section Headquarters at Gazala and Gambut. Fighters were dispatched to intercept British aircraft only when 'sighting' reports were received, a procedure which handicapped

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fighter defence and accounted for the infrequency with which interceptions were made in the early weeks of this period. However, as the German warning system became more efficient, casualties grew heavier.

Whatever its defects in defence, as will be seen subsequently, the Luftwaffe had air superiority over Tobruk from the time the deteriorating military situation forced the British Squadrons to retire to the Maaten Bagush area. The necessity for operating from these landing-grounds remote from the forward area, and particularly from Tobruk was one of the main difficulties under which the squadrons laboured at this time. The use of Sidi Barrani as an advanced refuelling base eased the situation to some extent, but its security could not be guaranteed by the Army, so that it was necessary to keep the units there in a high state of mobility and with a minimum of staff, while its vulnerability to air attack made it advisable to keep the number of aircraft on the landing-ground down to the minimum.

In addition to fighter defence the enemy attempted to protect supply columns with gunfire from the ground. This was done by stationing armoured vehicles at intervals of five miles along the littoral road between Tobruk and Capuzzo, and along the Trigh Capuzzo between El Adem and Sidi Azeiz. The 'flak' fire from a single armoured vehicle might be expected to have little effect against a fast low-flying aircraft, but the stationing of these vehicles at frequent intervals severely handicapped operations and tactics, because previously aircraft had enjoyed freedom from flak while flying homewards at ground level in search of further prey. Successive bursts of fire from the armoured vehicles at the aircraft as they flew along the road was disconcerting, and to that extent successful.

Offensive Air Operations, 15-30 April

In spite of the enemy's successful advance, largely owing to heavy requirements elsewhere, particularly in Greece, very little had been done to reinforce the air force in the Western Desert since March. Until May only four heavy bomber, three medium bomber and two fighter squadrons were operating under No.204 Group, although the arrival of a strategic reconnaissance flight (No.39 Squadron detachment), relieved No.55 Squadron of a hitherto heavy commitment. A remarkable feature of the last half of April was the high scale of effort maintained by this comparatively small force working under the difficulties imposed by the Axis advance, the chief of which was the great distance of the air bases from the target areas.

During this period twelve raids were carried out against Benghazi, the most important single target, eight sorties being flown by Blenheims, and thirty-six night sorties by Wellingtons. Although this effort was insufficient to deny the enemy the use of the port, Intelligence reports indicated that it had succeeded in limiting the capacity of the port sufficiently to prevent the enemy from relying on this means for building up his force for a further advance without extensive dumping of supplies. However, he was still able to maintain his existing force in the forward area. During this period No.148 Squadron detachment at Malta maintained offensive activity against Tripoli, now far in the rear of the enemy lines, but still important as an unloading port; thirty-four sorties were flown by the Wellingtons, and considerable damage was believed to have been caused to ships in the harbour.

M.E.F.O.S.
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
31/3)

(10003)60

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Lloyds List of
Enemy Shipping
Sunk and
damaged by
Allied action.

Sqdn O.R.B.s

M.E.F.O.S.
(A.H.B./ILJ1/
31/3)

The Italian ship Marocchino, 1524 tons was sunk during a joint naval/air bombardment on 21 April, and the Romaena, 149 tons was sunk during a Wellington and Swordfish raid on 17th.

The bulk of the attacks on enemy airfields was concentrated against Derna and the advance landing-ground at Gazala. Three Wellington and seventeen Blenheim sorties were flown against Derna and two Wellington and nineteen Blenheim sorties against Gazala, while El Adem also received considerable attention. In addition effective machine-gun attacks by fighters were made at Benina on 27 April and Derna on the 30th. The latter attack was very fortunately timed, for the single Hurricane dispatched on the raid found eight Ju 52's emplaning troops on the airfield. The Hurricane delivered several attacks, setting fire to one aircraft and apparently inflicting casualties on the troops.

The offensive against motor transport supplying the forward area was maintained by both bombers and fighters. Over fifty sorties were made by Wellingtons and Blenheims, and eighteen by fighters; it was believed that these caused losses of enemy transport vehicles which the Axis could ill afford, but there is no record of this in enemy documents although a general shortage of vehicles is recorded especially in Luftwaffe units. Except for the attacks on Tobruk, enemy air activity was slight during this period.

The Air Defence of Tobruk

Diary of Air
Liaison Section,
Tobruk. A.H.B./
ILJ6/9/2)

A.H.B./183/
146(A), Encls.
116(a), 117(a),
130(b) and
136(a).

After the heavy attacks on Tobruk on 14 April, the possible need for evacuating the air units was brought up for discussion. Group Captain Brown informed the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief that because of constant bombing attacks and bombardment by enemy artillery, Nos. 6 and 73 Squadrons would soon have to be withdrawn, as it was impossible to service the aircraft on the Tobruk airfields. He was urged to retain them for as long as possible because of the vital need for tactical reconnaissance for the Army as well as for the defence of the port, and it was suggested that when practicable he should send aircraft to rear landing-grounds for servicing. In the meantime arrangements were made for the future evacuation of men and equipment of both squadrons, and of No. 258 (Fighter Control) Wing. Only the minimum number of men for keeping the aircraft of No. 73 Squadron in the air was retained, while No. 6 Squadron was deprived of all aircraft except the Hurricane flight and two Lysanders. Its Lysander flights left the fortress by air on 19 April, and on the 20th airmen and officers of both squadrons left by sea.

A.H.B. Mono-
graph, Signals,
Vol. IV
(C.D. 1063).

No. 235 M.R.U. was retained at Tobruk to provide early warning for the garrison, but in addition to this important task it was soon carrying out a second highly valuable function. From its location with the perimeter it was viewing across the Axis lines of communication, and was thus able to report all aircraft movements between the enemy's rear and forward areas. This information was passed in simple code by W/T to the desert Fighter Wing Operation Control.

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A.H.B./IIJI/
183/146(A),
Encls. 127(a)
and 135(a)

On 16 April, in view of the shortage of shipping, particularly water carriers for Tobruk, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean asked for fighter protection over the harbour during unloading. He suggested that the existing fighter force at Tobruk was inadequate to meet naval and army requirements, and asked that additional fighters should be stationed there. In the circumstances this request could not be fulfilled, but Air Marshal Tedder instructed No. 204 Group that for the time-being the primary role of the fighter squadrons in the Western Desert was to defend Tobruk, and that for this purpose a minimum of ten Hurricanes was to be retained at Tobruk during daylight hours.

Nos. 73 and
274 Squadrons
O.R.B.s

As the month progressed, enemy air attacks on Tobruk became heavier. On 19 April twenty Ju. 88's escorted by five Me. 109's attempted to bomb the fortress and were intercepted by Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons. (1) Both squadrons claimed one bomber and one fighter destroyed, enemy records admitting the loss of three bombers but only one single-engined fighter. One Hurricane of No. 274 Squadron was lost. During 21 April there were five scrambles over Tobruk, in the last of which five Me. 109's were intercepted without result. By this time No. 73 Squadron, was reduced to five serviceable aircraft, and the position was serious. Many pilots were showing signs of strain and the morale of the squadron was suffering. The situation showed no signs of improvement however. On 22nd the enemy made a series of raids on Tobruk in which a total of seventy-four bombers, and over fifty fighters took part. No. 73 Squadron claimed at least five Ju. 87 and three fighters destroyed, for one Hurricane damaged, but enemy records admitted the loss of only one aircraft, a fighter. Large scale raids continued on the following day when enemy formations totalling at least forty Ju. 87 and sixty Me. 109's and 110's made three attacks on Tobruk. No. 73 Squadron claimed four Ju. 87's and four Me 109's destroyed but lost three Hurricanes, two others being damaged. The enemy admitted the loss of two single-engined fighters and one bomber.

A.H.B./IIJ1/183/
146(A),
Encls. 156(a)
and 157(a) and
No. 73 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

As a result of these raids it became impracticable to operate No. 73 Squadron, from the airfield within the Tobruk perimeter, and on 25 April the air party was moved to Sidi Haneish. In consequence, the problem of the air defence of the town was greatly aggravated and no further interceptions were made up to the end of the month. The single flight of No. 6 Squadron was now the only operational air unit in the fortress area. Fortunately the air attacks tended to diminish, but the move of No. 73 Squadron, and the consequent establishment of German air superiority over Tobruk caused the C.A.S. to enquire how much air support could now be given to the Tobruk garrison. The A.O.C.-in-C. assured him that it was hoped to maintain periodic fighter patrols over Tobruk by refuelling at Sidi Barrani, although he fully realised that this would not prevent the enemy from enjoying a far greater freedom of action over the town.

At that time, however, there was no alternative course of action. No. 73 Squadron's losses in personnel and aircraft at Tobruk had been prohibitive, they had frequently been outnumbered

(1) (No. 274 Sqdn. arrived at Gerawla on 17 April to replace No. 3 Sqdn. R.A.A.F. which was withdrawn to the Delta for rest on 20 April.

by as many as seven or eight to one in their encounters with large formations, they had had three squadron commanders within three weeks and the majority of the pilots were in need of immediate replacement. Out of 15 serviceable Hurricanes available on 21 April, only five were serviceable on the 23rd, and on the latter date one pilot had been killed and three wounded. The total number of Hurricanes immediately available in the Western Desert on 26 April was 14, and it seemed a much wiser policy to meet the enemy occasionally in strong patrols with a reasonable chance of success, than to fritter away the Hurricane strength in probably unsuccessful single sorties. When he had collected sufficient Hurricanes to maintain air cover for refuelling at Tobruk, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief intended to resume refuelling and rearming there, but without air cover the risk to the aircraft while on the ground was too great to be taken. In the meantime everything possible was done to lessen the scale of air attack on Tobruk, by means of dusk and night raids on the enemy airfields at Gazala and Derna and on the sources of supply at Benghazi and Benina.

In spite of Axis supply difficulties, the Tobruk raids did not abate until the second week in May, when the German air effort began to concentrate in the Eastern Mediterranean for the Crete operations. Even this respite was short-lived, for after the fall of Crete the attacks assumed their former intensity at the end of May, and did not decrease until the British offensive of mid-June, Operation Battleaxe. According to British estimates, between 11 April and 24 June, Tobruk received 47 air attacks, an average of one in every thirty-six hours. These comprised some 950 bomber sorties, an average of 20 per raid.

Ground Activity 15-30 April

By 16 April the bulk of the forward enemy troops appeared to be concentrating in the area Bardia-Sollum-Sidi Omar, and to be taking up defensive positions. It was thought that there was an enemy force of one or two brigades in the area west of Fort Capuzzo and a small concentration of armoured cars and trucks at the fort itself. On 15 April the British Mobile Force (late 2nd Support Group) raided Sollum, where all the enemy troops encountered were found to be German. Further raids were carried out against Capuzzo on 16 and 17 April. Air activity in support of these operations consisted of eight Blenheim sorties against motor transport at Capuzzo on the 15th, five in the Bardia-Sollum-Capuzzo area on the 17th, two at Bardia on the 18th and thirteen at Bardia and Capuzzo and on the Gazala-Tobruk-Capuzzo road on the 19th. By 18 April there were indications that advance elements of the German 15th Division recently landed in Tripoli were in the forward area. This information caused a change in British policy, in that it was now agreed that while the Western Desert Force continued to act offensively where possible, it must, at the same time, be prepared to meet strong enemy reinforcements, especially tanks, which might reach the line Tobruk - El Gobi by the 27th. While it was estimated, that the concentration of the 15th Division on the front could not be completed till 1 May, it was known that a group of German bombers and a group of fighters which had been withdrawn to the Balkans, were returning to Libya.

CAS Folder App 4D
to the Inspector
General's Minute to
C.A.S., 23 Sept. 1941
(A.H.B./ID3/545(A))

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Nos. 14, 45 & 55
Sqdn O.R.D.S.

War Cabinet
Narrative,
Section 1,
Chapter F.

The situation in the Sollum area was apparently causing some anxiety to the Axis, for on 23 April, in view of the uncertain situation in the Desert, General Paulus was sent from Germany to see Rommel. According to the Chief Quarter Master appraisal of the situation on 24 April a crisis had been reached, not at Tobruk but at Sollum. He considered that the British at Tobruk at the least matched the Axis forces in strength and were even superior in artillery, so that a decisive attack was out of the question for the time being although it was hoped to maintain the siege; this would probably have to be raised, however, if Rommel were beaten at Sollum where the British were believed to be bringing up reinforcements. He pointed out that no ground reinforcements would reach Rommel until 5 May by which time the 15th Armoured Division should be beginning to arrive, and meanwhile the activities of the Air Force were hampered by the shortage of fuel in North Africa.(1) On 24 April, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces agreed to lend aircraft for transporting engineers and rifle units of the 15th Armoured Division to Derna, and several units were ferried to Libya during the next few days.

In spite of these alleged difficulties, by 25 April enemy patrols against the British Mobile Force were increasing, on 26th three enemy columns advanced eastward, and during the night the Mobile Force, which had now been forced to relinquish its position on top of the Halfaya Pass, completed its withdrawal to the line Buq Buq - Bir Sofafi. Between 23 and 25 April, immediately preceding the enemy's advance, Wellingtons made four sorties and Blenheims twenty-four sorties against enemy motor transport on the roads around Tobruk, Gazala, Bardia, Capuzzo and Acroma, while in addition on the 24th two Hurricanes of No. 274 Squadron made an apparently successful attack on motor transport north-west of Fort Capuzzo. Enemy records reported only slight damage however.

The Second Attack on Tobruk

On 28 April, despite the uncertain situation, Rommel decided to make a further attack on Tobruk. For this he intended to employ all the German forces available, and to leave all the defensive operations around Sollum to the Italians. The attack was made on 30 April, when enemy troops advanced on the western perimeter from the direction of Acroma, and captured the British Forward Defended Localities on a five thousand yard front. Approximately sixty enemy tanks avoiding the gun positions, concentrated on the Infantry forward posts, but a portion of the enemy withdrew before a counter-attack by British tanks. Enemy losses were four tanks in the minefields, at least three by Molotov cocktails(2) and four through British tank action, as compared with the loss of three infantry tanks and four cruisers lost by the British, besides five tanks lost through mechanical failure. During the attack enemy aircraft made numerous dive-bombing attacks on troops and artillery positions. On the following day at the request of the General Officer Commanding Tobruk, twelve Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons

- (1) In his diary Halder records (16 April) 'The shocking loss by torpedo of convoy No. 20 en route to Libya'. According to Lloyds, on that date the Navy sank five southbound ships off the Kerkennah Bank, totalling over fourteen thousand tons.
- (2) Phosphorous incendiary bombs which could be thrown by hand or dropped from aircraft.

Halder's
Diary
(A.H.B.6).

Halder's
Diary
(A.H.B.6)

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(12)

A.H.B/ILJ1/
31/3

maintained standing fighter patrols over the fortress. The fighters encountered the enemy in greatly superior numbers, but No. 274 Squadron shot down three Me. 109's for the loss of one Hurricane destroyed and two damaged. Enemy documents record only one Ju. 87 destroyed at Tobruk.

According to a report by General Paulus to Headquarters in Germany although the attack had resulted in considerable gains at the important south-west corner and had breached the fortified lines in spite of considerable resistance, the Axis forces were not strong enough to exploit this success and capture Tobruk.

German and British Plans

Following the termination of the attack on Tobruk, the German Supreme Military Command confirmed a directive given to General Rommel by General Paulus, as an order from the Commander-in-Chief Army:-

Enemy Documents
A.H.B.6
Signals of
Luftwaffe Ops
Staff Alex II
4-9/41

(a) The stretch of country taken on 1 May is to be held and further attacks, also of limited extent only, are to be made whenever a quick success is to be expected without losses worth mentioning.

(b) Reference to the definitely weakened condition of the German troops. Arrangement of the units and withdrawal of the mobile reserves ordered.

(c) Renewed attack, opened after the arrival of the 15th Panzer Division and the reinforcements, to be dependent on the further development of the situation.

(d) Principal task of the Afrika Korps shall be the occupation of Cyrenaica with or without Tobruk, Sollum and Bardia. The accomplishment of this task is not to be questioned on account of the fighting round Tobruk.

(e) Reinforcement of the Bardia-Sollum front by mobile German troops. No advancing beyond Sollum without sanction apart from reconnaissance.

(f) Examination of the defences of Gialo.

(g) Preparation of the position of Ain el Gazala. Withdrawal there is left to C.-in-C. Afrika Korps according to the development of the situation.

(h) Coastal observation against enemy landings.

(i) The setting up of protected supply base.

In order to hasten the fall of Tobruk special importance was to be attached to increasing the bombing and mining activity of the Luftwaffe sections stationed in Greece.

At the beginning of May the combined Axis Air Forces had at their disposal in North Africa a strength of nearly four hundred aircraft of which only just over half was serviceable, as follows:-

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		<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
<u>German</u>	Bombers	8	6
	Dive-bombers	73	43
	S.E. Fighters	39	21
	T.E. Fighters	30	23
		<u>150</u>	<u>93</u>
<u>Italian</u> (5th Squadron)	Bombers	49	25
	Fighters	156	70
	Army Co-op.	27	14
	Coastal	<u>14</u>	<u>5</u>
	246	114	

In addition the following German aircraft were available in Sicily and Greece:

Bombers	147	89
Dive-bombers	88	63
Long range recon	27	7
Night Fighters	15	3
T.E. Fighters	18	14
Transport	<u>111</u>	<u>76</u>
	406	252

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At Headquarters Middle East, the concentration of the enemy's attacking forces at Tobruk was considered to be an advantage as it was thought to delay his preparations for an advance into Egypt. It was expected, however, that he would bring forward an additional German Armoured Division by mid-May, and the Commander-in-Chief Middle East instructed Lieutenant General Beresford-Pierson to prepare an offensive as soon as his armoured strength permitted. In counter-attacking, the main objective of the Western Desert force was to be the expulsion of the enemy from the territory east of Tobruk followed by a conjunction of this force with the garrison at Tobruk. Pending the attack, the task of the mobile force was to seize opportunities for small scale offensive operations. Meanwhile, however, the British defensive positions had to be carefully planned, especially for the protection of Sidi Barrani which was the only forward airfield available for fighters in the Tobruk area, and essential to the air defence of Tobruk.

British Air Activity in May

Sqdn. O.R.B.s

During May the air force continued its task of attacking the enemy's communications to prevent a build up of his forces. The Wellington effort in the Western Desert by Nos. 37, 38, 70 and 148 Squadrons which, apart from operations against Greece and the Dodecanese, amounted to 100 sorties for the whole month, was devoted for the first three weeks almost exclusively to attacks on Benghazi and its satellite airfields of Benina and Berta, the port and airfield at Derna and the forward landing ground at Gazala. Sixteen raids, totalling 33 sorties were made on Benghazi up to and including 21 May and a further eight raids, totalling twelve sorties during the following ten days, when Benghazi was the target on every occasion but one. Blenheims also flew a few daylight sorties against the port and on 1 May set fire to a ship alongside the north-east mole. This was presumably the Italian ship *Serdica*, 1,533 tons, reported by Lloyds as sunk in Benghazi harbour on 1 May. The damage inflicted by these attacks, particularly on the port facilities was considerable, and Intelligence sources estimated that the effort during the first half of the month continued to limit

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supplies passing through the port sufficiently to prevent the enemy from resuming a major offensive. This is supported by a message from the Africa Corps Luftflotte 4 (via Fliegerkorps X) dated 9 May:

Supply position of D.A.K. (Africa Corps) very serious owing to continued and successful pressure by British fleet and Air Force on communications via Benghazi and Tripoli. In the past forty hours alone four ships have been lost.(1) Request urgently that apart from attacks on shipping near Tobruk relief will be provided by air attacks on every British warship within striking distance.

During the first three weeks of the month, Blenheims of Nos. 14, 45 and 55 Squadrons joined their effort to that of the Wellingtons in attacking airfields. Thirty-five Wellington night sorties and 18 Blenheim day sorties were flown, including 'prickle' dropping by the Blenheims, the 'prickles' consisting of multi-pointed spikes designed to damage the tyres of aircraft and motor vehicles.(2) On the whole good results were obtained against airfield objectives, although on several occasions results were unobserved. According to enemy documents 'prickles' dropped on Derna and Gazala caused considerable damage to tyres.

Enemy Documents
A.H.B. 6.

Against Axis motor transport columns and concentrations Blenheim bombers and fighters and Hurricanes maintained a steady offensive, occasionally assisted by Wellingtons, when these failed to find their primary target. The Blenheims and Hurricanes flew at least 28 sorties against these targets during the month, and the Wellingtons flew six. The attacks on motor transport included many sorties by the five-front-gun fighter Blenheims of No. 45 Squadron, which were so successful that one flight was equipped entirely with these aircraft, and remained as the Blenheim Fighter Flight until the squadron left the Western Desert. On several occasions messages of congratulation were received, praising the work and efficiency of No. 45 Squadron, whose attacks on motor transport columns were believed to have seriously interfered with the enemy's supplies, and to have under-mined morale.

No. 204 Group
& Squadrons'
O.R.B.s

During the month reconnaissance was maintained by No. 39 (Maryland) Squadron operating from Fuka, and No. 6 Squadron at Qasaba. Until 8 May a detachment of the latter squadron had operated from Tobruk, but shelling, dive bombing and ground strafing attacks had made this impossible, and the air party of the detachment rejoined the squadron on that day. No. 39 Squadron made daily reconnaissance of the areas El Agheila-Derna and Jarabub-Capuzzo during which hundreds of photographs were taken, while No. 6 Squadron made several tactical reconnaissances almost every day in the forward area. The work of both squadrons earned high praise from the Air Officer Commanding particularly that of No. 6 Squadron which was of great value during the various battles which took place during the month. General and photographic reconnaissance operations were augmented from time to time by the Blenheim squadrons and tactical reconnaissance by No. 274 Squadron.

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- (1) Two ships were sunk by the Navy and one by mine on 8th and 9th, on the North African Supply route. There is no indication in Lloyds of a fourth sinking around this date.
 - (2) This is the first known reference to the use of spikes or 'prickles' in attacks on airfields in the Western Desert.

For the greater part of the month the German Air Force was concentrating against targets in the Eastern Mediterranean in connection with the Crete operations and activity in the Desert was negligible.

Exploratory Moves by British and Axis Forces

By 6 May Middle East Intelligence authorities believed that pressure on the enemy's advanced units during the ensuing week might lead to his evacuation of the Bardia-Sollum area and possibly the withdrawal of the main part of the forces west of Tobruk, where a position had probably been prepared. To take advantage of the enemy's position as interpreted by Intelligence, the Officer Commanding, Western Desert Force therefore decided to take the offensive at the earliest possible moment with all the armoured and mobile troops at his disposal. His immediate objective was to drive the enemy from the area Capuzzo-Sollum-Bir Waer and exploit towards Tobruk to the limit of his administrative resources. Without waiting for armoured reinforcements, a tentative advance was made on 8 May, when a column consisting of the 7th Support Group (late Mobile Force) cleared the Sidi Suleiman area of enemy troops, and then attacked the enemy position at the top of the Halfaya Pass. Fighter protection was provided over the area of the advance by six Hurricanes of No. 274 Squadron, but no enemy aircraft were encountered. The operations were severely hampered by a severe sandstorm, and by nightfall the enemy still held both the top and bottom of the pass. Furthermore, on the following day, despite the storm which by then had effectively grounded the British fighter squadrons, two enemy columns advanced on Sidi Suleiman from Sidi Omar and the Halfaya Pass, and after a short engagement the 7th Support Group withdrew.

On 12 May, the fast convoy through the Mediterranean, arrived in Egypt with the long-awaited tank reinforcements and 43 Hurricanes. During the voyage one ship containing 57 tanks had been lost, leaving about 150 to reinforce the Western Desert Force. The problem was whether these tanks could be manned and put into action before German reinforcements reached the forward area, and it was originally hoped that they would be ready and in the line by the end of May. This estimate, however, was to prove optimistic.

Meanwhile, on 12 May an enemy force of five columns made a tentative advance along the whole front from Halfaya to Sofafi and was engaged by British forward troops about five miles to the south-west of Bir Sofafi. The enemy did not press the attack and his columns withdrew during the evening, his movements having been closely watched throughout the day by aircraft of No. 6 Squadron which made seven Tactical and one photographic reconnaissance sorties. During the latter stages of the withdrawal three fighter Blenheims of No. 45 Squadron, and eight Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons bombed and machine gunned the retreating enemy.

British Attempt to capture Capuzzo and Sollum

In the middle of May, immediately following the enemy's reconnoitring manoeuvres, there appeared to be a fleeting chance of attacking his ground forces near Sollum in favourable circumstances. Intelligence seemed to show that his strength in armoured fighting vehicles in the forward area was small, and that he was having difficulty with his supplies. The Commander-in-Chief decided to make an attack with the small number of tanks

available in the hope of recovering Sollum and Capuzzo as a jumping off place for the larger attack when the reinforcements arrived.

Collishaw's
Report
(A.H.B./ILJ6
/2)

The Army plan envisaged a tank battle in the Capuzzo area with a simultaneous sortie by the Tobruk garrison. The air plan was to prevent enemy reinforcements reaching the Sollum area from the concentration of troops investing Tobruk, and to prevent the movement of supplies along the lines of communication. In particular, however, the General Officer Commanding Western Desert Force was anxious that the main effort of the air units, both bomber and fighter, should be conducted directly against the enemy's armoured fighting vehicles, the intention being that the Air Force should act as artillery with the object of putting the enemy's armoured fighting vehicles out of action. The Air Officer Commanding was steadily opposed to this plan, because, during the first British offensive in Cyrenaica, when the British were advancing towards Bardia, the Italian Air Force had dropped thousands of bombs in intensified attacks against the 7th Armoured Division. An analysis of the results of these attacks had shown how ineffective they were, and this experience reaffirmed the uneconomical aspect of employing air forces to attack directly Armoured Fighting vehicles. The Air Officer Commanding No. 204 Group proposed, instead, to attack the thin-skinned vehicles in the rear of the armoured vehicles, on the ground that the latter could not fight without petrol and ammunition, and that the paralysing of the line of communications would automatically bring about the breakdown of the fighting units. The General Officer Commanding, Western Desert Force, concurred in this plan, but in the event the battle was too brief to allow time for the air units to cause a breakdown in the enemy's line of communication immediately in the rear of his armoured fighting vehicles, although a heavy toll was taken of his motor transport vehicles. Had the battle continued, there is little doubt that these air operations would have had a considerable effect on the results.

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Chapter F

No. 204 Sp. &
O.R.E.'s &
M.E.F.O.S.

The Army attack was made on 15 May on top of the escarpment at the Halfaya Pass and on to Bir Waer, Musaid and Capuzzo, and from Bir Hafid towards Sidi Azeiz, Hurricanes of No. 274 Squadron, maintaining a standing patrol to protect the advancing troops from ground-strafting by enemy aircraft. One Hurricane patrol encountered several enemy fighters escorting bombers, one Me. 109 being destroyed and two more damaged. Meanwhile Hurricanes of No. 73 Squadron patrolled over the British lines of communication between Sidi Barrani and Sidi Haneish. At about noon eight Blenheims of No. 14 Squadron, attacked infantry and motor transport and machine gunned troops at the foot of the Halfaya Pass. In the afternoon air attacks against the enemy were increased. Hurricanes attacked the enemy retreating along the Bardia-Tobruk road and between Bardia and Sollum, where M.T. and tents in wadis were thoroughly shot up, while Blenheims attacked motor transport and enemy positions west of the pass and south of Sollum, a total of twelve sorties being made by the fighters and eight by the bombers. The British attack had evidently taken the enemy by surprise since he evacuated all his aircraft from the forward area to landing grounds west of Tobruk, and on 16 May a column of 500 vehicles withdrew from Bardia. During the afternoon of the 15th the enemy counter-attacked and retook Capuzzo and Sollum landing ground

and barracks. The British still held Sollum village, Musaid and Bir Waer, but before dawn a general withdrawal was ordered, the British still holding the Halfaya Pass. On 16 May the Air Force continued its attacks on the enemy forces, eleven sorties being made by Hurricanes of No. 274 Squadron, against motor transport on the Gazala-Bardia road, four against a petrol convoy and armoured vehicles east of Tobruk, and three by long range aircraft against motor transport between Barce and El Gubba. No. 73 Squadron, made six sorties in the Tobruk-Capuzzo area destroying six vehicles and two Blenheim fighters machine-gunned motor transport in the Tobruk-Bardia road.

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On the following day it became apparent that the enemy was hastily bringing up considerable reinforcements of armoured forces. Air reconnaissance reported three hundred motor transport at Bardia, thirty tanks to the south of the Bardia defences and up to two hundred armoured fighting vehicles and a hundred and fifty motor transport between Capuzzo and the Libyan Omar. British Intelligence estimated the enemy now had a maximum of 150 tanks in the forward area. It was believed that the show of force on the part of the Western Desert Force had caused the enemy to change his plan, compelling him to abandon the policy of keeping only a light screening force on the frontier, and making him maintain large mobile protective forces there. Hurricanes made six sorties against these forces during 17 May claiming nineteen vehicles destroyed.

M.E. Daily
Op. Summary,
16/17 May 1941

On 18 May a strong enemy force including 100 motor transport vehicles and 75 tanks counter-attacked in two columns towards Sidi Suleiman and Halfaya, and was engaged by the 7th Armoured Brigade and the 7th Support Group. The British were compelled to withdraw in the face of the enemy's superior weight of attack, but the bulk of the enemy forces subsequently retired to Capuzzo. The enemy being obviously in greater strength than had been anticipated, the British offensive was not maintained. During the afternoon the British ground forces were supported by Blenheims of No. 14 Squadron, which attacked motor transport and encampments in the Sollum-Capuzzo-Bir Waer area. Throughout the four days (15th - 18th inclusive) of the fighting, aircraft of No. 6 Squadron, kept close watch on the movements of the enemy. One pilot landed beside a British battery during the course of a battle, and, by directing its fire on the main body of the opposing force, assisted the guns to check the enemy, thus enabling the British force to withdraw in good order. The pilot was awarded a bar to his D.F.C.

No. 6 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

During the following week there was a lull in ground activity, and although the Royal Air Force continued its attacks on the enemy lines of communication, these operations were on a more limited scale than hitherto. Fighter Blenheims of No. 45 Squadron, continued to make successful sorties against enemy motor transport in the Barce-Jedabya area and it was believed that these attacks had seriously interfered with the enemy's supplies and were undermining morale. Less fortunate however, was an attack on 21 May by No. 14 Squadron, on motor transport on the Tobruk-Capuzzo road, when five out of seven Blenheims failed to return.⁽¹⁾ This was the last

No. 204 Group,
& Sqdns
O.R.B.s

(1) According to enemy documents five Blenheims were shot down by German fighters in an air combat near Capuzzo. The date given, however was 20 May.

Blenheim operation of the month against Western Desert targets, as, on the following day the German attack against Crete began, and the whole effort was diverted to that theatre.

Axis Forces Recapture the Halfaya Pass

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The enemy's defensive scheme at the frontier was based, on the correct assumption that when reinforced the Western Desert Force would take the offensive there to raise the siege of Tobruk. The 15th German Armoured Division was given the task of defending the rear of the troops investing Tobruk on a defensive line running from Bir Hafa, through Capuzzo to Sollum, and it was the German intention to recapture the Halfaya Pass to include it in the general defensive position. On 25 May the number of enemy armoured car patrols on the line increased and at 1100 hours enemy aircraft dive-bombed the area covered by the 7th Armoured Brigade at the Halfaya Pass. The Royal Air Force noticed a slight increase of all arms in the Capuzzo area. At 1430 hours on 27 May enemy guns shelled the British position on the escarpment in the Halfaya Pass, forcing our troops to withdraw from the vantage point at point 190.

By intercepting British R/T the Germans were able to discover that the attack had achieved a measure of surprise and that the British had not had time to take steps to meet a German tank attack. It was therefore decided to make a surprise attack on Halfaya and the reserve column was ordered up. For the British the success of the battle now depended on whether point 190 could be recovered, since while they retained this position the enemy could observe fully the whole of the British line. General Gott commanding the Western Desert Force was instructed to hold the Halfaya Pass in the hope that the enemy would be unable to retain his position throughout the following day, and to use the 7th Armoured Brigade to drive back the enemy flanking column and strike the enemy in the Halfaya area from the south west. Early on the following morning, however, the enemy launched an attack on Halfaya compelling the British to withdraw, but were unable to follow in pursuit owing to a shortage of petrol. During the withdrawal Hurricane patrols between Halfaya and Sofafi afforded protection to the forward troops.

The Germans largely attributed their success to the outstanding work of the 'Listening Platoon' which provided precise and accurate information as to the intentions and dispositions of the British. Major General Gott ascribed the German success to their numerical superiority in armoured fighting vehicles, and to the complete observation which the enemy obtained of the Halfaya position. He submitted that the Desert was unsuitable for protracted infantry and artillery defence against strong armoured forces unless the flanks of the position were secure. At Halfaya the south flank had been open, and Halfaya was a difficult position to defend from the south.

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SECTION II

OPERATION BATTLEAXE

Effects of the Fall of Crete

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(B)5(Final)(7)

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Section 1,
Chapter F.

After the capture by the Germans of the Halfaya Pass it still remained the intention of the British to drive the enemy back west of Tobruk. This was in fact considered vital both for the saving of the situation at Tobruk and for the defence of Egypt. Within a few days the fall of Crete (1 June) added a new urgency to the importance of gaining a decisive victory in the Western Desert. The possession of Crete enabled the enemy to establish a direct line of communication to Cyrenaica from Italy via the west coast of Greece and Crete, and unless British air forces could be established in Cyrenaica it was likely to become impossible to interrupt this line, so that the difficulties of maintaining Malta and interrupting from there the line between Italy and Tripoli would be greatly increased. Preparations were therefore hastened to reform the 7th Armoured Division and to equip it with the tanks sent through Operation Tiger. It was decided to use the whole of the British strength available in a single attempt to destroy the enemy's armed forces in the Western Desert. This offensive was named Battleaxe.

German Plans

Having captured the Halfaya Pass the enemy at once began to fortify it and include it in a general line of defence, but apart from dive bombing raids he made no offensive moves against the British in the frontier area. There was evidence, however, that a general eastward move of the Italian forces in Libya was being made, and that these were being reinforced from Italy. It was believed that only two German Divisions were in Libya, the 15th Division and the 5th Light Armoured Division. As has already been noted however(1) it is now known from enemy documents that following the failure of the German attempt to capture Tobruk on 1 May, Army Headquarters at Berlin had warned Rommel against a repetition of the attack before the troops were rested and refitted, and made it clear that the possession of Cyrenaica with or without Tobruk, Sollum and Bardia, was the primary duty of the Africa Corps. To ensure this task during the summer months Rommel was instructed to limit his efforts to preparing a permanent position in the Gazala area, which could, if necessary be more easily defended than the frontier; meanwhile he was to prepare a supply base for the continuation of the offensive after the hot summer months were over. In the German view, the continuation of the advance into Egypt was only secondary in importance to the secure defence of Cyrenaica. Even at this stage, however, the securing of Tobruk was visualised as the basis for a future German/Italian attack against the Suez Canal which would coincide with a German attack on the Middle East through the Balkans and Russia.

(1) Page 151 above.

Reorganisation of the Army for the Offensive

The first requirement of the Army was the reorganisation of the armoured units. Since their arrival in Egypt the tank reinforcements from England, as well as other tanks from the battlefield had been under preparation for the forthcoming offensive. This had proved a longer and more difficult task than had been expected, however, so that it was not until the first week in June that all the tanks were available, and even then the state of training of the 7th Armoured Division caused General Wavell much anxiety. The Division had been without tanks since February, and the shortage had been so acute that it had not even been able to continue training while awaiting re-equipment. The unit was therefore in no state to go into battle with new equipment and the Commanding Officer, Major General O'Moore Creagh asked for at least five days to enable his crews to fire their guns and obtain some working knowledge of the new machines they were taking over, as well as to allow the staff and commanders to get to know each other. General Wavell therefore decided to postpone the date of the offensive to 15 June.

War Cabinet
Hist.(B)5
(Final) (39)

Air Organisation for Battleaxe

Whereas the reinforcement of the Army in readiness for the advance, although completed later than had been expected, had been carried out, generally speaking, according to plan, the Air Force was in a less fortunate position. As has been seen, (1) since the fall of Tobruk efforts had been made to build up the strength of the Desert air units, and by 15 May the number of serviceable aircraft had risen from forty to seventy-two. With the German attack on Crete on 20 May, however, all the available aircraft with the necessary range had been called on to operate against the German airfields in Greece and the Dodecanese, or over Crete itself, with the result that the serviceability state in the air units, particularly among the Blenheim squadrons, was greatly reduced.

Tedder's Dis-
patch (Draft).
(A.H.B./IIJ4/
402/1).

Following the completion of the evacuation, therefore, a new effort had to be made to rebuild the strength of the squadrons and this once again, in the face of new demand from a fresh campaign in a subsidiary theatre, in this case Syria. (2) On 4 June the estimate of squadrons reasonably certain to be available for the operation was four bomber and four fighter squadrons excluding the Wellington squadrons, although it was hoped to increase the number by one fighter and one medium bomber squadron. Besides these ten squadrons there were another seven re-equipping and immobile in Egypt, and the Prime Minister and the C.A.S. urged that at least some elements of these squadrons should be used, even at the expense of future prospects. The attitude in Whitehall towards the forthcoming operation was that everything should be risked to achieve a quick success and that as regards the air war, no effort should be spared to bring the maximum possible force to bear on the enemy from the start in order to win air superiority.

A.O.C.-in-C.,
Corres. with
P.M.C.A.S.,
S. of S.
(A.H.B./IIJ4-
/183/271(A)-
(B)).

Ibid,
83 A,
83 B.

- (1) Page 140 above.
- (2) Imperial and Free French forces entered Syria on 8 June to prevent German air reinforcement to Iraq via the Syrian airfields.

The A.O.C.-in-C. was urged to throw in everything possible at the outset, in order to gain the initiative. It was believed that if this were done the Royal Air Force would commence the battle numerically superior to the enemy. The A.O.C.-in-C. accordingly made further attempts to increase his force to the maximum by drawing from every available source although he could not agree that this would achieve numerical superiority. As a result of these efforts the air units available for Battleaxe were as follows:- (1)

Fighters (2)

No.1 Sqdn. (S.A.A.F.)	Hurricane	L.G.07(Matruh area)
No.2 Sqdn. (S.A.A.F.)	Hurricane	L.G.07(Matruh area)
No.73 Sqdn.	Hurricane	Sidi Haneish
No.274 Sqdn.	Hurricane	Gerawla
No.250 Sqdn.	Tomahawks	(Arrived at Sidi Haneish from Mariut on 14/6).

Medium Bombers

No.14 Sqdn.	Blenheim	L.G.21(Daba area)
No.113 Sqdn.	Blenheim	Maaten Bagush
No.24 Sqdn. (S.A.A.F.)	Maryland det.	Fuka

Reconnaissance

No.6 (A.C.) Sqdn.	Hurricane	Qasaba
No.39 Sqdn.	Maryland	Fuka

Heavy Bombers (3)

No.37 Sqdn.	Wellington	Shallufa
No.38 Sqdn.	Wellington	Shallufa
No.70 Sqdn.	Wellington	Kabrit
No.148 Sqdn. (less detachment in Malta)	Wellington	Kabrit

In addition No.33 Squadron (Hurricanes) with Fleet Air Arm pilots from No.806 Squadron was attached to No.274 Squadron, and pilots of No.229 Squadron were attached to No.73 Squadron. Nos.45 and 55 Squadrons which had both suffered severely during the Crete operations, had been withdrawn to the Delta area for refit.

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- (1) Strengths are given on page 166.
 - (2) Sidi Barrani was used as an advanced landing-ground by the fighters.
 - (3) Fuka was used as an advanced landing-ground by the Wellington Squadrons.

General Air Plan

The role of the air force in Battleaxe provided a preliminary stage during which air attacks would be carried out to prevent the enemy bringing up any reinforcements or supplies from the rear. This was to be followed by a shorter operation which would prevent the enemy from sending reinforcements from Tobruk into the Sollum area. When the tank battle developed the air force was to assist the army with close support operations against the enemy. The General Officer Commanding the Western Desert Force was very anxious that the maximum air resources should be employed up to 12 June against shipping in Benghazi harbour and motor transport convoys on the Benghazi-Derna road, and from 12-14 June on mechanical transport between Tobruk and the Egyptian frontier and all the landing grounds within reach.

Preliminary Air Offensive Against Benghazi and Axis Airfields, Positions and Supply Lines

Among all the exigencies of the weeks preceding Battleaxe, it remained of the utmost importance that every effort should be made to curtail as far as possible the reinforcement of the enemy's forward troops through the port of Benghazi. During the evacuation of Crete operations against the port had had, perforce, to be reduced, although even then scarcely a night passed when an attack by one or more aircraft was not mounted. Early in June, however, reconnaissance reports indicated that the enemy was unloading armoured fighting vehicles at Benghazi, and the Chiefs of Staffs urged that a renewed effort should be made against the port. Although the reconnaissance reports had not been confirmed by air photographs the A.O.C.-in-C. entirely agreed on the importance of stopping the flow of enemy reinforcements through the port, and, as soon as the commitments for Crete were ended, he mounted the maximum possible effort against Benghazi, expending only a small proportion of bombing attacks against airfields in Cyrenaica and Rhodes.(1) Throughout the first fortnight in June, the preparatory period of Battleaxe, and even during the battle itself attacks on the port were carried out every night. From 1-18 June inclusive Wellingtons made over ninety sorties against Benghazi inflicting considerable damage, particularly on the moles and quays. Numerous fires and explosions were observed among buildings and warehouses in the vicinity of the port, and ships in the harbour were seen to be hit. Lloyds record the loss of three ships, The Nadia, 247 tons, the Mario Bianco, 258 tons, and the Giorgina, 253 tons.

Owing to the heavy demands made on the medium bombers and fighters in connection with the evacuation of Crete, softening up operations in preparation for Battleaxe by the Desert air units other than the Wellington squadrons, could not be commenced until the second week in June. Even then, owing to the losses suffered by the air force during the evacuation, the operations were on a considerably smaller scale than had been planned. On this account the Royal Air Force suffered much adverse criticism from the Army authorities who at first pronounced the failure of the R.A.F. to continue these attacks

(1) Rhodes was being used by the Germans for the night bombing of Alexandria and the Suez Canal.

Collishaw's
Report (A.H.B./
IIJ6/2).

A.O.C.-in-C.
Corres. with
P.M., C.A.S.,
S. of S.
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
163/271(A-B))

War Cabinet
Series Hist.
(B)5 (Final)
(111)

No.257 Wing
Nos.37,38
70 and 148
Sqdns. O.R.B.s

A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/146 (A),
Enclo.180(a)
181(a) and
183(b).

throughout the evacuation as deplorable. Later, however, it was recognised that in the circumstances the continuation of these operations had become impossible.

MEFOS. No.
204 Gp &
Sqdns. O.R.B.s

Attacks against enemy landing grounds began on the night of 6/7 June, when four Wellingtons made a successful attack on Derna landing ground, its satellite, and barracks. Three further raids, amounting to ten sorties, were made on this target up to 15 June, and two attacks amounting to eight sorties were made on Gazala landing ground. Medium bombers and fighters operating under No.204 Group made the majority of their attacks between 10 and 14 June, by which time the squadrons had recovered in some measure from the losses they had received during the Crete operations.

Altogether during the preliminary period seventeen Blenheim and twenty-six fighter Blenheim and Hurricane sorties were made, mostly against the more forward airfields, the chief targets being Derna and Gazala. A particularly successful operation was carried out at dawn on 14 June when Hurricanes of Nos. 1 S.A.A.F. and 73 Squadrons, led by two Marylands of No.24 Squadron S.A.A.F. attacked Gazala north and south landing grounds. Seven enemy aircraft were set on fire at the former and four at the latter, although a Maryland and three Hurricanes failed to return. Other successful attacks were made on 3 June when seven Hurricanes of No.1 Squadron S.A.A.F. attacked enemy aircraft at Great Gambut destroying three by fire and damaging others, and on 9 June when Hurricanes of Nos.73 and 274 Squadrons attacking Derna and Gazala burnt out eight aircraft at the former and six at the latter and damaged others.(1)

Medium bomber and fighter attacks on enemy motor transport and lines of communication although not on a large scale, achieved considerable success. All but one of these attacks were carried out between 10 and 15 June. On 10 June three fighter Blenheims of No.113 Squadron attacking motor transport in the Marau - El Gubbi area, claimed to have destroyed twenty-eight large vehicles towing trailers, and to have damaged other vehicles, while on the 11th ten Hurricanes of No.274 Squadron on an offensive patrol claimed eighteen large enemy vehicles destroyed on the road Gazala - El Adem - Capuzzo. Marylands of No.24 Squadron S.A.A.F. attacked motor transport on roads in the Barce - Maraua area on 11 and 13 June, claiming a total of seventeen vehicles destroyed, while on 14 June Hurricanes of No.274 Squadron shot up enemy vehicles between Gazala and Capuzzo, claiming nineteen put out of action or burning. Also on 14 June, fighters covered the approach of the Army columns to the frontier area, but unfortunately an enemy reconnaissance aircraft which flew over escaped interception and was able to return to its base unmolested.

Fighter Cover for Supply Ships to the Forward Area

An important feature of fighter operations both before and during Operation Battleaxe was the protection of supply ships plying between Tobruk and Alexandria. Since mid-April, when the siege of Tobruk first began, the Navy had supplied the garrison with petrol and other essentials, but because of the shortage of fighters in the Western Desert

(1) These claims are not supported by evidence from enemy documents.

the ships had usually sailed without fighter escort. During May, to avoid the threat of enemy air attack, as far as possible the arrival and departure of shipping at Tobruk had been timed to take place during the hours of darkness. When enemy air activity was particularly heavy the transportation of supplies had been confined to destroyers, which could make the journey quickly and carried anti-aircraft guns. After the fall of Crete however, the enemy had been able to achieve a far greater concentration of his air forces against the Eastern Mediterranean, while the experiences of the evacuation of Crete had shown that as long as enemy air forces were operating in force over the area, the Navy could not put to sea without fighter protection. Yet it was of the outmost importance for Operation Battleaxe that the Navy should not only continue to carry supplies to Tobruk, but should increase the rate of supply as soon as possible, as it was hoped that, if the initial advance was successful, a frontal attack on the investing forces at Tobruk would be supported by a sortie by the garrison. In addition the Navy was also required to carry water and petrol to the forward base of the Western Desert Force at Sollum.

H.Q., R.A.F.
Cyrenaica
File. Encl.
236(a).
(A.H.B./IIJ6
/71).

Under these conditions, the fighters were obliged to expend a considerable proportion of their effort in shipping patrols, which, by the nature of the task, imposed a heavy burden on the squadrons. It was always necessary that in the danger area patrols should not consist of less than twelve aircraft, and consequently they consumed many flying hours; on 5 June thirty-three hours were flown by one squadron, protecting very small, slow ships, while on 3 June thirty-two Hurricanes expended sixty flying hours on ship protection. On 7 June, in order that the Hurricane squadrons might have an opportunity to prepare for the battle, the Air Officer Commanding No. 204 Group requested the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief to arrange for aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm and No.201 Group to take over the protection of shipping from 11 June. This was presumably not possible, as the Hurricanes continued shipping patrols up to, and to some extent, during, the battle, but on 7 June the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean ordered the transport of supplies to Tobruk by ships other than destroyers to cease because of the difficulty of providing air protection.

Collishaw
Report.
A.H.B./IIJ6/2),

AOC/11 Western
Desert Opera-
tions A.H.B./
IIJ4/183/146
(A), Encl.179
(b)

Naval Narrative

The enemy's air operations against the supply ships usually took the form of bombing attacks from about 10,000 feet, but sometimes dive-bombing attacks took place, or Me.109's and 110's shot up the vessels from low altitudes. At first an attempt was made to provide security against all possible forms of attack, but when the enemy began to operate in large formations with heavy fighter escorts it became necessary to concentrate each patrol in one formation operating at approximately 15,000 feet, to prevent its being surprised by a superior force. The fighters had to rely on anti-aircraft fire from the ships to warn them of the approach of low-flying aircraft; (1) R/T was employed by the fighters, but unfortunately few H.M. Ships were fitted with it. Fighter Squadrons normally operated in formations of twelve, with the aircraft detailed to assault the enemy bombers from both flanks in pairs, and with 'weavers' always on duty to prevent surprise. These tactics proved successful, and even when the formations met a numerically

Collishaw
Report (A.H.B./
IIJ6/2).

- (1) There were insufficient M.R.U.s. to cover the extensive coastline, and in any case the radar units available at this time did not cover low altitudes.

superior enemy they gave a good account of themselves, and no ships were lost while provided with a fighter escort.

The large number of flying hours involved had an adverse effect on the serviceability of squadrons, and the continual operations over the sea, with the risk of being overwhelmed by numerically superior forces might have had an adverse effect on morale, but by interchanging these operations with overland operations it was found possible to prevent this.

From 28 May German air activity in the desert began to increase, and dive-bombing attacks on Tobruk approached their former intensity during the first fortnight of June. There were also a number of attacks on Alexandria. These attacks continued until Operation Battleaxe caused a diversion of the air effort to supporting the army.

British Appreciation of the Enemy's Dispositions

Cabinet Office
Narrative,
Section 1,
Chapter F
& No.
6 Squadron
O.R.B.

During the preparatory period immediately preceding the advance, although daily reconnaissances to Benghazi and in the forward area were made by Nos.39 and 6 Squadrons respectively, the Army staff maintained that considerable difficulty was experienced in obtaining detailed information of the enemy's dispositions, owing to the limited means available for air photography, and accidents to those photographs which it had been possible to take. Certainly, there was seldom more than one photographic Hurricane available in No.6 Squadron, but the unit carried out photographic reconnaissance on eight of the first fourteen days of June; the nature and cause of the accidents to photographs is not readily ascertainable, and may or may not have been the responsibility of the air force. On 11 June air photographs disclosed what appeared to be a double row of 'Dragon's Teeth' obstacles between Capuzzo and Sollum, and air reconnaissance showed a defended locality at point 206, about eight miles south of Sollum; in view of this information the advance line of the Army was altered. There appeared to be no attempt by the enemy to advance from the positions covering the Halfaya Pass and no indication of an immediate offensive by the Axis in the Western Desert. It was believed that the 132nd Ariete Division was in the Tobruk area and that the total German and Italian force in the area south and west of Tobruk held one hundred and eighty tanks. In the frontier area the enemy was believed to have about one hundred medium tanks and fifty armoured cars. It was thus calculated that if the enemy brought tanks forward from the Tobruk area he could muster altogether three hundred tanks against the two hundred of the Western Desert Force.

Comparative Air Strengths

An exact comparison of British and Axis air forces before Operation Battleaxe is not possible, since no figures for the Italian Air Force are available for a date nearer 15 June than those given for 1 May. (2)(1) If these figures are

(1) See page 152.

taken as a rough estimate, it would appear that the Axis had a numerical superiority of about one hundred and twenty aircraft. When every available squadron and flight had been brought up to the Western Desert the British air strength was:-

	<u>I.E.</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Heavy Bombers	64	50
Medium Bombers	64	55
S.E. Fighters	96	84
T.E. Fighters	20	14
	<u>244</u>	<u>203</u>

German air strength in North Africa was (7 June):- (1)

	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Bombers	25	10
Dive-bombers	38	29
S.E. Fighters	34	24
T.E. Fighters	25	17
	<u>122</u>	<u>80</u>

Italian Air Strength (as at 1 May) was: 246 114

A rough estimate of the total Axis strength would therefore be:- } 368 194

In addition the Luftwaffe had available in Crete and Greece:- 276 157

The Army Plan of Attack

The detailed army plan drawn up by Lieutenant General Beresford-Pierce, and approved by General Wavell was to advance in three columns. The right column, consisting of the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade Group was to advance between the coast and the escarpment to Sollum. This move would assist the centre column, consisting of the 4th Armoured Brigade Group, in its advance south of the escarpment clear of the enemy's prepared positions, to capture the area Musaid - Halfaya - Bir Waer - Capuzzo, from the south west. The left column consisting of the 7th Armoured Division, less the 4th Armoured Brigade, advancing on the axis Bir Habata - Sidi Suleiman - Sidi Azeiz, would protect the left flank of the 4th Armoured Brigade Group and attack the enemy tank force wherever encountered.

It was anticipated that the attack of the right and centre columns on the enemy defended areas, while the left column threatened the enemy's rear and supply columns, would force a tank battle either east of the frontier during the attack on Halfaya or west of it after the capture of Capuzzo. If the first stage of the attack was successful and the enemy forces on the frontier defeated, it was intended to continue the advance to the Tobruk - El Adem area, and to engage the enemy there in conjunction with a sortie in force by the Tobruk garrison.

- (1) Between 7 and 24 June the German air strength in North Africa was increased by reinforcements chiefly from Crete, including seventeen S.E. Fighters, fourteen Dive-bombers, and nine bomber and long-range reconnaissance aircraft. It is not known when these increases took place.

Wavell's
Dispatch
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
27).

Need for Full Army-Air Agreement on the Role of the Air Force

A.O.C.-in-C.
corres. with
C.A.S. etc.
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/271(A-B)).

It was particularly necessary that, before the battle began, complete agreement should be reached between the Army and the Air Force concerning the employment of the latter, because of a tendency in the United Kingdom to criticise the existing methods of air support. For example, the idea was current that German troops, when in difficulties, immediately summoned aircraft to deal with the ground opposition, and the question had been raised why the British did not have a similar arrangement. On the same grounds, it had been suggested that in the forthcoming battle the air forces would pay too much attention to shooting up lines of communication and airfields in the rear, and not enough to dealing with anti-tank guns, tanks and artillery which might be firing at British troops. For this reason the Chief of Air Staff instructed the A.O.C.-in-C to ensure that he and Air Commodore Collishaw obtained the complete agreement of the Army to their tactical plans. If the Army Commander's requirements appeared unsound and he could not be persuaded to alter them, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief was to do his best to act according to these requirements but was to register his disagreement to them and to the Chief of Air Staff before the action started.

Plan for Close Support

Collishaw's
Report
(A.H.B./IIJ6
/2).

In planning the role of his squadrons for the forthcoming operation, it was Air Commodore Collishaw's intention to take the offensive whenever possible. This policy was straightforward so far as the bombers were concerned, but in planning the operation of the fighters, the Air Officer Commanding came up against direct opposition from the Army. It had been his wish, that during the advance of the ground forces, the fighters should be employed either in operating in force over the enemy's advance airfields, or in attacking the thin-skinned vehicles comprising the ammunition supply vehicles immediately behind the armoured fighting vehicles. The General Officer Commanding Western Desert Force insisted, however, on the fighter force being used to carry out 'umbrella' tactics to cover the British troops during the approach march to the battle area and to cover the advance of the 4th Indian Division and the Guards Brigade. The continuity of the patrols demanded by this plan, with the given size of the fighter force, necessarily meant that each patrol would be small in numbers of aircraft. Such a policy, if persisted in for any length of time, was certain to wear out the fighter force, expose it to engagements in which it was outnumbered, deny escorts to bombers, leave the initiative largely in the hands of the enemy and ultimately result in the loss of air superiority. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief was prepared to carry it out, however, since it was requested for only a short time, and since the ground forces, after the experiences of Greece and Crete, were not unnaturally extremely alive to the possibilities of enemy air attack.

Tedder's Draft
Dispatch
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
402/1).

Collishaw's
Report
(A.H.B./IIJ6/
2).

In providing air protection for the ground forces the possibility of low-flying and high-flying bomber attacks had to be considered. If the fighters were placed at low altitudes to meet the danger of low-flying attacks, protection would be ineffective against the high-flying attacks, and vice versa. There were however insufficient fighters

to provide two constant patrols. It was essential to operate each formation with a minimum of twelve aircraft wherever possible in order that the fighter squadrons should not be defeated in detail by German fighter squadrons operating in force in the battle area, and this made a heavy demand on the fighter strength. It was finally decided to operate the fighter squadrons at approximately 15,000 feet, so that they could intercept any bombers attempting to attack the ground forces from a medium altitude. If the army was severely attacked by low-flying, it was intended to reduce the height of the fighter patrols.

The task of the bomber force was to attack the enemy's most advanced line of communication to prevent his armoured forces from being adequately refuelled and reammunitioned. In the event of the ground troops meeting superior forces, however, the bomber's role might be changed to direct support in the shape of attacks on the enemy fighting force.

The Battle

Sqdn. O.R.B.s
and (Army)
W.D.F. Diary

Enemy Docu-
ments with
A.H.B.6.

Sqdn. O.R.B.s

During the advance of the ground forces on 15 June, Hurricanes and Tomahawks (1) of all the available fighter squadrons maintained constant protective patrols from dawn to dusk over the forward area, engaging enemy bombers and fighters with sufficient tenacity to prevent the development of any serious attacks on the troops. The enemy claimed two successful attacks on British ground forces, however, the first to the south of Capuzzo during the morning and the second to the west and south west in the afternoon. In the latter attack a flank guard of three tanks was claimed destroyed. During engagements with the enemy throughout the day, the fighter squadrons claimed three Me.109's destroyed and three probably destroyed for the loss of four Hurricanes, while the enemy claimed nine Hurricanes and two bombers destroyed for the loss of two German fighters. In addition to the patrols over the forward area on this and subsequent days of the battle, the fighter squadrons maintained others over their base landing-grounds, the forward landing ground at Sidi Barrani and shipping proceeding to and from Tobruk.

M.E.F.O.S.
and Sqdn.
O.R.B.s.

Despite the constant demands on the fighter strength made by all these patrols, Hurricanes of No.274 Squadron, and fighter Blenheims of No.113 Squadron carried out offensive operations during the day. At dawn eight Hurricanes ground strafed enemy motor transport on the Gazala - Tobruk road and a camp east of Gazala, and on the return journey shot down a C.R.42. Two further attacks of six and ten sorties were made on the Trigh Capuzzo and the Capuzzo - Acroma roads, respectively, four Hurricanes being lost during the latter attack. In response to a special request by the army a Cannon Hurricane successfully attacked enemy gun positions at Halfaya in the morning, but it failed to return from the operation. In operations against the enemy's rearward line of communication four fighter Blenheims of No.113 Squadron ground strafed motor transport between Barce and Tecnis, Maraua and Slonta, and El Brega and Jedabya, claiming damage to a light tank and at least fifteen vehicles. During the night of 14/15 besides an attack on Benghazi by five Wellingtons, one

(1) These belonged to No.250 Squadron which joined Western Desert Force on 14/6 from the Delta.

Wellington attacked concentrations of motor transport and stores between Capuzzo and Bardia, and two more attacked Derna Satellite airfield. The enemy reported no damage at the airfields but admitted that a few vehicles were destroyed during attacks on troops and vehicles in the Acroma area and on the Tecnis - Maraua and coastal roads.

By the end of the day the British had succeeded in capturing Capuzzo and Bir waer but a further attack on Hafaid had failed, the British armoured forces incurring heavy losses in the face of stiffening enemy opposition. The Army confirmed, however, that fighter patrols had prevented molestation of the ground forces from the air. During the night of 15/16 five Wellingtons of No.38 Squadron attacked Benghazi, two attacked Derna Satellite, and four Wellingtons and four Blenheims attacked the Gazala landing grounds. Small fires and explosions were started on the landing grounds and some aircraft were believed to be destroyed but the enemy reported only slight damage and claimed two aircraft shot down.

On 16 June the Army made a further attack on Halfaya, but although units gained the high ground overlooking the pass, they failed to capture the pass itself. During the day the fighter squadrons, maintaining continuous protective patrols over the ground units, were ordered to patrol in squadrons instead of in sections in order to be able to meet the increasingly strong enemy formations on more equal terms. However, while the efforts of the fighter squadrons were maintaining air superiority, the situation on the ground was less favourable, since the enemy was strengthening his advance forces with armoured vehicles and was putting up determined resistance to the British efforts. In the evening a strong force of enemy tanks attempting an outflanking movement to the south were engaged by the 7th Armoured Brigade at Sidi Omar, and although the British cruiser tanks inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy, by the end of the engagement they found themselves heavily outnumbered and were compelled to withdraw. Losses on both sides were considerable.

Enemy
Documents
A.H.B.6.

During the day German aircraft flew at least ten bomber, thirty dive-bomber and eleven twin-engined fighter sorties in continuous attacks on British tank concentrations south of Halfaya Pass and at Capuzzo, and against reserves at Gasr El Arid, without encountering British aircraft. Italian bombers and fighters also bombed and shot up tanks, vehicles and troops at Sidi Suleiman, Sidi Omar and Gasr El Arid. Army sources confirmed enemy air activity in these sectors. There was no offensive activity by the R.A.F. nor was any requested by the Army, but fighter patrols encountered Me.109's during the day, and three Hurricanes were lost, although the enemy made no claims. During the night 16/17 two Wellingtons attacked Gazala North and Derna Satellite and eight attacked Benghazi harbour.

Sqdn. O.R.B.s
and CAS Folder
No.734
'Battleaxe'
(A.H.B./ID3/
734).

On the following day, 17 June, in view of the unexpected resistance of the enemy, the air force was called upon to resume offensive operations against enemy ground forces on a much larger scale. During the morning four fighter Blenheims of No.113 Squadron machine-gunned motor transport in the Maraua - Barce - El Gubbi area, and another five attacked enemy troops at Halfaya and the frontier near Sidi Omar, good results being observed on both occasions. The latter aircraft were escorted by eight Hurricanes of Nos. 1 and 2

Squadrons S.A.A.F., which lost four aircraft when they were attacked by Me.109's.

Ibid.

On this day both the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the Chief of Air Staff urged that bombers should be used to support the army units in the Halfaya sector, but the Commander-in-Chief maintained that the fighting there was too confused to make this practicable. However in the Sidi Omar area two operations were carried out in support of the army as the result of reconnaissance, and at the request of the General Officer Commanding. In the morning six Blenheims of No. 14 squadron attacked motor transport and tanks in the Sidi Omar area, and this operation was repeated in the afternoon by nine aircraft of the same squadron, while three Blenheims of No. 113 squadron attacked a similar target at Qaret Abu Faris, south west of Sidi Suleiman. The object of these operations was to prevent an enemy column attacking the 4th Indian Division, as it was doubtful whether the armoured vehicles of the 7th Division could interpose themselves in time. The aircraft were loaded with bombs fused to instantaneous, which were dropped from a low height. Instantaneous fusing was used to take advantage of the fragmentation of the bomb, which with near misses could cause considerable damage to the unprotected parts of tanks, particularly the tracks. The General Officer Commanding believed that the bombing of the enemy armoured vehicles played an important part in bringing the column to a halt.

Enemy documents A.H.B.6.

Also in the afternoon, six Hurricanes of Nos. 1 and 2 S.A.A.F. Squadrons machine gunned motor transports and tanks between Sidi Omar and Abu Faris, six aircraft of No. 73 Squadron attacked enemy forces on the Trigh Capuzzo, and twelve aircraft of No. 274 Squadron machine gunned troops in the forward area. This formation encountered enemy aircraft and claimed one G.50, one Ju.87 and one Me.109 destroyed for the loss of three Hurricanes. Six aircraft of No. 33 Squadron in company with two of No. 229 Squadron dispatched to shoot up motor transport near Sidi Omar also encountered enemy fighters and bombers about to attack British troops in the same area, and shot three down for the loss of one Hurricane, before any bombs could be dropped. Fighter aircraft on protective patrols over the ground troops encountered enemy aircraft on three occasions and forced many of the enemy to jettison their bombs. Total claims by the air force were ten aircraft destroyed for the loss of nine Hurricanes. Enemy activity included successful bombing attacks on troops at Sidi Omar and Sidi Suleiman, during which air battles developed. Fourteen Hurricanes were claimed destroyed for the loss of one German aircraft.

Wavell's
Dispatch
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
27).

Despite the efforts of the air squadrons to intervene in the battle against the increasing number of enemy armoured forces, the British were forced to withdraw during the day. On the morning of 17 June the 22nd Guards Brigade in the right-hand column was still in position at Capuzzo, Musaid and Bir Waer, with the 4th Armoured Brigade protecting its left flank. Enemy detachments still held out in Sollum and at Halfaya and air reconnaissance discovered strong columns advancing south from Bardia and eastwards from south west of Capuzzo. To the south the 7th Armoured Division had been forced back from Sidi Omar towards Sidi Suleiman and was reduced to only twenty cruiser tanks. An enemy column had advanced east from Sidi Omar towards Halfaya and was threatening to cut off the troops in the forward area. Since the 7th Armoured Brigade had suffered heavy losses a plan was formed to attack this enemy

column from both the north and south by the 4th and 7th Armoured Brigades respectively. When this was attempted, however and the 4th Brigade began to move southwards a second enemy column further to the north attacked the left flank of the 22nd Guards Brigade, and the 4th Brigade was compelled to return and counter attack. A second attempt produced similar results, and in view of the weakness of the 7th Armoured Brigade, General Messervy, commanding the right hand column, decided to withdraw the troops from the forward area to prevent their being cut off by the advancing enemy column from the westward.

During 18 June the British ground forces effected a general withdrawal back to their original positions. The enemy ground forces appeared to have no interest in exploiting their counter-attack, and were content simply to salvage their armoured fighting vehicles and improve their defences. Enemy aircraft continued to be active in the forward area, however.

MEFOS, June
1941,
No.204 Group
& Sqdn.O.R.B.s

On the night of 17/18 June two Wellingtons of No.70 Squadron operating under No.204 Group gave support to the forward troops by attacking motor transport at Bardia while others attacked Benghazi, and Derna and Gazala airfields. During the following day the air force continued to support the ground forces with attacks on enemy motor transport and tanks. Between 0645 and 0930 hours nine Blenheims of No.14 Squadron, followed shortly by three Marylands of No.24 Squadron, S.A.A.F. attacked a concentration of enemy motor transport near Sidi Omar. The Marylands were unable to assess any damage from their own bombs but reported direct hits and near misses by the Blenheims. Later in the morning at 1120 hours six Blenheims of No.113 Squadron, escorted by five Hurricanes of No.2 S.A.A.F. Squadron bombed a similar target near the frontier south west of Sidi Omar and Bir Esc Shefersen but although bombs were seen to fall among vehicles no results were observed. Twice during the day fighter Blenheims dispatched to attack motor transport between Mekili and Bir el Gobi failed to find a suitable target.

M.E.F.O.S.,
June 1941.

Offensive operations were also carried out by the fighter squadrons. Between 1545 and 1800 hours twelve Hurricanes of No.73 Squadron escorted by six of No.274 Squadron ground- strafed enemy motor transport in the forward area and claimed some vehicles destroyed. Three Fleet Air Arm aircraft detailed to attack with the Hurricanes unfortunately failed to find the target and attacked Sidi Barrani and British motor transport. Of eight Tomahawks of No.250 Squadron which attacked motor transport between Tobruk, Capuzzo and El Adem four failed to return after an encounter with Me.109's on the return journey. Enemy records claim successful German and Italian air operations against British concentrations south of Halfaya and south of Sidi Omar during 18 June, but the ground forces made no attempt to follow up their counter attack after recapturing and assuming their original positions.

Causes of the Failure of Battleaxe

The British reverse in the Desert came as a heavy blow to the Allied cause. After the disasters in Greece and Crete hopes had been pinned on an improvement in the North

African situation, culminating perhaps in the relief of Tobruk, and to this end all the resources of the command had been thrown into the battle. Fortunately, however, although the Axis strength had been underestimated by the British before the battle, Rommel was either unable or unwilling to exploit his success and to make a further advance into Egypt.

CAS Folder
No. 734
Battleaxe.
(A.H.B./ID3/
734).

It appears that a number of causes contributed to the failure of Battleaxe. In his signal to the War Office, announcing the outcome of the battle, General Wavell attributed the reverse to three main factors. In the first place the enemy had disclosed much greater tank strength in the forward area than had been expected; it had been thought that he had about 100 medium tanks there, whereas on 17 June, after considerable fighting, by all accounts the enemy was still employing over 200 tanks. Further, the enemy was obviously ready for the attack and had prepared a counter-attack; this possibility had been anticipated and provided for, but in the event, the Western Desert Force simply had insufficient strength to resist the weight of enemy pressure. Lastly, the 7th Armoured Division was not as effective a fighting formation as it should have been, owing to its heterogenous composition; the combination of cruiser and infantry tanks was difficult to employ against the enemy's homogenous and mobile armoured force, since the latter could always avoid the infantry tanks and concentrate on the cruisers. The Division had had very little time to settle down since its formation, and was inexperienced in the use of the cruiser tanks, with the result that there were many casualties through mechanical failures, and the infantry tanks suffered heavy casualties from accurate enemy fire at their tracks. The heavy loss of tanks was thus attributed to the fact that neither operationally nor mechanically was the Division as efficient as it should have been.

The Air Force also suffered from weaknesses which, like those of the army, were the inevitable consequences of hurried reinforcement and inadequate training, aggravated in this case by the heavy fighter effort demanded during the evacuation from Crete. Four squadrons were new to the Desert and to fighting the Germans, but having had considerable experience in East Africa, were over-confident; other squadrons were weak in experienced crews through losses in Greece and Crete, and many pilots had not been through training in an Officers' Training Unit. In order to build up the fighter force, squadrons had had to be supplemented by additional half squadrons made up of pilots straight from the United Kingdom⁽¹⁾ who had had little or no opportunity of achieving co-ordination as fighter teams; finally, the succession of intensive operations in which the squadrons had been previously engaged had left scarcely any opportunity for them to train the large influx of new crews to become integral parts of the squadrons. This initial weakness was aggravated during the battle by the policy of employing the fighters in small patrols which were liable to be outnumbered by the enemy. The fighter squadrons suffered heavy casualties, twenty fighters, that, is to say twenty per cent of the initial serviceable strength, being destroyed and many others damaged.

(1) These pilots had taken part in the carrier-borne reinforcing operations, Rocket and Tracer in which Hurricanes were shipped to the Mediterranean on a carrier and then flown off to Malta and thence to Egypt.

Ibid

Reporting on air force activity, General Wavell stated that his troops had been effectively protected from enemy bombing, except on certain occasions when protection had been temporarily withdrawn, and that considerable casualties had been inflicted by air attack on the enemy forces in the rear of the fighting. He asserted however that the air force never had sufficient air superiority to afford entire protection to the ground forces, or to stop the enemy's movements, but he admitted that the British forces were not trained or organised for the type of air support enjoyed by the enemy, and that therefore they could not expect it. Referring to the messages received from the Chief of Imperial General Staff and the Chief of Air Staff on 17 June, he added that the fighting round Halfaya on the 16th and 17th had been too confused to make air support practicable.

At Air Ministry there was a strong reaction to the Commander-in-Chief's comments on air activity. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief was asked whether he had been consulted about the terms of General Wavell's signal, particularly with regard to the statement that the air force did not entirely protect the Army from air attack and did not stop the movement of the enemy. He was also asked whether the army had made a request for the bombing of the Axis troops at Halfaya, whether, if such a request had been made, Blenheims could have been employed for air support and within how short an interval, and by what means the Blenheims which on 17 June bombed enemy troops attempting to cut off the 7th Indian Division and the Guards Brigade, were directed on to the target.

Ibid

General Wavell's statement concerning air activity contained a two-fold criticism. It asserted that in its primary role of air warfare the air force failed to master the sky over the battlefield, sufficiently to keep the enemy air force from operating in the area, and to stop enemy ground movement; and it asserted that the latter failure was due to a lack of training and organisation in both Army and Air Force. In his reply to the Air Ministry and in a subsequent appreciation of the battle, Air Marshal Tedder put forward a very strong case for the performance of the air force in Battleaxe, while at the same time exposing the fundamental weaknesses of existing methods of close support in the field, weaknesses to be found in both army and air organisation.

Ibid

Referring to the charge of insufficient air superiority, Air Marshal Tedder maintained that the cover asked for by the Army had been provided by the air 'umbrella' and had proved effective, and that with only two exceptions in the extreme forward area, enemy attempts to attack the British troops from the air were intercepted and bombs were dropped unaimed. He pointed out that, in addition, in spite of numerical weakness, by their attacks on Axis lines of communication and airfields, medium bombers and long range fighters had led the enemy to retain a large proportion of his fighters in the rear of the battle area for protective purposes; there was no evidence of any enemy fighter sweeps, and apart from those retained for airfield defence, the Axis fighters were almost entirely employed as escorts to bombers. He maintained that superiority 'to afford entire protection' or 'to stop enemy movement' was unattainable unless the enemy air force was first completely eliminated. This view was strongly supported at Air Ministry, and was subsequently confirmed by

the Prime Minister with the approval of the Chiefs of Staff, in a directive telegram on air support.(1)

Ibid

The form of air protection referred to as the air 'umbrella', which the air force had been obliged to provide for the protection of the Army, received strong criticism from the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief for several reasons. In the first place, although it demanded a heavy air effort, it could not be infallible; thus the raids which had succeeded in piercing the 'umbrella' had achieved this by splitting into sections, some of which had inevitably escaped interception. Furthermore, the 'umbrella' involved the maintenance of many, and therefore probably weak, fighter patrols, which were consequently likely to be outnumbered in encounters with the enemy, and were therefore liable to suffer heavy casualties. Air Marshal Tedder considered that the recent experiences of the Army in Greece and Crete had justified the use of the 'umbrella' in Battleaxe for the period of the initial approach, but that, had similar cover been provided over a prolonged period, as would have been the case if the advance had proceeded according to plan, it would have gradually frittered away the fighter strength, allowed the enemy to take the offensive, and resulted in the loss of air superiority. His chief anxiety was that the success of this limited fighter cover should not lead to demands for similar cover over prolonged operations.

Ibid

Regarding the question of air support, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief confirmed that at Halfaya the forward army units made no request for air support, although if the necessary information had been available Blenheims could have carried out an attack within one and a half hours; in fact the Blenheim force, which was on call throughout the battle, was not called on at all at the initiative of the Army, the bombing attacks of the 17th being made as a result of air reconnaissance, which reported enemy columns well clear of the British formations, but threatening to encircle them.

Ibid

In the opinion of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, the main difficulty in providing air support was the almost complete lack of information from the Army. This was caused by the failure of both the arranged air-to-ground recognition system, brought about mainly by lack of response to aircraft signals by ground formations, and the Army signals communication system. The arrangements for challenge and recognition between air and ground forces by means of panels and signal cartridges had been satisfactory for headquarters of higher formations, but not for indicating the position of forward mobile units, and air challenge signals to ground units had frequently been unanswered. Coupled with this, the failure of the wireless communications between forward troops and their headquarters had meant a serious lack of information at headquarters regarding the disposition of formations so that it was frequently impossible for Army Headquarters to give even a conservative bombline, although periodic reports were received from the Wireless Observer Unit posts. In this way opportunities for air support had undoubtedly been lost, particularly on 17 June, when enemy mobile units attacked Indian infantry retreating on Buq Buq. The only traceable instance of direct support called for was the Cannon-Hurricane attack on the anti-tank battery at Halfaya on 14 June.

(1) See page 176 below.

It was possible that the breakdown of communications might have been due to a lack of suitable equipment, but it was far more likely that lack of training was the primary cause, and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief considered that joint training, particularly between squadrons and mobile army units was essential to ensure efficient communications and mutual recognition.

'G' Staff
Diary Western
Desert Force.

The lack of information from Army sources might have been compensated for by more extensive tactical reconnaissance, but the weakness of the only available Tactical Reconnaissance squadron, and the fact that it had suffered casualties, had precluded this.⁽¹⁾ Criticism of tactical reconnaissance in the battle came from the commander of the 7th Armoured Division, who emphasised the necessity for better and more direct communication between the pilots and Divisional Headquarters. The existing system of signalling information from Force Headquarters had proved useless in most cases since it was scarcely ever received in time to be of use to the unit concerned. This criticism however would appear to be directed against the system of transmitting reconnaissance reports rather than against the actual execution of the reconnaissance patrols.

A further criticism regarding Army/Air Co-operation was made by the General Officer Commanding Western Desert Force, General Beresford-Pierce, who considered that a grave draw-back had been the siting of his headquarters and Headquarters No.204 Group some eighty miles apart, at Sidi Barrani and Maaten Bagush respectively. In his view, lack of communications, and the fact that all aircraft operated from the area east of Matruh, except the fighters refuelling at Sidi Barrani, made close support, and quick response to calls for fighter protection impossible. The latter part of this criticism could hardly have sprung from actual operational experience since the Army had failed to make requests for air support, but the disadvantages of widely separated Army and Air Headquarters were recognised, and in future operations it became the practice to locate Army and Air Headquarters together in a joint Battle Headquarters where this was possible. However circumstances in which the forward airfields were some distance from the battle area, such as those obtaining in Battleaxe, were unfavourable to such an arrangement since either the Army Commander had to remain in the rear of his forward units, or the Air Commander had to proceed in advance of his formations. In this situation, if airfields were available in the forward area, it was the task of the army to make them sufficiently secure from ground attack for aircraft to operate from them without risk of being unexpectedly overrun. In the Battleaxe period the ground situation was not considered sufficiently secure to make use of Sidi Barrani except as an advance refuelling base operated by highly mobile units.

Squadron
O.R.B.

-
- (1) Two aircraft and one pilot were lost on 15 June. There were no other casualties, but the squadron was short of pilots from the beginning of the operation until the 17th, when six new pilots arrived. These, however, were fighter pilots and could only carry out simple reconnaissance tasks.

Conclusions

It would appear from this Army and Air Force evidence, that the failure of Battleaxe was primarily the result of the numerical, operational and mechanical inferiority of the British armour, compared with that of the enemy, and that the results of this were aggravated by the fact that, through faulty organisation the available air units were not fully employed in support of the army. In addition the air force was suffering from the effects of its exhausting operations in Crete, and from other weaknesses, so that it is doubtful how long the strain of intensive operations could have been endured had the Army been more successful and the battle prolonged.

It should also be borne in mind that this was the first pitched battle fought against the Germans in the Desert, and that the contrast between their fighting powers and those of the Italians was considerable. This may well explain the emphasis on air support, which Battleaxe brought about. Henceforth the Army could not enjoy the advantages of fighting an enemy temperamentally less suited to war; on the contrary it needed to exert its full powers against the German enemy, and to make use, wherever possible of co-operative activity by the Air Force.

Two important developments resulted from the lessons learned through the failure of Battleaxe. In the first place the need for an effective joint Army/Air system for air support was recognised as a major requirement by both the Army and the Air Force, and steps were immediately taken to establish such a system in readiness for the next offensive. Joint training exercises were held during the summer to experiment in air support methods, and in September a special conference was held in Cairo, which led to the issuing of the Middle East (Army and Air Force) Directive on Air Support. This laid down the main principles of air support and defined, in detail, the new organisation, with instructions on the procedure to be employed.⁽¹⁾ Although these initial arrangements later underwent many modifications as a result of further experience, it was on these beginnings that Air Support, as practised throughout the remainder of the war, was founded.

The second important, though less direct outcome of Battleaxe was the definition of the relationship between the Army and Air Commanders in planning and carrying out a battle. This definition, laid down by the Prime Minister with the approval of the Chiefs of Staffs in two telegrams⁽²⁾ to the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, confirmed the independence of the Air Force, in opposition to Army demands for greater control of air operations. Gone was the situation in which an air commander might be obliged to supply a certain type of air operation, as for example the air 'umbrella' against his better judgment. The necessity for air force compliance with the general army plan in a theatre of war was acknowledged, but it was emphasised that once the army commander had made known his requirements for a forthcoming battle, it was for the air commander to use his force in accordance with these requirements, in the most effective manner. In short, choice of method rested with the air force, in direct contrast, incidentally, to the German system, in which the air commander had frequently to employ his air force against unsuitable targets, in accordance with the demands of the Army commander.

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- (1) Details on the development of Air Support may be found in the A.H.B. Monograph: Air Support in the Second World War,
 (2) For further details regarding these telegrams and their results, see the A.H.B. Narrative, The Middle East Campaigns, Volume II, Part II.

ANNEX

AIRCRAFT REINFORCEMENTS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

JUNE 1940 - JUNE 1941

On the outbreak of war with Italy on 10 June 1940, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, Air Marshal Longmore, was responsible for the command of all air units in Egypt, Sudan, Palestine and Trans-Jordan, East Africa, Aden and Somaliland, Iraq and the Mediterranean. In July⁽¹⁾ the total strength of the operational aircraft under his command, excluding units of the South African Air Force in Kenya, was approximately as follows:-

D.W.O. Folder
A.H.B./IIJ1/
17(1)

<u>Fighters</u> (Gladiators, Gauntlets, Hurricanes)	160
<u>Army Co-operation</u> (Lysanders)	45
<u>Medium Bombers</u> (Blenheim I's and IV's, Harts, Vincents)	260
<u>Heavy or Transport Bombers</u> (Bombays, Valentias and G.R. Wellingtons)	35
<u>Flying Boats</u> (Sunderlands)	10
	510

From these aircraft the following operational force was maintained:-

<u>Type of Squadron</u>	<u>No. of Squadrons</u>	<u>Type of Aircraft</u>	<u>Total I.E.</u>
<u>Fighters</u>	4	Gladiator	72
<u>Army Co-op</u>	2	Lysander	32
<u>Medium Bombers</u>	10	Blenheim	102
	3	Wellesley	48
<u>Heavy or Transport Bombers</u>	1	Bombay	12
	1	Valentia	12
<u>Flying Boats</u>	2	Sunderland	9
			287

There was also a number of miscellaneous flights and other units.

Nearly all the aircraft in the command were obsolete or obsolescent, the exceptions being the Sunderlands, Wellingtons Blenheim IV's and Hurricanes which amounted to only 15 aircraft in all. This position was the inescapable result of the general shortage of modern aircraft at the outbreak of war with Germany, and the subsequent demands for aircraft in France and the United Kingdom which absorbed the output of the factories in the intervening period.

On the entry of Italy into the war a few Blenheims and Hurricanes had been flown out to Middle East via France as an emergency measure, but with the French collapse this route was closed. On 21 June the A.O.C.-in-C. asked the Air Ministry to consider reinforcing the Middle East with modern aircraft for offensive action against the Italians. His request was

A.M. Files
S.5461 A.O.C.-
in-C./A.M.21/6

(1) The first date for which figures are available.

supported by the Deputy Director of War Organisation at Air Ministry and by the British Ambassador to Egypt, and, on 3 July at a meeting of the Equipment and Reinforcement Policy Committee it was decided to reinforce the Middle East as follows:-

A.H.B./VB/14,
Minutes of 7th
Meeting.

12 Blenheim IV's	} To be sent at once	12 Blenheim IV's	} To be sent monthly thereafter
12 Lysanders		12 Hurricanes	
12 Hurricanes		6 Lysanders	

A.M. File
S.5461

In addition, approximately 75 Glen Martins, off French/U.S.A. orders, were to be despatched between October 1940 and February 1941. To strengthen the South African Air Force, 24 Hurricanes were to be sent to that country in the following three months and approximately 75 Glen Martins in due course. The A.O.C.-in-C. was not satisfied with this quota, claiming that he was losing 10 Blenheims and 11 Wellesleys per three weeks even with restricted operations. A further difficulty was that re-inforcement of spares and other equipment was delayed by shipping arrangements, which he described as chaotic. Later he signalled that he could not counter expected attacks with his small force, and he thought that Whitehall had underrated the Italians. He was again supported by the ambassador, and at Air Ministry, by the Director of Overseas Operations, and on 25 July the Expansion and Re-equipment Committee agreed:-

A.H.B./VB/14,
Minutes of 8th
Meeting

- (a) To send 24 Hurricanes as soon as possible, and to raise the monthly quota from 12 to 18 to maintain the Hurricane squadrons. The re-equipment of the remaining fighter squadrons, and subsequent expansion was to be met by American aircraft.
- (b) To send 36 Blenheim IV's at once and to raise the monthly quota from 12 to 36. The aim was to re-equip the Blenheim squadrons with Blenheim IV's. The remaining medium bomber squadrons were to be re-equipped eventually with American bombers.
- (c) To send out 6 Wellingtons monthly to equip the bomber/transport squadrons.

The quota of Lysanders remained at 6 per month, but the A.O.C.-in-C. had already complained that these aircraft had too short a range for reconnaissance.

The reinforcement policy behind these decisions was to re-equip the squadrons already in the Middle East with modern aircraft, in preference to forming new squadrons which would require extra personnel. The supply of personnel was at this time dependent on the Empire training scheme which was not expected to produce any results until the early months of 1941. The grounds for reinforcing the Middle East in the face of heavy requirements at home were:-

- (a) There was no firm indication that the invasion of the United Kingdom was imminent.
- (b) German oil shortages seemed likely to force a move in the near future to try to open the Eastern Mediterranean and thus obtain delivery of oil from the Black Sea.

To help solve the problem of shipping aircraft to the Middle East, an air reinforcement route was opened between Takoradi on the west coast of Africa, across the continent to

Egypt. The plan was to ship crated aircraft to Takoradi where they would be erected and flown to Egypt by stages.⁽¹⁾ By August work on the route was going ahead and it was thought that it would be in use by the end of the month.

C.O.S.(40)
623(J.P.) and
D.Ops.O/S.
Folder (A.H.B./
IIJ1/243/9(A))

The delivery of aircraft was only part of the supply problem. Personnel, stores, spare parts, maintenance tools and other unit equipment had to be sent out, chiefly by sea, and air transport had to be found for returning ferry pilots from Egypt to Takoradi or the United Kingdom. The introduction of new types into the Middle East (at this stage the Hurricanes and Wellingtons) called for a complete new range of tools, and at first the number of these aircraft which could be usefully employed was determined by the number of tool sets available.

By the end of August the Middle East reinforcement programme had been started and the position was as follows:-

D.Ops.O/S
Folder (A.H.B./
IIJ1/243/9(A)).

Hurricanes. 72 already dispatched from the United Kingdom of which none had yet arrived, although a special consignment of 12 reached Malta early in August; these formed a half squadron for the defence of the island.
Blenheims. 84 already dispatched or awaiting dispatch by sea or air, of which 23 had reached Egypt and one was being repaired at Malta.
Wellingtons. 12 had been allocated of which six had arrived and six were due in late September.

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L./2
A.H.B./IIJ1/183/
138(a), Encl.
89(a)).

At the beginning of September, although satisfied that the existing programme was going ahead smoothly, the A.O.C.-in-C. feared that with no provision of aircraft for new squadrons, the strength of his force would remain much the same for the next six months. This was disquieting since it seemed likely that the Italians would attack from Libya in the autumn, and according to British calculations, the British force in the Western Desert was already outnumbered by four to one in all types. In view of this threat the A.O.C.-in-C. sent No.45 Squadron (Blenheims) from Egypt to reinforce the Wellesley squadrons in the Sudan, and ordered No.84 Squadron (Blenheims) to move from Iraq to the Western Desert at the end of the month.

D.O.O.
E.R.P. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
243/10).

On 5 September the first blow to the reinforcement programme occurred when the air requirements of the Battle of Britain precluded the further dispatch of Hurricanes to the Middle East for the time being. At this stage no further Hurricanes had been dispatched in addition to the 72 already mentioned. Meanwhile, however, the E.R.P. Committee decided to allocate to the Middle East 227 Mohawks due to arrive in consignments from the U.S.A. by February, and 65 Marylands not yet allotted. Both types were to be sent to the Middle East via Takoradi as they became available.

In the Western Desert, the urgency of the air situation was intensified when an Italian offensive commenced on 9 September and quickly achieved greater success than the British had anticipated. It was supported by an air force estimated at over 600 aircraft, although, according to

(1) For further details of the Takoradi route see the A.H.B. narrative, The Middle East Campaigns, Volume X, The West African Air Reinforcement Route.

A.H.B./ILJ1/17
(1) and A.H.B./
ILJ1/183/138(a)
Encls. 90(a)
and 95(a).

Italian Orders of Battle for June and December it was probably only about 300 strong; against this force the British could operate about 180 First Line aircraft in Egypt and the Desert. In reply to a report from the A.O.C.-in-C. for the recommencement of Hurricane shipments, and for additional reinforcements, particularly maintenance staff, the Chief of the Air Staff could only reply that more Hurricanes would be sent out as soon as the situation at home permitted. He had already arranged that over 2,000 maintenance personnel were to leave the United Kingdom as soon as shipping could be arranged.

By the end of the month a few aircraft reinforcements had reached the Middle East:-

<u>Hurricanes</u>	<u>Blenheims</u>	<u>Wellingtons</u>
8 via Takoradi	50	12
24 via Cape.		

During the month the A.O.C. had already created four fighter squadrons of 16 I.E. out of his original three squadrons of 21 I.E. in the Desert, and the arrival of the Hurricanes enabled him to equip one of these and one flight of another with this type. The Wellingtons were allotted to No. 70 Bomber/Transport Squadron, and No. 113 Squadron (Blenheim I's) was re-equipped with Blenheim IV, while No. 30 Squadron was partly equipped with Blenheim fighters. Outside Egypt, the I.E. of No. 203 (Blenheim IV) Squadron at Khormaksar (Aden) was increased from 6 to 12, and No. 14 (Wellesley) Squadron in the Sudan was re-equipped with Blenheim I's.

A.H.B./ILJ1/183/
138(B) and
A.H.B./ILJ1/183/
287(A).

In October, for the first time, Middle East reinforcement claims were given priority. The position in Egypt was that the A.O.C.-in-C. had only five fighter squadrons of which one Blenheim and one Hurricane were needed for the defence of Alexandria, leaving one Hurricane and two Gladiator Squadrons to face the Italian force then estimated at some 700 aircraft. The minimum requirement was two more fighter squadrons, but although Wellingtons and Blenheim IV's as well as Hurricanes were coming through over long routes, the process was slow, and involved a steady wastage of over ten per cent.

C.O.S.(40)817
& Amex A to
E.R.P. 55
(A.H.B./VB/14/1)

At Whitehall it was agreed that the present policy of reinforcement was inadequate. Not only was the air force heavily outnumbered in Egypt and the Sudan, but it was calculated that some 378 I.E. aircraft, Gladiators, Blenheim I's, Wellesleys, Vincents, Lysanders and various other types were obsolescent or unsuitable types which ought to be replaced by June 1941. Additional urgency was provided by the possibility of Axis attacks on Greece or Turkey. The Prime Minister said that it was now necessary to choose between the rival claims of home defence and Middle East, and it was decided:-

C.O.S.(40) 827

(a) To expedite the re-equipment of existing squadrons with modern aircraft.

(b) To speed up the delivery of unit ground equipment direct from the United States.

(c) To expand the first line strength of existing squadrons.

This first sign of expansion in the Middle East Command was a landmark in the reinforcement programme. As a first

D.O.O. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
243/9(A))

step the I.E. of existing bomber squadrons (2 heavy and 12⁽¹⁾ medium) was increased from 12 to 16 aircraft. It was estimated that with a similar expansion in the three S.A.A.F. bomber squadrons in the Middle East this would mean a first line increase of 68 bombers. The two Sunderland squadrons were to be increased to six I.E. and Malta's half squadron of Hurricanes to a full squadron of 16 I.E. To achieve these ends the delivery quotas were raised as follows:-

Wellingtons 10 more in addition to 13 already approved to re-equip the two heavy bomber squadrons at 12 I.E. with some reserves.

Blenheim IV Monthly quota raised from 36 to 48 from October inclusive.

Hurricanes Monthly quota raised from 18 to 24 from October inclusive.

Mohawks and Glen Martins It had already been decided to send 65 Glen Martins in the United Kingdom to Middle East (via Takoradi) and South Africa as soon as possible in the ratio of 2 as to 1. A further 150 on order in the U.S.A. were to be dispatched in the same ratio with the proviso that South Africa was to receive a total of 75, the balance being sent to Middle East when this had been completed. Of the 227 Mohawks allocated to Middle East in September it was hoped to send out 25 in October⁽²⁾

This programme was bound to put an additional strain on the Takoradi route, quotas for which were estimated as follows:-

Ibid.

	<u>October</u>	<u>November</u>	<u>December</u>
Blenheims	36 (to be increased to 48 if possible)	48	48
Hurricanes	24	24	24
Mohawks	25	60	60
Lysanders	12	nil (Lysanders would in future go via the Cape)	nil
Fulmars	13	nil	nil
Glen Martins	nil	nil	13 (and 13 per month thence- forth)

At the end of the month the A.O.C.-in-C. was given permission to raise two complete new fighter squadrons, in

A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/196(a)

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- (1) Presumably the 10 Blenheim and 2 Wellesley squadrons in Egypt and Sudan.
- (2) The first 18 Mohawks arrived at Takoradi in December, but it was subsequently decided that this type was not good enough for operations against the Axis, and the Mohawks were sent to S. Africa and India to be used for training.

Ibid

addition to two already being built up from a flight basis, and Air Ministry promised to increase the flow of aircraft personnel and equipment. In fact, however, although the personnel and equipment were sent to Egypt by sea no extra Hurricanes were sent and arrivals remained behind schedule.

Sqdn O.R.Bs
A.M. Orders of
Battle.

During October 14 Hurricanes, 26 Blenheims and 11 Wellingtons arrived in the Middle East, bringing the total arrival figures to 46, 76 and 23 respectively. At this stage two of the five fighter squadrons in Egypt were completely equipped with Hurricanes, a flight of four was being provided for No.208 A.C. Squadron and an additional A.C. Squadron, No.3 R.A.A.F. which had been formed in September was equipped with Gladiators. A flight of No.6 A.C. Squadron from Palestine had also arrived in Egypt. There were five Blenheim squadrons in Egypt, and one Wellington squadron, No. 70, previously equipped with Bombays.

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L./9
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/287(A)).

At the beginning of November, although reinforcement plans were going ahead, the air situation in the Middle East was far from satisfactory. The time lag between the date of decision to dispatch reinforcement aircraft and the date on which the aircraft became operationally effective in the Middle East was considerable. In addition dispatches from the United Kingdom were behind schedule, and even when aircraft arrived up to schedule, the later arrival of equipment and personnel by sea, delayed them operating. The situation was further aggravated by the Italian invasion of Greece on 28 October. It seemed politically essential to give the Greeks military aid, and on 31 October the A.O.C.-in-C. sent No.30 Squadron (of mixed bomber and fighter Blenheims) from the Delta to Greece, an action which won the swift approval of the Prime Minister. This deprived the defence of the Delta and Suez areas of half its fighter defence, leaving only one squadron of Hurricanes.

Hist.(B)1
Series Oct.

In view of the smallness of his own air force the A.O.C.-in-C. was reluctant to send more than one squadron to Greece, and the Commanders-in-Chief were agreed that the defence of Egypt was more vital than the war in Greece. However on 4 November, the Chiefs of Staff instructed the A.O.C.-in-C. to send to Greece as soon as airfields were ready a further two Blenheim squadrons, and one Gladiator squadron to be followed by a second as soon as Hurricane reinforcements permitted. To replace these withdrawals they promised to send out 32 Wellingtons via Malta in addition to the agreed quota of 12,(1) and to expedite the arrival of Hurricane reinforcements by sending 34 to Takoradi on the aircraft carrier Furious. Ground crews for two Wellington squadrons (Nos. 37 and 38) and one Hurricane squadron (No.73) were shipped to Egypt via the Mediterranean in November, arriving early in December. Including 17 Wellingtons at Malta at the end of the month, a total of 50 Wellingtons reached Middle East in November.

Ibid

Squadron
O.R.Bs

The Greek commitment imposed a heavy burden on the Middle East air forces, for hard fighting was in progress in the Desert and East Africa, engrossing the forces in Egypt, Sudan and East Africa. In November the command held the following operational squadrons:-

A.M. File
S.6700

- (1) It was decided to send 12 Wellingtons to Malta to make four offensive sorties each against Italian targets before continuing the journey to Middle East.

Egypt/Desert	I.E.	Sudan	I.E.	Aden	I.E.	Malta	I.E.
2½ Hurricane	36	1 Gladiator	14	1 Gladiator	16	1 Hurricane	16
2½ Gladiator	40	2 Wellesley	24	4 Blenheim	43	1 Wellington	12
3½ Blenheim	44	2 Blenheim	24		59	½ Maryland	6
1 Bombay	12	½ Vincent	12	Iraq	I.E.	1½ Sunderland	7
1 Wellington	12	1 Various	12	1 Vincent	12		41
1½ Lysander	20		80			Kenya	
½ Sunderland	3	Greece	I.E.	Palestine	I.E.	1 Gladiator	9
	167	1½ Blenheim	16	3 Lysander	8	3 Various	36
							45

C.A.S.
Folder
(A.H.B./ID3/58)

D.O.O. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
243/9(A)).

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L./9

D.W.O. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
17(1)).

During the month the Prime Minister complained that there were nearly 1,600 aircraft in the Middle East Command, excluding East Africa, while the total I.E. was barely 400, and asked why a greater proportion of operationally fit aircraft was not available. As the C.A.S. explained, these figures could not be taken without analysis. For example not all the serviceable aircraft could be placed in the front line. It was practicable to leave a reserve in hand, and in any case squadrons could not maintain many aircraft above their establishment. In fact, of the 1,000 aircraft some 250 were not operational types - that is, they were only useful for police duties, training etc. Some 730 operational types remained, of which about 130 were unserviceable. Of the 600 serviceable some 400 furnished the I.E. of the 30 squadrons in the Middle East. The remaining 200 might be termed reserves, and the C.A.S. did not think a reserve of 50 per-cent of the I.E. was excessive, but in any case they were nearly all obsolete or obsolescent, and many had probably been thrown up by the re-equipment of squadrons.⁽¹⁾ In addition some of them had been in the Middle East for some time. For example in October the A.O.C.-in-C. was finding difficulty in maintaining his existing Gladiator formations owing not only to wastage but to deterioration, as some of these aircraft had been in the open for two years. The Prime Minister accepted the C.A.S. and A.O.C.'s explanations for the time-being, but he was to raise the subject again later.

The A.O.C.-in-C's chief problem was the shortage of fighters. On 19 November the second Gladiator consignment left for Greece, leaving only two fighter squadrons in Egypt, both Hurricane. Furthermore only eight Hurricane reinforcing aircraft had arrived by the end of the month, bringing the total Hurricane arrivals to 52, excluding Malta. Here there were still 12 Hurricanes on strength, but of a further 12 sent out during the month to bring the flight up to a full squadron 8 had been lost en route. Thus the A.O.C.-in-C. could not draw on Malta for Hurricanes. The fighter situation was the more serious in view of the impending British offensive in the

(1) The so-called reserve aircraft included 42 Blenheims, 22 Wellesleys, 37 Lysanders, 37 Gladiators, 13 Gauntlets and 42 Harts and Vincents, nearly 200 aircraft, and all obsolete or obsolescent. These about equalled in number the number of modern types, Wellingtons, Blenheim IV's and Hurricanes which had reached Middle East by the end of November.

Desert (Operation Compass) which had already been postponed once, because of the Greek commitment, and which was due to begin on 9 December. Although the C.A.S. assured the A.O.C.-in-C. that 34 Hurricanes were en route via Takoradi, and calculated that 80 or 90 should be available for Compass, there could be no certainty that these would arrive in time.

To strengthen his force for the offensive, the A.O.C.-in-C. resorted to the expedient of reducing operations in other theatres and transferring to Egypt the air units thus relieved. In this way the two Blenheim Squadrons remaining in Egypt after the removal of three to Greece, were augmented by three squadron detachments from Aden and the Sudan. The two Hurricane squadrons were supported by the remainder of No. 112 Squadron which had been providing Gladiators for Greece, and by No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron (Army Co-operation) whose Gladiators were employed in a fighter role for the battle. The defence of the Delta was left to a detachment of No. 73 Squadron which began to arrive in Egypt on 8 December. It was this squadron's aircraft which, with other Hurricanes, was transported to Takoradi on the carrier Furious, in November.

During December aircraft reinforcements showed some improvement, but they were offset to a considerable extent by the increased wastage resulting from operational activity, especially in the Desert and Greece, and by extraordinary commitments, including the supply of Gladiators to the Greek Air Force. The fighter force was augmented by No. 73 Squadron which became available for operations at the end of the month, but casualties to Gladiators, resulting from the enemy's incendiary ammunition, required a greater replacement of fighters than was available. In mid-November, when the total I.E. of the Gladiator Squadrons had been 74 aircraft, there had been a serviceable reserve of 30 aircraft. By the end of December there were only 45 Gladiators serviceable in Egypt, and 17 in Greece, to supply five squadrons and one or two flights. The reserve had in fact disappeared, and Gauntlets were being employed to make good the shortage of Gladiators. As a result No. 112 Squadron was withdrawn from the battle to rearm with Hurricanes as these became available.

It was becoming clear that the existing monthly quota of Hurricanes promised was insufficient to keep pace with requirements for Libya, Greece and the Sudan. In anticipation of this the C.A.S. had made arrangements by 12 December for the Furious to proceed to Takoradi with a second consignment, of 40 Hurricanes and pilots as soon as she had returned from her first trip. These Hurricanes were scheduled to arrive in Middle East in mid-January. Such measures, while expediting the arrival of Hurricanes did not increase the flow, which, from the Middle East point of view was already in arrears to the extent of 80 aircraft, not counting the December quota. The position was that at the end of December there were three Hurricane squadrons and one flight, requiring a total I.E. of 52 Hurricanes. Eighty-seven Hurricanes had arrived in the Middle East (excluding Malta), of which about six had been lost, leaving a margin of some thirty aircraft in reserve, excluding badly damaged aircraft withdrawn from the line.

The Blenheim situation was little better than the fighter. For the three Blenheim IV squadrons with a total I.E. of 36, there were 19 aircraft in reserve of which six were serviceable on 27 December. For the seven Blenheim I squadrons with a total I.E. of 84, only 77 aircraft were serviceable, all of which

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L./4
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/283).

D.W.O. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
17(1)).

H.Q., R.A.F.M.E.
& Sqdn. O.R.Bs.
& Apps.

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L/9
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/287(B)).

D.W.O. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/4
17(1)) & D.O.O.
Folder (A.H.B./
IIJ1/243/10).

C.A.S. Folder
6791 (A.H.B./
ID3/679(A)).

A.O.C. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
D.O./A.M.L./9
183/287(B)).

had been in Middle East since before September 1939. A typical instance of the prevailing shortage was that two of the squadrons had only nine aircraft between them. In addition the Wellesley squadrons had been reduced from 15 to 10 I.E. A total of 109 Blenheims had arrived in Egypt by the end of the month, but wastage had been heavy, 31 aircraft being destroyed since 11 November, as well as others damaged. The chances of re-equipping the Blenheim I and Wellesley squadrons with Blenheim IV's and Glen Martins seemed remote. The Blenheim programme was in arrears by 100 aircraft, not counting the December quota of 48, but including 27 arrivals, and the Glen Martins were still undergoing modifications and had not begun to arrive except for a few at Malta.

The Wellington position was better. Arrivals had risen to 33 in November, and there were 17 at Malta due to proceed to Egypt shortly, and these included the aircraft of Nos. 37 and 38 Squadrons, whose non-flying members had arrived by sea. These squadrons had commenced operations early in the month. There were now four Wellington squadrons in the Middle East, including No. 70 Squadron and No. 148 Squadron(1) which was formed at Malta during the month.

D.O.O. Folder
A.H.B./IIJ1/243/
10

On 14 December the question of further expansion in the Middle East was raised at the 18th meeting of the Expansion and Re-equipment Committee, but as the existing programme was already far in arrears, it was agreed that the new proposals, involving an extra 20 heavy bombers, 144 medium bombers, and 144 fighters, should be regarded as an aim to be achieved as soon as practicable. Immediate plans to improve the situation included Furious' second trip to Takoradi.

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L./2
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/138(C)).

At the beginning of January, the A.O.C.-in-C's apprehension increased concerning the 'appalling air weakness' in relation to air commitments and enemy strength. He told the C.A.S. that he needed all the Hurricanes he could get, and that the recent rate of Wellington arrivals fell short of the programme outlined. In reply the C.A.A. calculated that 79 Hurricanes should have arrived by the end of January, and that the programme was only 11 aircraft in arrears. He also maintained that the Wellington programme was only nine aircraft in arrears.

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L./2
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/138(C))
and
S. Of S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID/2/
245).

It is impossible to discover precisely how the C.A.S. reached this conclusion regarding the Hurricanes. From the Middle East point of view, out of a total allotment of 196 Hurricanes only 87 had arrived by the end of December, leaving a deficit of 109 Hurricane aircraft in early January, not counting the January quota of 30. According to Air Ministry calculations, to cancel this deficit 114 aircraft were en route, of which 79 were expected to arrive by the end of January, but this was an optimistic estimate as the arrival figure for January was 50 Hurricanes. Although it is impossible to work out precisely why the actual figures did not tally, these contrasting estimates show clearly the disparity in Air Ministry and Middle East calculation, caused largely by the time-lag between dispatch and arrivals. Added to this, at the Air Ministry end of the route shortage of shipping space and casualties to ships en route delayed

(1) This squadron had a peculiar establishment. It had air and ground crews but no permanent aircraft. The policy was that reinforcing aircraft en route to Middle East should operate with No. 148 Squadron for a certain number of sorties, against targets in Greece, Sicily, etc., before proceeding to Egypt.

the despatch of aircraft to Takoradi, while at the Middle East end delays at Takoradi or en route between Takoradi and Egypt, and maintenance and repairs on arrival to make good the wear and tear of the journey, delayed the arrival of aircraft in the operational line.

D.Ops.O/S
Folder (A.H.B./
IIJ15/1, Pt.1)

In such circumstances, a close watch was kept on Takoradi, in case defects in the organisation were causing undue delay in the onward despatch of aircraft. Early in December there were 44 aircraft of all types at Takoradi of which 25 were being erected and 19 were awaiting erection. The C.A.S. did not consider this an alarming concentration.

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L./2
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/138(G)).

As the Hurricane reinforcements arrived, the A.O.C.-in-C. planned to use them to replace the Gladiators in Egypt, and to send the latter to Greece as reserves for maintaining No.80 Squadron, and to equip No.112 Squadron which, contrary to his original plan, was not being re-equipped with Hurricanes. Hurricanes were also being supplied to No.1 S.A.A.F. Squadron in the Sudan. At this time the employment of Hurricanes in Greece was restricted by water-logged airfields and by the limited size of some of the airfields. On 10 January however the C.O.S. instructed the A.O.C.-in-C. to prepare to send three Hurricane and two Blenheim IV squadrons to Greece as soon as Tobruk had been captured, thus depriving the air units in the desert of all three Hurricane squadrons and both Blenheim IV squadrons as well as a Blenheim I squadron. The A.O.C.-in-C.'s protests were overruled, but as the scope of the British advance in the Desert was extended to include the capture of Benghazi, and the reduction of the air units was postponed until after that event, which took place on 6 February.

Cabinet Hist.
Series (B)1.
(76)&(79)

On 30 January, the A.O.C. -in-C. was 'astounded' to be told to prepare to send 10 to 15 squadrons to Turkey. Actual dispatch of squadrons was to depend on a stabilised situation in Libya, but was to take priority over operations in East Africa, Abyssinia, Sicily and Greece. The A.O.C. pointed out that present arrivals hardly kept pace with casualties in Libya, Sudan, Greece and Malta, that four fighter squadrons were still unformed, that three medium bomber squadrons were still equipped with Wellesleys, Lysanders and Vincents, and that No.39 Squadron had no aircraft and was awaiting the arrival of Glen Martins. The C.A.S. replied that in the opinion of the War Cabinet aid to Turkey was of greater importance than anything, except Malta and Mandibles (proposed plans for the occupation of the Dodecanese.)

A.M. File
S.5737

During January the air situation improved with the arrival in Egypt of 23 Blenheims, 50 Hurricanes and 3 Wellingtons, but there was anxiety over the Wellington shortage, as the squadrons were not yet up to 16 I.E. and were without reserves. Delivery of the full quota, which, by the end of January, was nineteen aircraft in arrears not counting the January quota, was urgently required to meet prospective commitments for bombers operating from Greece. Delivery had been retarded by two crashes and by weather, and there was uncertainty whether it would be possible to continue using Malta as a staging-post now that the Luftwaffe had commenced large scale operations against the island.

Ibid (60) &
(61)

The situation regarding American aircraft still showed no sign of advancement. The Glen Martins which were originally scheduled to arrive between October and February were held up by lack of equipment and shipping space, the delivery of 300

Tomahawks recently promised by the U.S.A. had not yet begun, and the 200 Mohawks, had developed an engine defect. The A.O.C.-in-C. pressed for the delivery of Hurricanes at the maximum rate to fill the gap in the American fighter programme.

A.O.C. Folder
D.O./A.M.L./2
(A.H.B./ILJ1/
183/138(D)).

The new demands on the Middle East Air Force came at a time of intensive activity, in Libya, Greece, Malta and East Africa, when every available aircraft was being fully employed. There was only one squadron with a defensive role, No.33, which was defending Alexandria and the Suez Canal, where German long-range mine-laying aircraft had already sunk three ships, and temporarily blocked the canal. The supply situation was none too hopeful; Blenheim arrivals were far behind schedule, Mohawks were held up with defects, and Tomahawks an unknown quantity. If Turkey were to accept the Prime Minister's offer at an early date it was obvious that the A.O.C.-in-C. would have the utmost difficulty in fulfilling the obligation it laid upon him.

Early in February, the successful British advance across the Desert and the defeat of a considerable portion of the Italian Army at Beda Fomm, together with the capture of the port of Benghazi, marked the end of the first British offensive in the Desert. Operations in the Balkans were then favoured at the expense of continuing the desert advance to Tripoli, and the A.O.C.-in-C. began to withdraw his squadrons from the desert, in preparation for sending further reinforcements to the Balkans. He had worked out a programme of progressive reinforcement for Greece as it was impossible to send out ten squadrons at once, and the first squadrons to go to the Delta for rest and refit were Nos. 45 and 113 (Blenheims) and No.73 (Hurricanes). These were followed shortly by No.208 A.C. Squadron which was replaced by No.6 A.C. Squadron part of which was already in the Desert. Nos.33 and 73 Squadrons were also marked down for Greece. There remained in the desert besides No.6 Squadron, No.3 R.A.A.F. which, re-equipped with Hurricanes, became a fighter squadron, No.73 Squadron (whose departure for Greece was postponed, and finally cancelled because of the commencement of German air activity in Libya) and No.55 Squadron. Of the remaining squadrons bound for Greece, Nos.33 and 112 Squadrons arrived there in February, and in addition No.80 Squadron already in Greece, received its first Hurricanes during the month. Nos.113 and 208 Squadrons arrived in April and No.45 Squadron never reached Greece, as it had not yet embarked when the Axis advance in the Desert at the end of March necessitated its return to the Libyan front.

Sqdn. O.R.B.s

S. of S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID/2/
245)

On 17 February, the Prime Minister remarked to the C.A.S. that it was very difficult to reconcile the aircraft strength returns with the great quantities of aircraft being sent to the Middle East, especially in Hurricanes: it looked like 'pouring water into Desert sand'. The C.A.S. explained that the particular return which the Prime Minister referred to, the Defence Committee Return, gave only the minimum number of serviceable aircraft, that is to say, those available with pilots. On 10 February these totalled 78 Hurricane aircraft, but the actual serviceability figure was 120 including those estimated as likely to be serviceable within 14 days. Taking arrivals and wastage into consideration, this was by no means an unreasonable figure. Fifty Hurricanes had arrived in January, bringing the total arrivals to 137. With the re-equipment of Nos. 3 R.A.A.F. and 80 Squadrons with Hurricanes there were five Hurricane squadrons in Middle East, as well as

a flight for Army Co-operation, requiring a total I.E. of 84 aircraft. In addition Hurricanes had been supplied to No.1 S.A.A.F. Squadron in the Sudan, six had been sent to reinforce Malta, and total losses had been thirteen up to 10 February. These deductions left little more than twenty aircraft as a backing for the five squadrons in Greece and the Desert.

The shortage of medium bombers remained acute, and the A.O.C.-in-C. feared he might have to re-equip some squadrons with Tomahawks. The position was that during January and the first half of February 29 Blenheims had arrived in Middle East, but total losses had amounted to nearly twenty, so that there was little chance of replacing obsolete aircraft such as Wellesleys, which were also suffering from a steady wastage. The Blenheim I's also required replacement, all of them being very old and requiring an excessive amount of maintenance.

C.A.S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID3/
679(A))

Cabinet Series.
Hist.(B)2
(Final)(35)

On 21 February, the British Ambassador in Egypt reviewing the air situation in Middle East, stated that while it was agreed that everything possible should be done to aid the Greeks as soon as possible, Luftwaffe attacks on Benghazi, and the air commitments in East Africa, even when reduced to the lowest possible figure, left the A.O.C.-in-C. with a much smaller margin of modern aircraft to meet the Germans than had been estimated. There were now seven squadrons supporting the Greeks, one more squadron was due to go in February and three more by the end of March. It was hoped to form two fighter squadrons for Greece in March, but this depended on the supply of equipment and ammunition for Tomahawks which in any case were as yet untried. Three Wellington squadrons were available for long distance bombing in support of Greece. These dispositions left no margin whatever for any help to Turkey from resources available or in sight in the Middle East.

Folder A.O.C./1
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
183/137(A))

Early in March the Deputy Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Air Marshal Tedder, prepared an appreciation of the air situation in the Middle East. He calculated that to meet requirements in Egypt, Malta, Greece, the Sudan and East Africa there were at Takoradi or en route to Egypt, 127 fighters and 79 medium bombers, while about 20 heavy bombers were expected by air. Against these to bring re-equipped squadrons up to establishment, re-equip obsolete squadrons, form new squadrons and meet commitments for Greece and Turkey(1) 277 fighters, 196 medium bombers and 55 heavy bombers were required - some 500 aircraft, apart from current requirements to make good the wastage of aircraft.

D.O.O. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
243/9(B))

and
S. of S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID/2/
245).

On 7 March the A.O.C.-in-C. again asked the C.A.S. for more aircraft, particularly fighters, to enable him to fulfill his commitments in Greece. He suggested that the Takoradi route, even when fully developed, was likely to fall short of his requirements and recommended the use of additional reinforcing routes. He also asked that 200 Tomahawks in the United Kingdom might be released, and supplies from the United States expedited. On 13 March the A.O.C.-in-C's plea was supported by the Foreign Secretary then visiting Middle East. He stated that the only certain supply of Hurricanes in sight was 40 due to arrive in Furious at an unknown date, and that none had yet arrived in March. Since only two had arrived in February(2) his concern

- (1) It is not possible to ascertain what the Turkish commitment was at this time.
- (2) None arrived at Takoradi during February.

was perhaps reasonable. The Wellington shortage was equally serious. Of 27 promised by the end of February and 17 by the end of March only two had reached Middle East and six had reached Malta.

Ibid

The Prime Minister then put his point of view to the A.O.C.-in-C. as follows:-

'I have been concerned to read your continual complaints of the numbers of aircraft which are sent to you. Every conceivable effort has been made under my express directions to reinforce you by every route and method for the last five months. In order to do this the Navy have been deprived of Argus and Furious and are left without a single aircraft carrier, except occasionally the Ark Royal, to cope with the German battle cruisers in the Atlantic. A weekly report is submitted to me of all movements via Takoradi.'

This telegram had the support of the C.A.S., who although recognising the A.O.C.-in-C's needs was naturally disposed to weigh them up against what had been dispatched rather than what the A.O.C.-in-C. had actually received. Several other signals passed between the C.A.S. and the A.O.C.-in-C. during March, indicating a mutual distrust of the attitude of each regarding the problem of reinforcing the Middle East.

C.A.S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID3/
678(A)).

C.A.S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID3/
679(A-B))
and
D.W.O. Folder
(A.H.B./ILJ1/
17(1)).

S.of S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID/2/
245).

The position at the end of March was in fact none too promising from the Middle East point of view. Only 19 Hurricanes had arrived since the end of January, since then wastage had accounted for 20 Hurricanes, it had been necessary to reinforce Malta with 12, and serviceability had dropped from 110 to 80. Arrears in arrivals far from decreasing had increased by 15. It was known that five air convoys from Takoradi including 24 Hurricanes were held up by weather, but in spite of every effort the supply from Takoradi was disappointingly slow. There was continued wastage en route owing to the weather and hard wear, and for this reason and because the air commitments in the Middle East were becoming too heavy for a single line of communication, the A.O.C.-in-C. considered that the opening of alternative routes and the shipping of aircraft via the Cape were essential supplements to the Takoradi route.

On 27 March the C.A.S. told the A.O.C.-in-C. that they were trying to send out 46 Wellingtons with crews before 30 April, and that up to 100 Hurricanes were leaving for Egypt via the Cape on 22 April. With the discrepancy between arrival and dispatch figures, it was only reasonable that an enquiry should be made into the situation at Takoradi. On 10 March the Prime Minister remarked that there was a 'frightful hold-up' at Takoradi, where 195 aircraft were waiting in one condition or another. He noted that 20 were received during the week and only five dispatched, while Furious with her second consignment of Hurricanes, 40 in number, would be arriving shortly. The facts were that until February the erection of aircraft had kept pace with the shipments to Takoradi. The arrival of 100 Tomahawks and 20 Marylands early in February however, had immediately reversed the position in which erection capacity was in advance of requirements, and had provided a pool of aircraft on which the Takoradi erection unit could work to full capacity, (it was, in fact; over-employed). Of the 196 aircraft at Takoradi on 8 March, 102 were Tomahawks which had arrived early in February

A.H.B./TIM/DF3/
1(a) Takoradi
Report

and were held up by shortage of equipment, 16 were Mohawks which were grounded with engine defects, and 20 were Glen Martins, which had arrived early in February but were difficult to erect -138 aircraft in all. Of the remaining 48 aircraft, ten were Fulmars which had arrived towards the end of February, and in early March; there were two Hurricanes and two Lysanders which had arrived in early March, and 34 were Blenheims, of which 23 were outstanding from the previous month and 11 had only just arrived. Thus the only aircraft type which had been arriving regularly for which erection appears to have been behind schedule was the Blenheim.

Two reports were made on Takoradi during February and March, the first by the Senior Maintenance Officer to the Middle East who appears to have been unjustifiably severe, and like the Prime Minister, was horrified to find that there were 170 aircraft at Takoradi, although, as has been shown, most of these had only arrived recently. The second report by a Group Captain from Air Ministry, who had been closely concerned with the Takoradi scheme from its conception, was far more favourable, and adjudged that, bearing in mind the difficulties that had to be faced in the provision of labour and material and in the organisation of the route, good work had been done. He advised, however, that to achieve the aim of sending 180 aircraft per month from Takoradi to the Middle East, it was necessary that each aircraft should be complete with equipment and engines installed on arrival at Takoradi, and not incomplete like the Tomahawks.

Early in April 1941, operations in the Middle East increased in intensity when German air and land forces intervened on two fronts. On 31 March the respite in the Desert, on which the British had depended while they concentrated their forces in the Balkans, was abruptly terminated by a combined Axis offensive at El Agheila, while on 6 April German forces invaded Yugoslavia, and, quickly overcoming native resistance, drove through into Greece. Meanwhile although the British had scored a victory over the Italian forces in East Africa, they were still employed in mopping up isolated pockets of resistance.

The shortage of fighters was still the A.O.C.-in-C's most serious problem. By the end of March a total of 182 Hurricanes had arrived, an increase of some 40 aircraft since the end of January. During February and March, however, there had been 22 total losses, and 12 Hurricanes had been sent to reinforce Malta, leaving only a small margin in reserve behind the six squadrons in Greece, the Desert, and the Sudan.

On 4 April, to meet the increasing demand for fighter aircraft in the Middle East, the C.A.S. suggested to the Prime Minister that six complete Hurricane squadrons should be shipped out by convoy, and that American aircraft should be delivered direct from the United States to Egypt, Iraq or India. He foresaw the commencement of German operations in the Balkans and the steady development of the fighting already resumed in Libya, and submitted the view that it might soon be necessary to send air forces to Turkey. He considered that the requirement for fighter squadrons was likely to become so great that the four squadron expansion scheme then in hand would be totally inadequate. The Prime Minister eventually agreed with this proposal, but he was concerned to find that

M.E. Folder
A.O.C./7
(A.H.B./IJ1/
183/22(A)).

A.M. File
G.S.5137

S.of S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID/2/
245)

'(a) with a total personnel strength of 26,600 and a pilot strength of 1,175, and 1,044 aircraft on charge, we can only fight 292 aircraft against the enemy.

(b) That with this immense personnel and mass of obsolete machines he (the A.O.C.-in-C.) cannot find the necessary servicing staff for the new aeroplanes as they arrive, but that large numbers have to be sent round the Cape, with remittent destructive delays. I am sure there must be frightful mismanagement and futility.'

Ibid

Once again the C.A.S. explained that the strength returns which the Prime Minister quoted were limited to the number of modern aircraft immediately available for modern aircraft with pilots, and that in addition there were many squadrons armed with obsolescent aircraft doing good work. The actual number of operational aircraft in the Middle East was 650, of which approximately 530 were serviceable, and it was with these that the A.O.C.-in-C. would fight the Axis rather than with the 292 shown on the return. He did not consider that the personnel strength was excessive for covering the maintenance of some 400 obsolescent and training aircraft as well as the 650 operational aircraft, and for taking the place of the aircraft industry at home. The proportion of men to aircraft was increasing but this was necessary because of the large numbers of modern aircraft arriving in the command, and the introduction of new equipment. It would appear that the Prime Minister accepted this explanation.

Cabinet
Hist.Series
(B)3(120)

By mid-April there were signs of improvement in Hurricane deliveries from Takoradi. Forty-seven had arrived by the 14th and another nine by the 21st, to set against a wastage of 36 in the three week period. On 17 April the A.O.C.-in-C. reported that the wastage rate of Hurricanes and Blenheims was balancing the rate of supply, but a temporary lean period for Hurricanes was approaching. Some 20 Tomahawks had arrived but they were not yet available for operations because of 'teething' troubles with guns and engines.

S.of S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID/2/
245).

On 22 April the Prime Minister again remarked to the C.A.S. 'on a frightful congestion at Takoradi of 285, a run-off of only 25 in the current week, and a proposed dispatch of only 38 more the following week'. He wrote:-

'I apprised you sometime ago of my misgivings about the capacity of Takoradi, and you were good enough to reassure me; but this looks as if we were going to get into a thorough jam there. Let me know your projected arrivals there in the next six weeks, for if you cannot clear them by more than 40 a week we shall be open to serious criticism'.

The C.A.S. replied that the present stocks at Takoradi were British types 66, American types 219. British types had been deliberately shipped in excess of Takoradi's capacity in order to constitute a working stock there. He did not regard two weeks supply as excessive, and thought the rate of clearance was good. American types had accumulated largely for reasons beyond our control. The Mohawk engines had been a failure and Tomahawks had given an unexpected amount of technical trouble, but in addition to this American stocks had been piled up simply because it was necessary to get the aircraft

across the Atlantic when shipping was available.⁽¹⁾

S.of S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID/2/
245).

Although the C.A.S. was confident in the ability of Takoradi to fulfill its commitments, the increasing Hurricane casualties in Greece and in Libya (especially at Tobruk) caused him to doubt whether the existing methods of reinforcement were sufficient to sustain the air situation in the Middle East and Mediterranean until the difficulties with the Tomahawks had been overcome. To sustain Malta the Navy had already undertaken to transport two Hurricane contingents into the Mediterranean on aircraft carriers, from which they could be flown to the island, and the flying-off operations took place on 3 and 27 April, resulting in the reinforcement of Malta with 34 Hurricanes. The C.A.S. now secured from the C.N.S. a promise that on her return from the second operation Argus should be reloaded for a further trip. The C.A.S. intention was that this time a consignment of Hurricanes should be sent on from Malta to the Middle East.

Beamish Report
(A.H.B./ILJ5/
2)

Towards the end of the month the fighter situation once more became acute. Only 6 out of some 30 Hurricanes, and 12 out of some 40 Gladiators were left in Crete after the evacuation of Greece,⁽²⁾ and wastage in the Desert was still heavy. Tobruk had become a besieged port from 12 April, and on the 23rd the A.O.C.-in-C. withdrew the Hurricanes operating from the airfield within the defensive perimeter, because of the heavy losses incurred by enemy air operations. This meant that the enemy would have air superiority over Tobruk until a fresh fighter force could be built up, but he considered that any further attempt to maintain a fighter squadron inside Tobruk would only result in heavy loss to no purpose. On hearing of this move the Prime Minister wrote to the C.A.S.

S.of S. Folder
(A.H.B.ID/2/
245)

'If the figures which Air Marshal Longmore has been giving us of his losses are true, there can be no grounds for such a serious decline in his strength in Egypt. The withdrawal of the fighter squadron in Tobruk is a most grievous step. What are the prospects of a fresh fighter force being built up?'

Western Desert
Ops. Folder
A.O.C./11
(A.H.B./ILJ1/
183/146(a),
Encl.157(a)).

In reply to enquiries from the C.A.S., the A.O.C.-in-C. stated that there had been no alternative course of action, that No.73 Squadron's losses had been prohibitive, and that the Hurricanes had frequently been outnumbered by up to seven or eight to one; out of 15 Hurricanes serviceable on 21 April, only 5 were ~~serv~~ serviceable on 23rd. The total number of Hurricanes immediately available in the Western Desert, on 26 April was 14, and it seemed far wiser to meet the enemy occasionally in strong patrols than to fritter away the Hurricane strength in single sorties.

S.of S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID/2/
245).

In reply to the Prime Minister's minute, the C.A.S. explained that the losses reported in the A.O.C.-in-C's reports included only those caused by enemy action, and that there were doubtless many others caused by accidents, mechanical defects and forced landings. It was also probable that operational reports were sometimes incomplete because of lack of

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- (1) 95 Tomahawks and 15 Glen Martins had arrived between 1 and 18 April from the United States..
- (2) The A.O.C.-in-C. at first maintained that all the Hurricanes had been lost.

D.W.O. Folder
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
17(1)).

Orders of
Battle, and
O.R.Bs. etc.
(A.H.B./IIJ1/
31/3).

communications. From available records, which, for various reasons cannot be considered to be completely accurate, (1) it would appear that some 60 Hurricanes were destroyed in Greece and Egypt/Libya during April. This number approximately cancels out the 62 reinforcing Hurricanes which arrived during the month, the highest Hurricane reinforcing figure reached since June 1940. However, even taking into account damaged and badly damaged Hurricanes, it is difficult to reconcile the A.O.C.-in-C's figure of 14 Hurricanes immediately available on 26 April with his weekly serviceability statement, which showed 80 Hurricanes serviceable in Middle East on 29 April. Doubtless it was discrepancies of this kind that provided the Prime Minister's comments. On the other hand, it should be pointed out that there were only two Hurricane squadrons in the Desert at this time, Nos. 73 and 274, of which the former had suffered heavy losses. The remaining squadrons in Egypt were No.1 S.A.A.F. defending the Canal Zone, and No.3 R.A.A.F. Squadron which had been withdrawn from the Desert to re-equip with Tomahawks. In addition, there were three fighter squadrons from Greece requiring re-equipment. Thus in all there was a total I.E. of 124 aircraft required for which there were only 80 Hurricanes and 20 Tomahawks serviceable. (2)

The Prime Minister appears to have made no further comment on this subject for the time-being, but the two events indicate a deep dissatisfaction: early in May the A.O.C.-in-C. Air Marshal Longmore was recalled to London, and was subsequently replaced by his deputy Air Vice-Marshal Tedder, and at about the same time the War Cabinet decided to send out a mission under Air Vice-Marshal Dawson of the Ministry of Aircraft Production, to investigate the aircraft position in the Middle East. It may perhaps be best to judge the validity of the A.O.C.-in-C's constant requests for aircraft, by surveying the achievements in reinforcements from June 1940 to May 1941.

It has been seen that at first the reinforcement policy for the Middle East had been limited to the re-equipment and maintenance of existing squadrons with modern types, and that for this monthly quotas of aircraft, Wellingtons, Blenheims, and Hurricanes, were allotted. Later the quotas were increased, and it became the practice to send out complete squadrons to the Middle East, or to form them there. Unfortunately, aircraft arrivals fell steadily in arrears of their quotas. Therefore when in early December the Expansion and Reinforcement Planners met to discuss further proposals for expansion, it was agreed that the programme proposed which involved the dispatch of 20 heavy bombers, 144 medium bombers, and 144 fighters, must be regarded as an aim to be achieved as soon as possible but not to be embarked upon while arrears were heavy. By the end of April, the reinforcement of the Middle East was still considerably in arrears as the following statement shows:-(3)

- (1) The figures may be taken as a general guide, but it must be pointed out that sources for fighter losses do not invariably agree in detail. Discrepancies may be caused by a number of factors involved in compiling reports and computing periodic loss figures.
- (2) As there is no specific or comprehensive source for aircraft strengths this is necessarily a rough estimate of fighter requirements.
- (3) Malta is excluded as it had separate quotas and returns.

SECRET

194

C.A.S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID3/
679(A)) and
E.R.P. Minutes
(A.H.B./VB/14).

Type	Hurricane	Blenheim	Wellington	Maryland (1)	Tomahawk (1)
Total Quota	316	408	112	143	465
Total Arrivals	244	239	110	29	25
Arrears	72	169	2	114	440

With the modern aircraft which arrived in the Middle East, it had been possible to re-equip two heavy bomber, eight medium bomber and three fighter squadrons, and a flight each of both the Army Co-operation Squadrons. In addition the force had been increased by two heavy bomber and two fighter squadrons. The following statement gives a comparison of strengths for June 1940 and May 1941 (excluding Malta):-

A.H.B./ILJ1/
31/3

Date	No. of Squadrons per type	Approx. total I.E. June 1940	Approx. total I.E. May 1941
June 1940	4 Gladiator	84	-
May 1941	7 Hurricane, 1 Gladiator	-	128
June 1940	2 Lysander	32	-
May 1941	2 Hurricane/Lysander	-	32
June 1940	10 Blenheim I, 3 Wellesley	156	-
May 1941	2 Maryland, 6 Blenheim IV 4 Blenheim I, 1 Wellesley	-	188
June 1940	2 Bombay/Valentia	24	-
May 1941	4 Wellington, 1 Bombay/ Valentia	-	64
May 1941	1 Bombay/Valentia	-	20
June 1940	2 Sunderland	16	-
May 1941	2 Sunderland	-	6
		<u>312</u>	<u>438</u>

Miscellaneous June 1940) There were a number of miscellaneous
May 1941) squadrons and flights mostly of the
S.A.A.F. in Kenya - equipped with
obsolete aircraft.

By May 1941 there were also some fighter squadrons and one medium bomber squadron forming. The increase of I.E. in the bomber squadrons from 12 to 16, had not yet been completed. By May 1941 Malta had two fighter squadrons equipped with Hurricanes and 1/2 a G.R. Squadron equipped with Marylands, having had no squadrons at the outbreak of war with Italy.

Enemy
Documents
A.H.B.6

The following gives some idea of the enemy forces operating against the British in the Middle East theatre, excluding the greater part of the Italian Metropolitan Air Force:-

- (1) The Maryland and Tomahawk arrears were due not to a perpetual short delivery per month but to delay in dispatch from the U.S.A. and to various technical hitches and to shipping difficulties.

<u>Italian</u> 1940	<u>Sicily</u>	<u>N.Africa</u>	<u>E.Africa</u>	<u>Greece</u>	<u>Total</u>
June	205	270	325	-	800
Dec.	185	378	248	514	1,325
<u>1941</u>					
May	215	240	?	-	455
<u>German</u>					
<u>1941</u>					
April	396	165	-	563	1,124
June	-	122	-	276	398

Taking into account the heavy air commitments in the Desert, East Africa, Malta and Greece during this period, and the strength of the opposing air forces, the force at the command of the A.O.C.-in-C. was far from adequate, as was admitted at Air Ministry. At the same time, those responsible for dispatching aircraft to the Middle East from the United Kingdom were working under considerable difficulties, including in particular the shortage of shipping space for the transportation of aircraft to Takoradi; they also had a close acquaintance with the limitations of aircraft production and the conglomerate requirements of home and overseas units. It was for this reason that the Prime Minister, very conscious of the large numbers of aircraft being sent abroad, and the immense shipping resources involved in this task, voiced his complaint concerning the small proportion of the modern aircraft sent to Middle East which, according to the Middle East returns, were actually operating in the front line. There seems to have been some justification for his complaints, for, in early May, there were a number of aircraft which may be termed 'unaccounted for', after arrivals, losses and strength had been added up, and which were presumably in need of long term repairs which were not being undertaken. The position was as follows:-(1)

	<u>Type of Aircraft</u>	<u>Number Arrived M.E. June 1940 - May 1941</u>	<u>Total Wastage June 1940 - May 1941</u>	<u>Service-ability</u>	<u>Unaccounted for and/or unserviceable</u>
C.A.S. Folder (A.H.B./ID3/679(A-B)) D.W.O. Folder (A.H.B./ILJ1/17/(1)).	Hurricane	244	90 (incl. 18 sent to Malta)	80	74
	Blenheim(2)	239 (+100) in M.E. Sept. 1939	138	110	91
	Wellington	110	25	80	5
					<u>Total 170</u>

Further evidence that there were deficiencies in the maintenance organisation lay in the fact that soon after the arrival of Air Vice-Marshal Dawson from the Ministry of Aircraft Production, a steady improvement became apparent in

- (1) The figures given must be regarded as approximate only.
 (2) In the Blenheim figures, Blenheim I's are included for convenience. The extra 100 stands for the number of these aircraft already in M.E. in June 1940.

serviceability figures. This was, however, partly a result of an improvement in aircraft arrivals commencing in May. During this month 120 Hurricanes arrived, more than twice the number received in any previous month, and twice the average monthly figure for the previous eight months. In the same month arrivals of Tomahawks showed a considerable increase, while both Blenheim and Maryland arrivals were higher than the average.

At the beginning of May the outlook regarding reinforcements was more promising than it had been for some time. Although it had not yet achieved its scheduled monthly output, Takoradi was steadily increasing the number of aircraft erected and dispatched per month. In addition great exertions were being made to reinforce the Middle East via Malta by aircraft carrier and air to the tune of 140 Hurricanes; this was a development of the scheme initiated by the C.A.S. in April.

A.H.B./ID/2/245

On 10 May the Prime Minister again attacked Takoradi, saying that the bottleneck there must be opened up and the congestion relieved. Considering the nature of aircraft arrivals over the past months, however, it would appear that the 'congestion' was less culpable than the Prime Minister indicated. Up to the end of April the arrival and dispatch of aircraft had been as follows:-

	<u>Hurricane</u>	<u>Blenheim</u>	<u>Maryland</u>	<u>Tomahawk</u>
Takoradi O.R.B. Apps.				
Arrivals	251	197	51	195
Dispatches	235	164	19	39
Outstanding	16	33	32	156

Of these aircraft all the Tomahawks but two had arrived no earlier than February and had suffered from technical troubles and deficiencies in spares, while forty-nine of the Marylands had also arrived in February or later. Since that month, Takoradi had for the first time had sufficient aircraft to keep the erection unit fully employed, but with the difficulties experienced in erecting certain types it did not achieve its target output. Nevertheless, as has been mentioned, the number of aircraft dispatched per month was steadily rising, and in June the scheduled figure of 180 aircraft was reached.

During May the Chief of Air Staff disclosed proposals for raising the air forces in the Middle East to a total not far short of the German strength of some 650 aircraft, by 15 July. The existing strength was about 300 serviceable aircraft of modern types and he hoped to raise this to about 520 in the two months. The force at which he was aiming was:-

5 Wellington Squadrons at 20 I.E.	= 100 aircraft
7 Blenheim Squadrons at 20 I.E.	= 140 aircraft
3 Maryland Squadrons at 20 I.E.	= 60 aircraft
13 Hurricane Squadrons at 16 I.E.	= 208 aircraft
7 Tomahawk Squadrons at 16 I.E.	= 112 aircraft
4 Hurricane Squadrons at 12 I.E.	= 48 aircraft
1½ Maryland Squadrons at 16 I.E.	= 24 aircraft
Total 40½ Squadrons	692 I.E. aircraft

He thought this I.E. should be able to maintain a serviceable strength of 520 aircraft.

Although reinforcement prospects were brighter in May than ever before, when Air Marshal Tedder took over from Air Marshal Longmore early in the month, the situation in the Middle East was far from reassuring. Air Marshal Tedder's first task was to rebuild an air force for the desert, in readiness for an offensive to relieve Tobruk and to recapture the airfields of Eastern Cyrenaica. After the losses incurred in the final stages of the Greek campaign and the recent retreat from Cyrenaica, it was no easy task to build up an integrated force in the short time available. Seven squadrons from Greece and one from the desert had been withdrawn to Palestine to reform and refit after having lost nearly all their aircraft. In addition during May and June two and a half fighter, two bomber and one army co-operation squadrons had to be allotted to Palestine for operations against the Vichy French in Syria, and extra aircraft were needed at Habbaniya for operations against the Iraqi rebels under Raschid Ali. In the desert, out of an initial establishment of 106 aircraft, the seven squadrons under No.204 Group had only forty aircraft serviceable. An attempt to increase serviceability here by curtailing operations achieved some success, but with the German attack on Crete on 20 May, all aircraft with the necessary range were called upon to operate either over naval shipping, over Crete itself, or against the Axis air bases in Crete and the Dodecanese. In these operations losses were heavy, particularly in the Blenheim squadrons, and by the end of the month the desert casualty list included 29 Hurricanes, 8 Tomahawks, 38 Blenheims, 5 Marylands and 24 Wellingtons - 104 aircraft. In these circumstances it was fortunate that during May, for the first time aircraft began arriving in the Middle East in substantial numbers. Receipts included 129 Hurricanes, 40 Blenheims, 11 Marylands and 49 Tomahawks, with the result that, on 2 June serviceability showed an improvement on late April figures of about 100 Hurricanes, 20 Blenheims, 20 Marylands and 30 Tomahawks.

C.A.S. Folder
679

C.A.S. Folder
679 &
A.H.B./ILJ1/
17(1)

The remarkable increase in Hurricanes may be said to have been entirely the result of special efforts at home to reinforce the Middle East along quick routes which by-passed Takoradi. In April, in order to achieve a quick reinforcement of the army in the desert with much-needed tanks it had been decided to send at considerable risk a special fast convoy through the Mediterranean to Egypt and 43 Hurricanes were included in this convoy which arrived in mid-May. A further 42 arrived by air from Malta in May and a further nineteen in early June, the first products of the scheme initiated by the Chief of Air Staff in April to reinforce the Middle East via Malta with fighters flown off carriers in the Western Mediterranean, in the way that Malta itself had already been reinforced. Another forty odd Hurricanes arrived from Takoradi.

C.A.S. Folder
(A.H.B./ID3/
58) & A.M. File
C.S.9143 &
Takoradi O.R.B.

The supply of aircraft did not present the only difficulty involved in rebuilding the Western Desert Air Force. There was also a shortage of squadron personnel resulting from casualties incurred in the evacuation from Greece, and many squadrons were incomplete or reforming. In order to use the men available as fully as possible in the coming battle, incomplete units were temporarily amalgamated to form composite squadrons, but there was little time for training

C.A.S. Folder
No.734 (A.H.B./
ID3/734)

these to work as integral units. Other squadrons were allotted a number of new pilots who were fresh to the desert or to fighting the Germans, or had not completed their training, and again there was little time for them to become accustomed to the new conditions and to operate with their new squadrons.

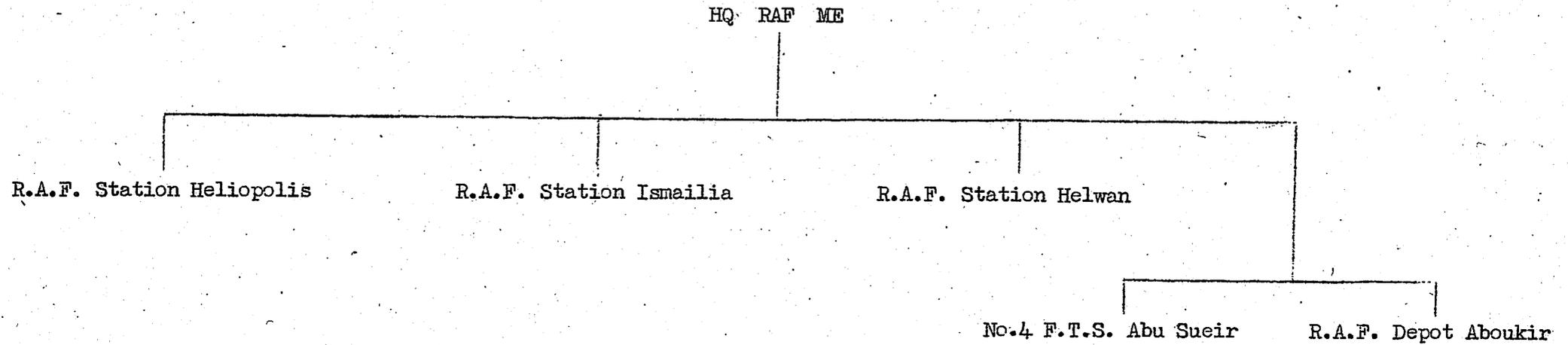
Nevertheless, when every available squadron and flight had been brought up to the Western Desert, the British strength totalled 244 aircraft, in the following types:-

	<u>I.E.</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Heavy Bombers	64	50
Medium Bombers	64	55
S.E. Fighters	96	84
T.E. Fighters	20	14
	<u>244</u>	<u>203</u>

This compared favourably with a German strength of 122 aircraft with 80 serviceable, but there were also approximately 246 Italian aircraft with 114 serviceable. (1) The British force included four Hurricane and one Tomahawk fighter squadrons, two Blenheim and one Maryland Medium bomber squadrons, one Hurricane and one Maryland reconnaissance squadrons, and the four heavy bomber squadrons. In addition detachments from three fighter squadrons were attached to the two veteran Hurricane squadrons of the Desert. The gathering of this force was a considerable achievement especially in view of the fact that of the seven squadrons from Greece and one from the Desert refitting in early May, only one had returned to Egypt; the rest were needed elsewhere, notably in Iraq and Palestine. In addition two of the desert Blenheim squadrons had had to be withdrawn to refit following the heavy casualties suffered during the operations in support of the Crete evacuation.

(1) Nearest date for available Italian figures was 1 May.

NORMAL ROYAL AIR FORCE ESTABLISHMENT IN EGYPT



SECRET

APPENDIX I

Miso. - 7a

Overall increases in Middle East

Chiefs of Staff in W.P.(39)148 recommended:

Six R.A.F. Fighter Squadrons in Egypt +	One Haifa	} 11 R.A.F. Fighter Squadron in M.E.
	One Khartoum	
	One Port Sudan	
	Two Aden	

also recommended

Five Army Co-operation Squadrons	{	No: 208 Sqdn.
		No: 6 Sqdn.
		S. Rhodesian Sqdn.
		Flight of No.47 Sqdn. increased to a completely new squadron

Eight Medium Bomber Squadrons:	Four in Egypt
	One Iraq
	Two Khartoum
	One Goya

Four Heavy Bomber Squadrons	No: 216 Sqdn.
	No: 70
	No: 14
	New Squadron

Also preparations to receive Twelve Heavy Bomber Squadrons from U.K.

GRF/Bt	Sqdns.	Three
GR Landplane		Four
TB/GR		One
add		
1 TB/GR		One already approved

Reference
S.44103/AOA

To:- A.O.C.-in-C.

Location of Units - Middle East Command

<u>Location</u>	<u>Unit</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>
<u>Western Desert</u>		
<u>Mersa Matruh</u>	No.33 Fighter Squadron	Gladiator II
<u>Maaten Bagush</u>	1 Flight No.208 Army Co-operation Squadron 1 Section S. & T. Column H.Q., No.253 Wing	Lysander I
<u>Fuka</u>	No.45 Squadron (Bomber) No.31 Air Stores Park No.1 Advanced Repair Section Salvage Section	Blenheim
<u>El Daba</u>	No.211 Squadron (Bomber)	Blenheim
<u>Amrya</u>	No. 80 Fighter Squadron Air Intelligence Wing	Gladiator II (Gauntlets)
<u>Outskirts of Alexandria (Shafakhana)</u>	No.252 Fighter Wing	
<u>Ikingi Maryut</u>	One R.D.F. Station nearing completion Two Sections S. & T. Column	
<u>Alexandria</u>	No.201 Group No.230 Flying Boat Squadron "S.S. Dumana" (Note: When No.11 Squadron ground echelon arrives this squadron will re-form at Fuka)	
<u>Egypt Proper</u>		
<u>Aboukir</u>	No.103 Maintenance Unit	
<u>Heliopolis</u>	No.202 Ground Headquarters Communication Unit Two flights 208 Squadron No.113 Squadron (Bomber) No.216 Squadron	Lysander I Blenheims Bombays and Valentias
<u>Helwan</u>	No.112 Fighter Squadron No.70 Bomber Transport Squadron (Less two I.E. aircraft stationed in Iraq)	Gladiator I (Gauntlets) Valentias
<u>Abu Sueir</u>	No.102 Maintenance Unit Navigation Flight Pilots Training Unit (Conversion to war types)	Ansons Blenheims Gauntlets
<u>Helwan Caves</u>	No.101 Maintenance Unit Main explosive dump	

<u>Location</u>	<u>Unit</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>
<u>Ismailia</u>	No.250 Wing H.Q. No. 30 Squadron (Bomber) No. 55 Squadron (Bomber) Special Wellington Flight	Blenheims Blenheims
	(Note: The 9 aircraft forming air echelon of No.11 Squadron are distributed 1 per flight in 30, 55 and 112 Squadrons pending arrival ground echelon)	
<u>Sudan</u>		
<u>Khartoum</u>	No.254 Wing Headquarters 'D' Flight/47 Squadron	Vincents
<u>Port Sudan</u>	No.14 Squadron	Wellesleys
<u>Surmit</u>	No.223 Squadron	Wellesleys
<u>Erkoweit</u>	No. 47 Squadron	Wellesleys
<u>East Africa</u>		
<u>Nairobi</u>	No.237 Southern Rhodesia Squadron Elementary Flying Training School 1 Communication Flight	Hardys (Partly equipped)
<u>Eastleigh</u>	-	
	Note: Four South African Squadrons at present en route will be distributed as follows:-	
<u>Port Reitz (Mombassa)</u>	Two G.R. Flights One Fighter Squadron	Ansons Gladiators
<u>Dar-Es-Salaam</u>	One G.R. Flight	
	The remaining two squadrons to be distributed between Eastleigh and Nairobi	
<u>Palestine</u>		
<u>Jerusalem</u>	H.Q., P. & T.J.	
<u>Ranleh</u>	No.6 Squadron (One Flight temporarily detached to Ghaza)	Lysanders II (incomplete with)
<u>Amman</u>	Temporary Trans-Jordan Flight No.2 Armoured Car Company	3 Vincents to be replaced by 6 Hinds

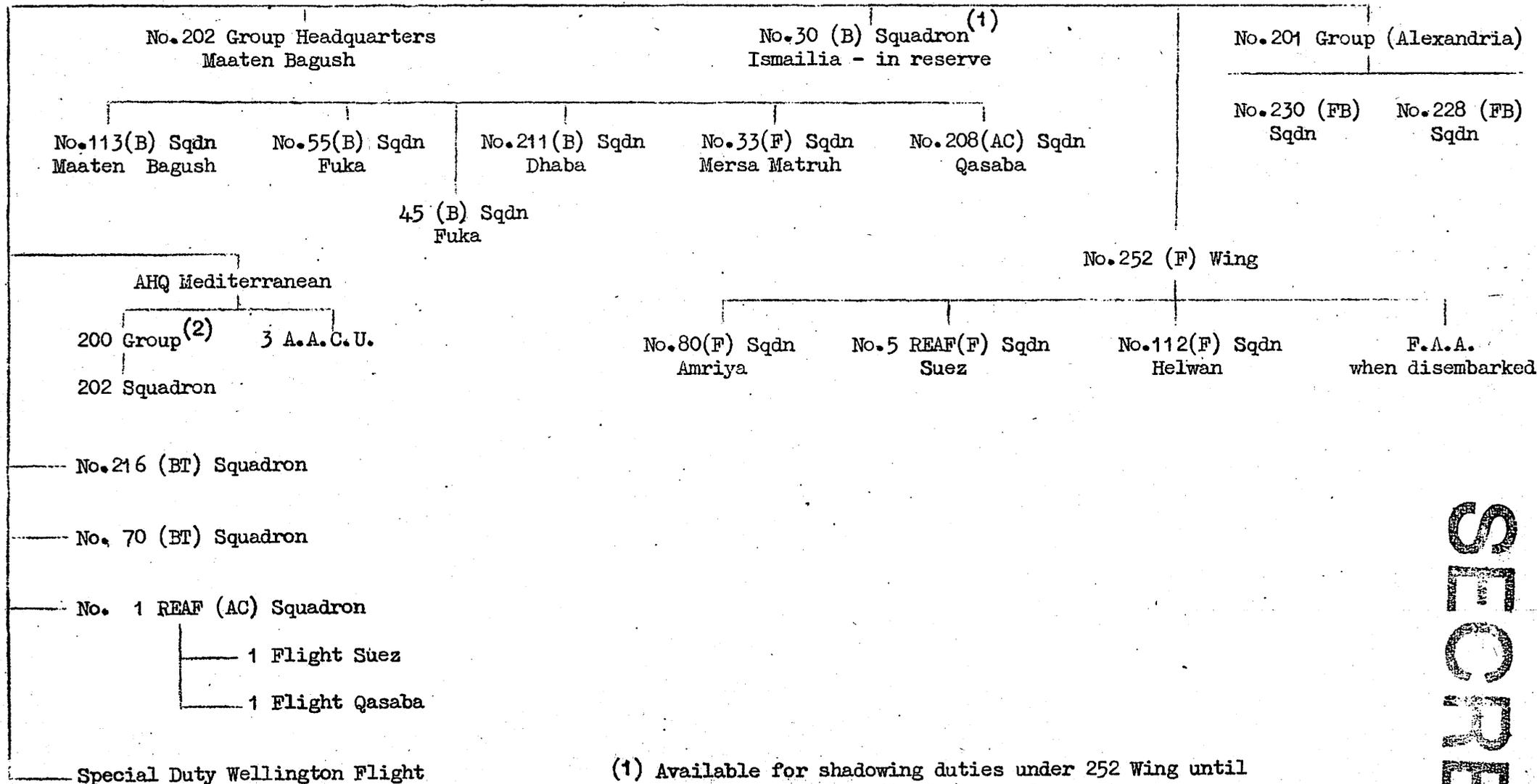
A. MAUND

Air Vice-Marshal
Air Officer i/c Administration

HEADQUARTERS ROYAL AIR FORCE MIDDLE EAST

As at 11 June 1940

C A I R O



(1) Available for shadowing duties under 252 Wing until relieved by aircraft of 11 Squadron.

(2) Transferred to R.A.F. Coastal Command 12.8.40.

SECRET

ORDER OF BATTLE, EGYPT/LIBYA SEPTEMBER 9TH, 1940

<u>UNIT</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>AIRCRAFT</u>	<u>I.E.</u>	<u>I.R.</u>	<u>REMARKS</u>
<u>H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.</u>	<u>CAIRO</u>				
No. 216 Sqdn BT	Heliopolis	Bombay	8	2	
No. 70 Sqdn BT	Kabrit	Wellington	16	4	(Moved from Heliopolis this day. Re-equipping Wellington
No. 202 Group H.Q.	Alexandria				(Detachment at Habbaniya. Mid November. Moved to Greece.
No. 211 Sqdn B	Qotafiya	Blenheim I	12	6	
No. 113 Sqdn B	Maaten Bagush	Blenheim IV	12	6	
No. 208 Sqdn AC	Qasaba	Lysander	12	6	
No. 112 Sqdn F	Sidi Haneish	Gladiator	16	4	
No. 55 Sqdn B	Helwan	Blenheim	12	6	
No. 80 Sqdn F	Sidi Haneish	Gladiators) Hurricanes)	16	4	Det. at Maaten Bagush.
No. 3 Sqdn R.A.A.F.	Gerawla	Gladiator	8	4	
<u>No. 252 Wing</u>	<u>Mex.</u>				
No. 30 Sqdn B	Iringi Mariut	Blenheim	12	6	12 Fighter Blenheims, 6 Bomber.
No. 33 Sqdn F	Helwan	Gladiator) Hurricane)			
No. 274 Sqdn F	Amiriya	Hurricane) Gladiator)	16	4	During the month fighter a/c were detached periodically from Nos. 30 and 274 Sqdns for operations in the Western Desert.
<u>No. 256 Wing</u>	<u>SHAFAKHANA</u>				
(Air Information Signals)					
No. 201 Group (Naval) (Co-op)	Alexandria				
No. 230 Sqdn (F.B.)	Alexandria	Sunderland	6	0	
No. 228 Sqdn (F.B.)	Alexandria	Sunderland	4	2	Det. of 3 a/c temporarily established at Malta 22/9/40.

NOTE: For Malta Units see Appendix No. IX.

APPENDIX V

ORDER OF BATTLE EGYPT/LIBYA - NOVEMBER 30TH, 1940

Unit	Location	Aircraft	I.E.	I.R.	Movements of Units
H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.	Cairo				
No. 70 Sqdn. <i>BT</i>	Kabrit	Wellington	16	4	
No. 216 Sqdn. <i>BT</i>	Heliopolis	Bombay	8	2	
H.Q. No. 202 Group	Maaten Bagush				
No. 6 Sqdn. det.	Qasaba	Lysander	4	-	B Flt. attached to No. 208 Sqdn. 7/12/40. 3 a/c A Flt. arr. W.D. on attachment.
No. 33 Sqdn. <i>f</i>	Fuka	Hurricane	16	4	
No. 39 Sqdn.	Helwan	Blenheim I	12	6	1/12/40 Arrived Helwan from Aden. 2/12/40 One Flt. detached to No. 45 Sqdn. Qetafiya.
No. 45 Sqdn. <i>B</i>	Qetafiya	Blenheim I	12	6	8/12/40 Arrived from Sudan. 31/12/40 Sqdn. moved to Menastir.
No. 55 Sqdn. <i>B</i>	Fuka	Blenheim	12	6	5/12/40 3 A/C No. 11 Sqdn. arr. on attachment.
No. 73 Sqdn.	Heliopolis	Hurricane	16	4	Whole Sqdn. assembled by 9/12/40. 11/12/40 Det. to F.A.A. Dekheila. 30/12/40 Sqdn. arrives Sidi Heneish. 31/12/40 Det. arrives Sidi Haneish.
No. 112 Sqdn. <i>f</i>	Sidi Haneish	Gladiator	16	4	
No. 113 Sqdn.	Kenayis	Blenheim IV	12	6	
No. 208 Sqdn.	(Nr. M. Bagush) Qasaba	Lysander	12	6	
		Hurricane	4	2	
No. 274 Sqdn. det.	Sidi Haneish	Hurricane			
No. 3 Sqdn.	Gerawla	Gladiator	8	4	
R.A.A.F.		Lysander	4	2	
		Gauntlet	6		
H.Q. No. 252 Wing	Mex				
No. 274 Sqdn.	Amiriya	Hurricane	16	4	7/12/40 Sqdn. joined flt. at Sidi Haneish. 29/12/40 Det. sent to Sidi Barrani.
H.Q. No. 256 Wing	Mex				
(Air Information Signals)					
No. 201 Group (Naval Co-op)	Alexandria				
No. 230 Sqdn.	Alexandria	Sunderland	6	0	
No. 1 G.R. Unit	Ismailia	Wellington	3	1	

NOTE: For Malta units see Appendix No. IX

SECRET

ORDER OF BATTLE EGYPT/LIBYA. DECEMBER 31ST, 1940

<u>UNIT</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>AIRCRAFT</u>	<u>I.E.</u>	<u>I.R.</u>	<u>MOVEMENTS OF UNITS</u>
H.Q. R.A.F. M.E. No. 216 Squadron	CAIRO Heliopolis	Bombay	8	2	
<u>Heavy Bomber Wing</u>					
No. 70 Squadron	Heliopolis	Wellington	16	4	
No. 37 Squadron	Shallufa	Wellington	16	4	
No. 38 Squadron	Shallufa	Wellington	16	4	
<u>No. 202 Group</u>	Maaten Bagush				
No. 6 Squadron (2 Flights)	Qasaba	Lysander	16	4	(6.1.41. Remainder of A Flight arr. W.D. on attachment. (14.1.41. B Flight attached to 202 Group to augment communication Flying (9.1.41. Det. with No. 55 Sqdn. Squadron ordered back to Helwan for move to Greece. 12.1.41. Squadron moved to Greece. (9.1.41. Attached No. 45 Sqdn. Flight withdrawn from W.D. for Greece, A/C given to No. 11 Squadron. 10.1.41. Squadron moved to L.G. 79 15 miles from Bug Bug. 16.1.41. Squadron moved to Amseat. 1.1.41. Squadron at Amiriya 23.1.41. Moved to Greece. 11.1.41. Squadron moved to Amseat. 30.1.41. Moved to Gazala West. 8.1.41. Det. Flight to Gambut 23.1.41. Squadron moved to Tmimi.
No. 11 Squadron	Helwan	Blenheim I	12	6	
No. 11 Squadron Det.	Fuka	Blenheim I	3	-	
No. 33 Squadron	Fuka	Hurricane	12	6	
No. 39 Squadron Det. Flight					
No. 39 Squadron	Helwan	Blenheim I	12	6	
No. 55 Squadron	Fuka	Blenheim I	12	6	
No. 112 Squadron	Sidi Haneish	Gladiator	16	4	
No. 73 Squadron	Heliopolis	Hurricane	16	4	
No. 113 Squadron	Kenayis	Blenheim IV	12	6	
No. 208 Squadron	Qasaba	Lysander	12	-	
		Hurricane	4	2	
No. 274 Squadron	Sidi Haneish	Hurricane	16	4	(9.1.41. Moved to L.G. S. of Sidi Azeiz. 19.11.41. Det. to El Adem (22.1.41. Party moved to Gazala. 27.1.41. Main party moved to Gazala.
No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F.	Gerala	Gladiator	8	4	
No. 45 Squadron	Menastir	Blenheim I	12	6	Moved from Qotafiya this day.
<u>No. 252 Wing</u>	Mex				
<u>No. 256 Wing</u> (Air Information Signals)	Mex				
<u>No. 258 Wing</u>	Sollum				5.1.41. Assumed control of Fighter Sqdns. 26.1.41. Moved to Tobruk.
<u>No. 201 Group (Naval Co-operation)</u>	Alexandria				
No. 230 Squadron	Alexandria	Sunderland	6	-	
No. 1 G.R. Unit	Ismailia	Wellington D.W.I.	3	1	

NOTE: For Squadrons under 252 Wing see Order of Battle for January 31st 1941.

NOTE: For Malta Units see Appendix No. IX.

SECRET

ORDER OF BATTLE EGYPT/LIBYA - JANUARY 31ST, 1941

Unit	Location	Aircraft	I.E.	I.R.	Movements of Units
H.Q. R.A.F. M.E. No. 216 Sqdn.	Cairo Heliopolis	Bombay	8	2	
H.Q. No.257 Wing No. 37 Sqdn. No. 38 Sqdn. No. 70 Sqdn.	Shallufa Shallufa Shallufa Kabrit	Wellington Wellington Wellington	16 16 16	4 4 4	
H.Q. No.202 Group No. 6 Sqdn. det.	Sollum Sollum	Lysander	12	6	1/2/41 A & B Flts. attached W.D. 24/2/41 All Sqdn. to Barce to replace 208 Sqdn. 9/1/41 a/c given to No. 11 Sqdn. 5/2/41 Moved to Bu Amud
No. 39 Sqdn. No. 55 Sqdn. No. 113 Sqdn. No. 208 Sqdn.	Heliopolis Capuzzo Sidi Barrani El Tmimi	Blenheim IV Blenheim IV Lysander Hurricane	12 12 12 4	6 6 6 2	
No. 3 Sqdn. R.A.A.F.	El Tmimi	Gladiator Hurricane	8 6 (Strength)	4 6	
No. 45 Sqdn.	Menastir	Blenheim I	12	6	9/2/41 Sqdn. returned to Helwan for refit.
No. 258 Wing No. 73 Sqdn. No. 274 Sqdn.	Sollum (Operational control of Sqdns. only) El Gazala El Gazala	Hurricane Hurricane	16	4	7/2. Sqdn. ordered to Ismailia for move to Greece.
(1) H.Q. No.252 Wing	Mex				
H.Q. No.256 Wing (Air Information Signals)	Mex				
H.Q. No. 201 (Naval Co-op) Group No. 230 Sqdn. No. 1 G.R. Unit	Alexandria Alexandria Ismailia	Sunderland Wellington	6 3 (Strength)	0	

Note: For Malta Units see Appendix No. IX.

(1) Note No.252 Wing Mex

The following squadrons came under
control of the Wing for the
defence of Alexandria during
December 1940 and January and
February 1941

) Up to 7/12/40, No.274 Sqdn.
) 7-12/12/40 F.A.A.
) 12-29/12/40 No.73 Sqdn.
) 29/12/40-10/1/41 F.A.A.
) 10-14/1/41 No.112 Sqdn.
) 14-26/1/41 F.A.A.
) 22/1/41-13/2/41 No.33 Sqdn.
) 13/2/41 No.274 Sqdn.

ORDERS OF BATTLE, MALTA, JUNE, SEPTEMBER, NOVEMBER, DECEMBER, 1940, JANUARY 1941

UNIT	LOCATION	AIRCRAFT	I.E.	I.R.	REMARKS
<u>June 10th, 1940</u>					
A.H.Q. Malta Fighter Flt. No. 3 A.A.C.U.	Valetta Hal Far Hal Far	Sea Gladiator	4	(Strength)	Formed 4/6/40.
<u>September 9th, 1940</u>					
A.H.Q. Malta Fighter Flight No.830 Squadron F.A.A. No. 3 A.A.C.U.	Valetta Luga Hal Far Hal Far	Hurricane Swordfish	8	4	Established at Luga with Hurricanes 2/8/40. Formed 1/7/40. Disbanded 19/9/40.
<u>November 30th, 1940</u>					
A.H.Q. Malta No.261 Squadron No.830 Squadron F.A.A. No.431 Flight G.R. No.228 Squadron	Valetta Luga Hal Far Luga Kalafrana	Hurricane Swordfish Glenn Martin Skua Sunderland	16 - 3 1 4	8 - 1 - 2	Arr. 19/9/40. Absorbed No.3 A.A.C.U. personnel. (22/9/40 3 A/C temporarily established at Malta. (6/11/40 Squadron permanently established Malta.
<u>December 31st, 1940</u>					
A.H.Q. Malta No.261 Squadron No.830 Squadron F.A.A. No.431 Flight G.R. No.228 Squadron No.148 Squadron	Valetta Luga Hal Far Luga Kalafrana Luga	Hurricane Swordfish Glenn Martin Sunderland Wellington	16 - 4 4 16	4 - 1 2 4	Formed at Luga during December.
<u>January 31st, 1941</u>					
A.H.Q. Malta No.261 Squadron No.830 Squadron No.228 Squadron No.148 Squadron No. 69 Squadron G.R.	Valetta Luga Kalafrana Luga Hal Far	Hurricane Swordfish Sunderland Wellington Glenn Martin	16 4 16 4	4 (Strength 28) 2 4 2	Formed in January from 431 Flight.

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APPENDIX X

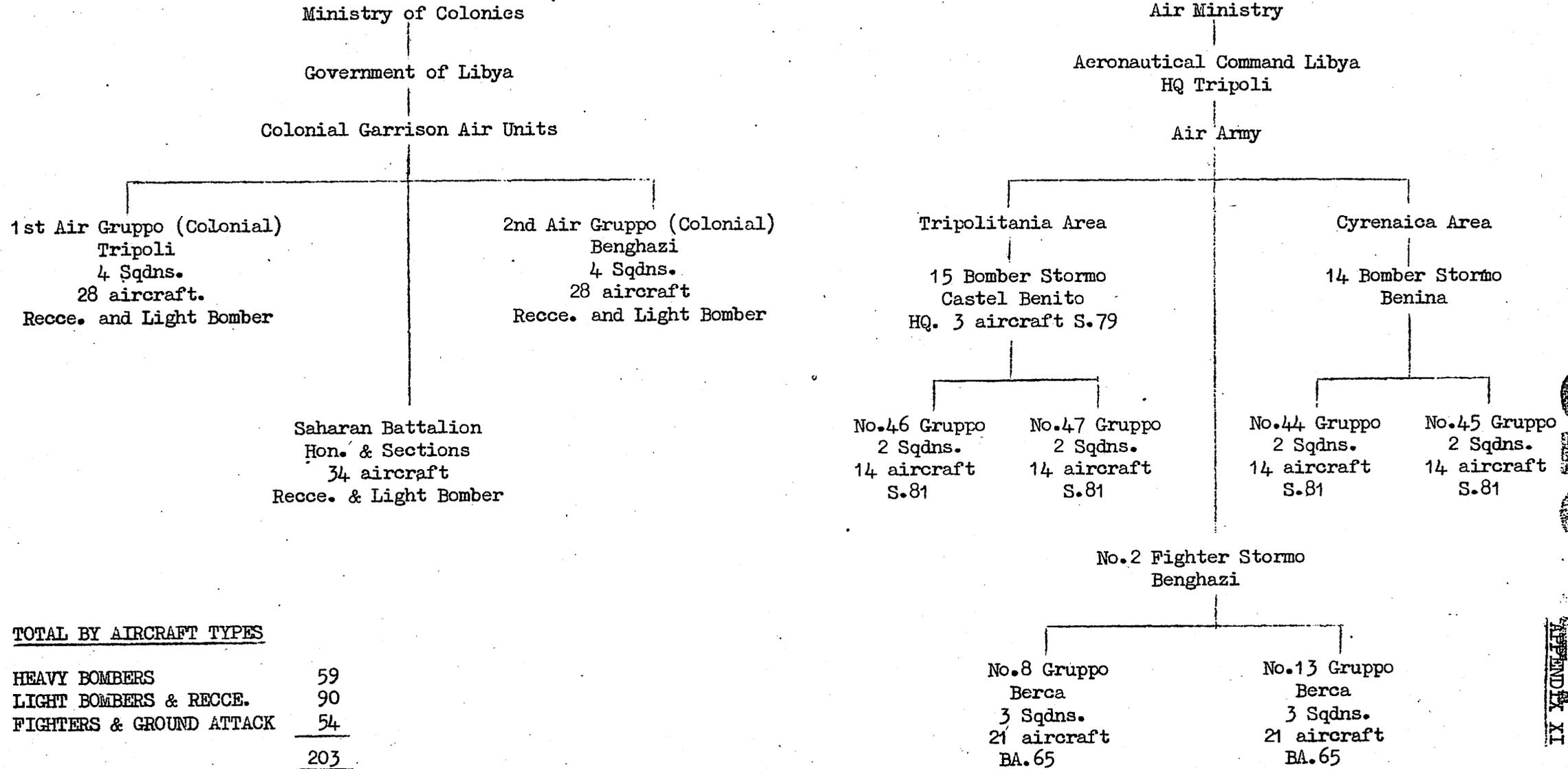
ORDER OF BATTLE OF ITALIAN AIR FORCE IN LIBYA - JANUARY 1938

Regiment	Wing	Sqdn.	Type	No. of a/c	Location	
No. 2 Mixed Fighter H.Q. Benghazi	No. 8	92	Breda 65	9	Benghazi	
		93	"	9	"	
		94	"	9	"	
	No. 13	77	C.R. 30	9	"	
		78	"	9	"	
		82	"	9	"	
No. 14 Bomber H.Q. Benina	No. 44	6	S. 81	6	Benina	
		7	"	6	"	
	No. 45	2	S. 79	6	"	
		22	"	6	"	
No. 15 Bomber H.Q. Castel Benito	No. 46	20	S. 81	6	Castel Benito	
		21	"	6	" "	
	No. 47	53	"	6	" "	
		54	"	6	" "	
3	6	14		102	Total	
In addition there are 8 Squadrons of the Colonial Air Force allocated to Libya, viz:						
None	No. 1 Tripoli C.P.	12	Ghebli	9	Mellaha	
		89	"	9	"	
		23	"	9	"	
		104	Rolbis	9	"	
		105	"	9	"	
	No. 2 Benghazi C.P.	26	Ghebli	9	Benghazi	
		16	"	9	Tobruk	
		37	Rolbis		?	
		2	8		72	Total
	3	8	22		174	Total in Libya

Note: Combined Plan 1939 puts the existing strength in Libya at that time as 181 aircraft. This included 51 modern long range bombers.

Above is Order of Battle of Italian Air Force in Libya for January 1938 as assessed by A.C.A.S.(I).

NORMAL ITALIAN AIR FORCE IN LIBYA



TOTAL BY AIRCRAFT TYPES

HEAVY BOMBERS	59
LIGHT BOMBERS & RECCE.	90
FIGHTERS & GROUND ATTACK	54
	<u>203</u>

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APPENDIX XI

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APPENDIX XII

CHIEFS OF STAFF APPRECIATION - APRIL 1939

	Bombers		Fighters	Army Co-op	Recce	Total
	L.R.	S.R.				
(1) Middle East	84	92	42	20	8	246
French N.A. Levant	37	66	54	124	42	323(2)
Italy	444		450	225	274	1,393
Libya & Dodecanese	96		90	81	9	276
East Africa	120			18		138
Spain	72		180	18		198

(1) Including Sudan, Kenya, Aden, Malta, Iraq

(2) Including 42 Naval aircraft

ITALIAN AIR FORCE IN LIBYA

Unit	Probable Location at 7/7/40	Approximate Strength	Types
14 Bomber Regiment	Cyrenaica	35	(19 - S. 81 16 - S. 79)
15 Bomber Regiment	Benina (with Detach: ment to Barce)	42	(7 - S. 81 35 - S. 79)
10 Bomber Regiment	Benina	30	S. 79
33 Bomber Regiment	Cyrenaica	30	S. 79
2 Fighter Regiment	El Adem or El Gubbi	74	CR.42
50 Ground Attack Regiment	El Gubbi or Berka	43	(27 - CR.32 16 - BA.65)
10 Fighter Wing	El Adem or El Gubbi	27	CR.42
73 Reconnaissance Wing	Cyrenaica	27	17 - RO.37 10 - CA.310
64 Reconnaissance Wing	Mellaba	6	RO.37
143 Squadron	Gulf of Bomba or Benghazi	9	Cant.2501
177 Squadron	Gulf of Bomba or Benghazi	9	(Cant.2501 or Cant.2506)
1 Colonial Wing	Mellaba Sirte Hon	12	Ghiblis
2 Colonial Wing	El Adem	14	(9 Ghiblis 5 - CA.310)
Saharan Battalions (Sections)	Hon Sirte Sebha Murzuk Cufra	22	Ghiblis

STRENGTH OF I.A.F. IN LIBYA AS AT 9/6/40

<u>Land Bombers</u>	<u>Present Strength</u>	<u>Projected Strength at End of 1940</u>
S.81	48	64
<u>Land Fighters</u>		
CR.32	54	72
Breda 65	54	72
<u>Land Recon.</u>		
RO. 1	9	12
RO.37	27	36
<u>Colonial A/C</u>		
Ghiblis	56	75
TOTALS	248	331

LOCATION AND STRENGTH OF ITALIAN AIR FORCE IN LIBYA ON 9/9/40

Formation and Component Units.	Full Estab. Strength.	Strength and Types of A/C. on 9/9/40.	Locations.
<u>No.14 (Bomber) Air Regiment</u>			
Nos.44 & 45 Wings: No. 6 Sqdn. } No. 7 Sqdn. }	18	17 - S. 79	El Adem
No. 2 Sqdn. } No.22 Sqdn. }	18	13 - S. 79	Derna
<u>No.15 (Bomber) Air Regiment</u>			
Nos.46 & 47 Wings: No.20 Sqdn. } No.21 Sqdn. } No.53 Sqdn. } No.54 Sqdn. }	36	32 - S. 79	H.Q. Marana (not confirmed) Benina
<u>No.10 (Bomber) Air Regiment</u>			
Nos.30 & 32 Wings: No.55 Sqdn. } No.56 Sqdn. } No.57 Sqdn. } No.58 Sqdn. }	36	28 - S. 79 3 - S. 79	Benina (No. 56 Sqdn. location not confirmed) Berka
<u>No.11 (Bomber) Air Regiment</u>			
No.33 (Bomber) Wing No.59 Sqdn. No.60 Sqdn.	18	16 - S. 79	Benina
<u>No.33 (Bomber) Air Regiment</u>			
Nos.35 & 36 Wings No.43 Sqdn. } No.44 Sqdn. } No.45 Sqdn. } No.46 Sqdn. }	36	16 - S. 79 26 - S. 79K	Sidi El Tinimi. Benina
<u>Unidentified Formation</u> <u>Bomber Transport</u>			
	?	15 - S. 82	Location Unknown.
<u>No. 2 (Fighter) Air Regiment</u>			
Nos.8 & 13 Wings No.92 Sqdn. } No.93 Sqdn. } No.94 Sqdn. } No.77 Sqdn. } No.78 Sqdn. } No.82 Sqdn. }	72	53 - CR. 42 6 - CR. 32 } 13 - CR. 42 }	Benghazi Castel Benito
<u>No.4 (Fighter) Air Regiment</u>			
Nos.9 & 10 Wings No.73 Sqdn. } No.96 Sqdn. } No.97 Sqdn. } No.84 Sqdn. } No.90 Sqdn. } No.91 Sqdn. }	72	32 - CR. 42 30 - CR. 42	Benghazi (believed) Tobruk (El Gubli)

Formation and Component Units.	Full Estab. Strength.	Strength and Types of A/C. on 9/9/40.	Locations.
No.50 (Ground Attack) Air Regiment			
Nos.12 & 16 Wings			
No.159 Sqdn. }		14 - CR. 42 }	Tamet
No.160 Sqdn. }		9 - BA. 65 }	
No.165 Sqdn. }	72	4 - RO. 41 }	
No.167 Sqdn. }			
No.168 Sqdn. }		15 - CR. 32 }	Tobruk
No.169 Sqdn. }		9 - BA. 65 }	(El Gubli)
No.18 (Fighter) Wing			
No.83 Sqdn. }			
No.85 Sqdn. }	36	36 - CR. 42	Location unknown.
No.95 Sqdn. }			
Unidentified (Fighter) Wing	36	15 - CR. 32	Location unknown.
Unidentified (Fighter) Wing	36	15 - Breda 88	Benina
No.65 (Fighter) Wing Composition Unknown	?	4 - AP. 1	Location unknown.
No.64 (Recco.) Wing			
No.122 }	18	18 - RO. 37 }	Mellaba
No.136 }		4 - RO. 1 }	
No.73 (Recco.) Wing			
No.127 Sqdn. }	18	27 - RO. 37	El Adem
No.137 Sqdn. }		6 - CA. 310	Tobruk (El Gubli)
No.143 (Sea Recco.) Sqdn. }			
No.142 (Sea Recco.) Sqdn. }			
No. ? (Sea Recco.) Sqdn. }	18	14 - Cant.2501	Gulf of Bomba Menelao Bay (not confirmed)
No. ? (Sea Recco.) Sqdn. }			
No. ? (Sea Recco.) Sqdn. }			
No.228 (Sea Bomber) Sqdn. }			
No.190 (Sea Bomber) Sqdn. }			
No.230 (Sea Bomber) Sqdn. }	12	12 - Cant. Z.506	Gulf of Bomba Menelao Bay
No.141 (Sea Bomber) Sqdn. }			
No. ? (Sea Bomber) Sqdn. }	3	2 - Cant. Z.506	Benghazi
No. ? (Sea Bomber) Sqdn. }			
No.1 (Colonial) Wing			
No.12 Sqdn. }			
No.89 Sqdn. }	24	22 - Ghiblis	Mellaba Sirte Hon.
No.99 Sqdn. }			
No.104 Sqdn. }			
No.2 (Colonial) Wing			
No.16 Sqdn. }			
No.23 Sqdn. }	12	7 - Ghiblis 5 - CA.310 2 - BA. 34 }	El Adem El Agheila

Formation and Component Units.	Full Estab. Strength.	Strength and Types of A/C. on 9/9/40.	Locations
<u>Saharan Battalion</u>			
Sections of 4 A/C. each at places named) No. 26 Sqdn. (Land Bomber))	22	29 - Ghiblis	Hon Ghat Sehba Murzuk Cufra
<u>No. 54 (Land Bomber) Wing</u>	18	13 - (Probably S. 79)	Benina (believed)
<u>No. 9 (Bomber) Air Regiment</u> <u>Nos. 26 and 29 Wings</u>			
No. 11 Sqdn.) No. 13 Sqdn.) No. 62 Sqdn.) No. 63 Sqdn.)	36	32 - S. 79	Derna (not confirmed)
<u>Unidentified Unit</u>	?	11 - CR. 42	Castel Benito (temporarily)
<u>No. 151 (Fighter Wing)</u>			
No. 366 Sqdn.) No. 367 Sqdn.) No. 368 Sqdn.)	36	30 - CR. 42	Garabulli (near Tripoli) (temporarily)
<u>No. 175 (Land Recco.) Sqdn.</u>	9	Not Known	Tobruk Area (possibly Menastir)
<u>Unidentified Unit</u>	?	2 - Cant. Z. 506	Meneloa Bay (Gulf of Bomba)

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APPENDIX XV

LOCATIONS AND STRENGTH OF ITALIAN AIR FORCE IN LIBYA 2.12.40

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>West Sector - Tripolitania - 9th Air Division.</u>		
<u>Bombers (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 15 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 46 Wing</u>		
No. 20 Squadron } No. 21 Squadron }	17 - S.79 (2.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (2.12.40.)
<u>No. 47 Wing</u>		
No. 53 Squadron } No. 54 Squadron }	15 - S.79 (2.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (2.12.40.)
<u>No. 41 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 59 Wing</u>		
No. 232 Squadron } No. 233 Squadron }	11 - S.79 (2.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (2.12.40.)
<u>No. 60 Wing</u>		
No. 234 Squadron } No. 235 Squadron }	10 - S.79 (2.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (2.12.40.)
<u>No. 26 (Bomber) Wing</u> <u>(of No. 9 Bomber Air Regt.)</u>		
No. 11 Squadron } No. 13 Squadron }	13 - S.79 (29.11.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (29.11.40.)
<u>H.Q. No. 9 Bomber Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 29 (Bomber) Wing</u>		
		Gambut (b)
<u>Recco. (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 64 (Recco.) Wing</u>		
No. 122 Squadron } No. 136 Squadron }	NIL - R.O. 37 (28.11.40.)	Mellaha (c) (28.11.40.)
<u>No. 67 (Recco.) Wing</u>		
No. (?) Squadron } No. 115 Squadron }	15 - CA. 310 (28.11.40.)	Mellaha (c) (28.11.40.)
<u>Recco. (SEA)</u>		
<u>(?) Section</u>		
	2 - CANT. Z. 501 (22.11.40.)	Tripoli (Harbour) (c) (22.11.40.)
<u>Colonial</u>		
<u>No. 1 (Colonial) Wing</u>		
No. 12 Squadron } (one section) } No. 89 Squadron } No. 104 Squadron }	18 - Ghiblis (28.11.40.)	Zuara (b) } } 5.9.40. Mellaha (b) } Sirte (b) } (Confirmed as located in West Sector on 28.11.40.)
<u>East Sector - Cyrenaica - 13th Air Division</u>		
<u>Bombers (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 14 (Bomber) Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 44 Wing</u>		
No. 6 Squadron } No. 7 Squadron }	17 - S.79 (7.9.40.)	El Tmimi (c) (2.12.40.)
	} Strength not confirmed	

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>No. 45 Wing</u> No. 2 Squadron } No. 22 Squadron }	13 - S.79) Strength not (7.9.40.) confirmed	El Tmimi (c) (2.12.40.)
<u>No. 10 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u> <u>No. 30 Wing</u> No. 55 Squadron } No. 56 Squadron }	28 - S.79	Benina (b)
<u>No. 32 Wing</u> No. 57 Squadron } No. 58 Squadron }	3 - S.79 (23.8.40.)	Berka (b) (23.8.40.)
<u>No. 33 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u> <u>No. 35 Wing</u> No. 43 Squadron } No. 44 Squadron } No. 36 Wing z } No. 45 Squadron } No. 46 Squadron }	16 - S.79 26 - S.79 (k) (23.8.40.)	El Tmimi (c) Benina (b) (23.8.40.)
<u>No. 33 (Bomber) Wing</u> (of No. 11 (Bomber) Air Regt.) No. 59 Squadron } No. 60 Squadron }	16 - S.79 (6.11.40.)	Location unknown but possibly at El Gazala
<u>No. 54 (Bomber) Wing</u> Component Squadrons not known.	18 - S.81 & S.79 (7.11.40.) (not confirmed)	Benina (c) (7.11.40.)
<u>Bomber Section</u>	5 - S.81 2 - S.79 (6.11.40.)	Benghasi (c) (6.11.40.)
<u>No. 278 (Bomber) Squadron</u> (Higher formation not known)	4 - S.79 (20.10.40.)	El Aden (c) (5.11.40.)
<u>Bomber - Recco.</u> <u>No. 175 Squadron</u>	9 - S.79(?)	Unknown but believed at advanced L.G. in East Sector. (2.12.40.)
<u>Bomber - Transport</u> <u>Unidentified Formation</u>	15 - S.82 (23.8.40.)	Berka (b) or Benina (b) (23.8.40.)
<u>Fighters (Land)</u> <u>No. 2 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u> <u>No. 8 Wing</u> No. 92 Squadron } No. 93 Squadron } No. 94 Squadron }	31 - G.R.42 (27.9.40.)	Advanced L.G. possibly Gambut or Menastir
<u>No. 13 Wing</u> No. 77 Squadron } No. 78 Squadron } No. 82 Squadron }	40 - G.R.42 (19.9.40.)	Gambut (b)

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>No. (Fighter) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 9 Wing</u>		
No. 73 Squadron } No. 96 Squadron } No. 97 Squadron }	30 - C.R.42 (30.11.40.)	El Adem (c) (28.11.40.)
<u>No. 10 Wing</u>		
No. 84 Squadron } No. 91 Squadron }	27 - C.R.42 (2.12.40.)	Berka (c) (2.12.40.) Benina (c) (No. 90 Sqdn.) (1.12.40.)
No. 90 Squadron)		
<u>No. 50 (Ground Attack) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 12 Wing</u>		
No.159 Squadron } No.160 Squadron } No.165 Squadron }	14 - C.R.32 13 - B.A.65 2 - R.O.41 (19.9.40.)	Tobruk (Crum El Chel) (b) (2.9.40.)
<u>No. 16 Wing</u>		
No.167 Squadron } No.168 Squadron } No.169 Squadron }	14 - C.R.32 8 - B.A.65 2 - R.O.41 (19.9.40.)	Tobruk (Crum El Chel) (b) (2.9.40.) Note: A Section of three R.O.41s is at El Tmimi.
<u>No. 5 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 7 Wing</u>		
No. 86 Squadron } No. 76 Squadron } No. 98 Squadron }	18 - Breda 88 (9.10.40.)	Benina (c) (Nos. 86 & 76 Sqdns.) (26.11.40.) with 1 A/C at Gazala El Gubbi (c) (No. 98 Sqdn.) (9.10.40.)
<u>No. 19 Wing</u>		
No.100 Squadron } No.101 Squadron } No.102 Squadron }	11 - Breda 88 (15.10.40.)	Berka or El Gubbi (b) (15.10.40.) with section of 4 A/C at Derna (El Fatayeh)
<u>No.151 (Fighter) Wing</u>		
No.366 Squadron } No.367 Squadron } No.368 Squadron }	29 - C.R.42 (22.11.40.)	Agedabia (b) (22.11.40.)
<u>Recco. (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 73 (Recco.) Wing</u>		
No.127 Squadron } No.137 Squadron }	13 - R.O.37 (26.11.40.)	Sollum (c) (27.11.40.)
<u>Colonial</u>		
<u>No. 2 (Colonial) Wing</u>		
No. 16 Squadron } No. 23 Squadron }	23 - Ghibli 5 - C.A.310 5 - S.81 1 - B.A.39 (26.11.40.)	El Adem (c) (5.9.40.)

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>Recco, (Sea)</u>		
No.142 Squadron (Section)	1 - CANT.Z.501 (2.11.40.)	Menelao Bay (b) (2.11.40.)
No.143 Squadron	7 - CANT.Z.501 (26.11.40.)	Menelao Bay (b) (26.11.40.)
No.145 Squadron	8 - CANT.Z.501 (19.10.40.)	Benghasi (c) (Juliana Harbour) (1.12.40.)
No.171 Squadron (Section)	3 - CANT.Z.501 (26.11.40.)	Menelao Bay (b) (26.11.40.)
No.288 Squadron (Section)	2 - CANT.Z.501 (16.11.40.)	Menelao Bay (b) (16.11.40.)
<u>Bomber (Sea)</u>		
No.141 Squadron	2 - CANT.Z.506 (19.10.40.)	Benghasi (b) (Juliana Harbour) (19.10.40.)
No.614 Squadron	5 - CANT.Z.506 (2.11.40.)	Menelao Bay (b) (2.11.40.)
<u>Saharan Battalion</u>	<u>In East and West Sectors</u>	
Headquarters		Hon (c)
No. 12 Squadron (Less 1 Section)		Beni-Ulid (c)
No. 26 Squadron	19 - Ghiblis (20.11.40.)	Cufra (c)
No. 99 Squadron		Hon (c)
One Section		Ghat (c)
One Section		Sebha (c)
One Section		Murzuk (c) (2.9.40.)
<u>Location Unknown</u>		
Unknown (Fighter) Unit	11 - C.R. 42 (8.11.40.)	Unknown

LOCATIONS AND STRENGTH OF ITALIAN AIR FORCE IN LIBYA

30.12.40.

Note:- The letters "NL" in left-hand margin denote New Location.
The letters "NI" in left-hand margin denote New Identification.

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>West Sector - Tripolitania.</u>		
<u>Fighters - Land</u>	6 - C.R.42 (Estimate)	Castel Benito (c) (25.12.40.)
<u>No. 52 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u>		
NL No. 22 Wing or No. 24 Wing	9 - G.50 (27.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (27.12.40.)
<u>Recco. (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 64 (Recco.) Wing</u>		
No.122 Squadron } No.136 Squadron }	NIL - R.O.37 (27.12.40.)	Mellaha (c) (27.12.40.)
NL <u>No. 67 (Recco.) Wing</u>		
No.115 Squadron	6 - C.A.310 (24.12.40.)	Mellaha (c) (24.12.40.)
NI <u>No. (?) (Recco.) Sqdn.</u>	6 - C.A.312 (believed) (27.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (27.12.40.)
<u>Recco. (Sea)</u>		
(?) Section	2 - CANT.Z.501 (22.11.40.)	Tripoli (Harbour) (c) (22.11.40.)
<u>Colonial</u>		
<u>No. 1 (Colonial) Wing</u>		
No. 12 Squadron } (one Section) } No. 89 Squadron } No.104 Squadron }	17 - Ghiblis (30.12.40.)	Zuara (b) } Mellaha (b) } 5.9.40. Sirte (b) } (Confirmed as located in West Sector on 27.12.40.)
<u>East Sector - Cyrenaica - 9th & 13th Air Divisions</u>		
<u>Bombers (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 26 (Bomber) Wing</u>		
No. 11 Squadron } No. 13 Squadron }	13 - S.79 (18.12.40.)	Derna (El Fetiah) (c) (28.12.40.)
<u>No. 29 Wing</u>		
No. 62 Squadron } No. 63 Squadron }	13 - S.79 (18.12.40.)	Derna (El Fetiah) (c) (28.12.40.)
<u>No. 14 (Bomber) Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 44 Wing</u>		
No. 6 Squadron } No. 7 Squadron }	13 - S.79 (9.12.40.)	El Tmimi (c) (28.12.40.)
<u>No. 45 Wing</u>		
No. 2 Squadron } No. 22 Squadron }	7 - S.79 (9.12.40.)	El Tmimi (c) (28.12.40.)

Note:- The letters "NL" in left-hand margin denote New Location.
The letters "NI" in left-hand margin denote New Identification.

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>No. 15 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u> <u>No. 46 Wing</u> No. 20 Squadron } No. 21 Squadron }	11 - S.79 (22.12.40.)	Sidi El Magrun (b) (15.12.40.)
<u>No. 47 Wing</u> No. 53 Squadron } NL No. 54 Squadron }	14 - S.79 (25.12.40.)	Gazala (c) (25.12.40.)
<u>No. 41 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u> <u>No. 59 Wing</u> No.232 Squadron } No.233 Squadron }	8 - S.79 (25.12.40.)	El Tmimi (c) (14.12.40.)
<u>No. 60 Wing</u> No.234 Squadron } No.236 Squadron }	8 - S.79 (25.12.40.)	El Tmimi (c) (14.12.40.)
<u>No. 10 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u> <u>No. 30 Wing</u> No. 55 Squadron } No. 56 Squadron }	24 - S.79 (estimated)	Benina (b) (Presence in Libya confirmed 4.12.40.)
<u>No.32 Wing</u> No. 57 Squadron } No. 58 Squadron }		
<u>No. 33 (Bomber) Wing</u> <u>(of No. 11 (Bomber) Air Regt.)</u> No. 59 Squadron } No. 60 Squadron }	12 - S.79 (estimated)	El Gazala (c) (20.12.40.)
<u>East Sector - Cyrenaica - 9th & 13th Air Divisions</u>		
<u>No. 34 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u> <u>No. 52 Wing</u> No.214 Squadron } No.215 Squadron } <u>No. 53 Wing</u> No.216 Squadron } No.217 Squadron }	24 - S.79 (15.12.40.)	Benina (c) (18.12.40.)
<u>No. 42 (Bomber) Wing</u> <u>(of the 12th Air Regt.)</u> No.206 Squadron } No.207 Squadron }	12 - S.79 (15.12.40.)	El Tmimi (c) (18.12.40.)
<u>No. 54 (Bomber) Wing</u> Component Squadrons not known.	8 - S.81 10 - S.79 (7.11.40.)	Benina (c) (7.11.40.) (Existence confirmed 11.12.40.)
<u>Special Bomber Wing</u>	5 - S.82 5 - S.79 (28.12.40.)	Benghasi (c) (22.12.40.)
<u>No.278 (Torpedo) Squadron</u>	7 - S.79 (27.12.40.)	Benina (c) (22.12.40.)

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<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>BOMBER - Transport Unidentified Formation</u>	15 - S.82 (Estimated)	Berka (b) or Benina (b)
<u>Fighters (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 2 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 8 Wing</u>		
No. 92 Squadron)		
NL No. 93 Squadron)	27 - C.R.42	Benina (b)
No. 94 Squadron)	(Estimated)	(21.12.40.)
<u>No. 13 Wing</u>		
NL No. 77 Squadron)	27 - C.R.42	Benghasi (c)
No. 78 Squadron)	(Estimated)	Berka (B)
No. 82 Squadron)		(21.12.40.)
<u>No. 4 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 9 Wing</u>		
No. 73 Squadron)	31 - C.R.42	Gazala (b)
NL No. 96 Squadron)	(25.12.40.)	(25.12.40.)
No. 97 Squadron)		
<u>No. 10 Wing</u>		
No. 84 Squadron)		
NL No. 90 Squadron)	35 - C.R.42	El Tmimi (b)
No. 91 Squadron)	(27.12.40.)	(12.12.40.)
<u>No. 50 (Ground Attack) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 12 Wing</u>		
No.159 Squadron)	3 - C.R. 32	
No.160 Squadron)	18 - B.A.65	El Gubbi (c)
No.165 Squadron)	(27.12.40.)	(13.12.40.)
<u>No. 16 Wing</u>		
No.167 Squadron)	10 - C.R.32	El Gubbi (c)
No.168 Squadron)	8 - B.A.65	(13.12.40.)
No.169 Squadron)	2 - R.O.41	Note:- A Section of 3-RO.41s to be at El Tmimi
<u>No. 5 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 7 Wing</u>		
No. 86 Squadron)	18 - Breda 88	Benina (c)
No. 76 Squadron)	(9.10.40.)	(Nos.86 & 76 Sqdns.) (26.11.40.) with 1 A/C at Gazala
No. 98 Squadron)		El Gubbi (c) (No. 98 Sqdn.) (9.10.40.)
<u>No. 19 Wing</u>		
No.100 Squadron)	11 - Breda 88	Berka
No.101 Squadron)	(15.10.40.)	or
No.102 Squadron)	(15.10.40.)	El Gubbi (b) (15.10.40.) with section of 4 A/C at Derna (El Fatayeh)
<u>No.151 (Fighter) Wing</u>		
No.366 Squadron)	24 - C.R.42	El Gubbi
No.367 Squadron)	(27.12.40.)	(or Satellite) (c)
No.368 Squadron)		(11.12.40.)

Note:- The letters "NL" in left-hand margin denote New Location.
The letters "NI" in left-hand margin denote New Identification.

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>No. 23 (Fighter) Wing</u> (of the 3rd Air Regt.)		
No. 70 Squadron } NL No. 74 Squadron } No. 75 Squadron }	20 - C.R.42 (27.12.40.)	El Tmimi (b) (28.12.40.)
<u>No.151 (Fighter) Squadron</u> (of the 2nd Wing)		
<u>No. 6 Air Regt.</u>	10 - C.R.42 (20.12.40.)	Benina (b)
<u>Recco - (Land)</u>		
<u>No.175 (Strategical Recco.) Squadron</u>	6 - S.79 (3.12.40.)	Benina (c) (27.12.40.)
<u>No. 73 (Recco.) Wing</u>		
No.127 Squadron } No.137 Squadron }	13 - R.O.37 (4.12.40.)	Unknown
<u>No. 67 (Recco.) Wing</u>		
NL No. 33 Squadron	6 - C.A.310 3 - R.O.37 (23.12.40.)	El Gubbi (c) (19.12.40.)
<u>Colonial</u>		
<u>No. 2 (Colonial) Wing</u>		
No. 16 Squadron } No. 23 Squadron }	21 - Ghibli 4 - C.A.310 5 - S.81 1 - B.A.39 (4.12.40.)	Unknown
<u>Recco. (Sea)</u>		
No.142 Squadron } (Section) }	1 - CANT.Z.501 (29.12.40.)	Menelao Bay (b) (18.12.40.)
No.143 Squadron }	7 - CANT.Z.501 (29.12.40.)	Benghasi (Juliana Harbour) (c) (19.12.40.)
No.145 Squadron	8 - CANT.Z.501 (19.10.40.)	Benghasi (c) (Juliana Harbour) (1.12.40.)
No.171 Squadron (Section)	3 - CANT.Z.501 (18.12.40.)	Menelao Bay (b) (18.12.40.)
<u>Bomber (Sea)</u>		
No.141 Squadron (Section)	2 - CANT.Z.506 (19.10.40.)	Benghasi (b) (Juliana Harbour) (19.10.40.)
No.614 Squadron	3 - CANT.Z.506 (2.11.40.)	Menelao Bay (b) (2.11.40.)
<u>In East and West Sectors)</u>		
<u>Saharan Battalion</u>		
Headquarters } No. 12 Squadron } (less 1 section) }		Hon (c) Ben-Ulid (c)
No. 26 Squadron } No. 99 Squadron } One Section } One Section } One Section }	17 - Ghibli (6.12.40.)	Cufra (c) Hon (c) Ghat (c) Sebha (c) Murzuk (c) (2.9.40.)

LOCATIONS AND STRENGTH OF ITALIAN AIR FORCE IN LIBYA

6.1.41. (amended to 3.2.41.)

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>West Sector - Tripolitania</u>		
<u>Fighters - Land</u>		
No. 2 (Fighter) Air Regt.	6 - C.R.42 (estimated)	Castel Benito (c) 25.12.40.
No. 23 (?) (Fighter) Wing (of No. 3 Fighter Air Regt.) No. 70(?) Squadron	9 - G.50 (27.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (27.12.40.)
No. 22 (?) (Fighter) Wing of No. 52 (Fighter) Air Regt.	21 - G.50 (31.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (31.12.40.)
<u>Recco. (Land)</u>		
No. 64 (Recco.) Wing No.122 Squadron } No.136 Squadron }	1 - R.O. 37 (3.2.41.)	Mellaha (c) (31.12.40.)
No. 67 (Recco.) Wing No.115 Squadron	6 - C.A.310 (31.12.40.)	Mellaha (c) (31.12.40.)
No.(?) (Recco.) Squadron	7 - C.A.312 31.12.40.(believed)	Castel Benito (c) (31.12.40.)
<u>Recco. (Sea)</u>		
? Section	2 - Cant.Z.501 (22.11.40.)	Tripoli (Harbour) (b) (22.11.40.)
<u>Colonial</u>		
No. 1 (Colonial) Wing No. 12 Squadron } (one Section) } No. 89 Squadron } No.104 Squadron }	6 - Ghiblis (3.2.41.)	Mellaha (c) (3.2.41.)
(The following moved from the Eastern Sector since 6.1.40.)		
<u>Bombers (Land)</u>		
No. 15 (Bomber) Air Regt. No. 46 Wing No. 20 Squadron } No. 21 Squadron }	27 - S.19 (3.2.41.)	Unknown possibly Zuara or Azizia (3.2.41.)
No. 47 Wing No. 53 Squadron } No. 54 Squadron }		
No. 41 (Bomber) Air Regt. No. 59 Wing No.232 Squadron } No.233 Squadron }	27 - S.79 (3.2.41.)	Unknown, possibly Zuara or Azizia. (3.2.41.)
No. 60 Wing No.234 Squadron } No.235 Squadron }		
No. 34 (Bomber) Air Regt. No. 52 Wing No.214 Squadron } No.215 Squadron }	4 - S.79 (3.2.41.)	Castel Benito (2.3.41.) (c)

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>No. 53 Wing</u>		
No. 216 Squadron } No. 217 Squadron }	3 - S.79 (3.2.41.)	
<u>No. 54 (Light Bomber) Wing</u>		
Component Squadrons Not known	2 - S.79 (3.2.41.)	Castel Benito (c) (3.2.41.)
<u>Special Bomber Wing</u>	5 - S.79 5 - S.79 (28.12.40.)	Castel Benito (c) (3.2.41.)
<u>No. 278 (Torpedo) Squadron</u>	4 - S.79 (3.2.41.)	Castel Benito (3.2.41.)
<u>Fighter (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 50 (Ground Attack) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 12 Wing</u>		
No. 159 Squadron } No. 160 Squadron } No. 165 Squadron }	6 - C.R.42 14 - B.A. 65 (29.12.40.)	Unknown, possibly Zuara or Azizia (3.2.41.)
<u>No. 16 Wing</u>		
No. 167 Squadron } No. 168 Squadron } No. 169 Squadron }	7 - C.R.42 (confirmed) 10 - C.R.32 } 3.2.41 8 - B.A. 65 } estimated 2 - R.O.41 }	Mellaha (c) (3.2.41.)
<u>No. 23 (Fighter) Wing of the 3rd Air Regt.</u>		
No. 74 Squadron } No. 75 Squadron }	17 - C.R.42 (3.2.41.)	Unknown (3.2.41.)
<u>Recco. (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 175 (Strategical Recco) Sqn.</u>	7 - S.79 (3.2.41.)	Castel Benito (c) (3.2.41.)
<u>No. 67. (Recco.) Wing</u>	6 - C.A. 310	
No. 33 Squadron	3 - R.O. 37 (23.12.40.)	Sidi El Magrun
No. 115 Squadron	? - C.A. 310 ? - R.O. 37	
<u>East Sector - Cyrenaica - 13th Air Division Bombers - (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 9 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 26 (Bomber) Wing</u>		
No. 11 Squadron } No. 13 Squadron } No. 29 Wing	14 - S.79 (30.12.40.)	Derna (Martuba) possibly (31.12.40.)
No. 62 Squadron } No. 63 Squadron }	14 - S.79 (30.12.40.)	Derna (Martuba) possibly (3.2.41.)
<u>No. 14 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u>		
<u>No. 44 Wing</u>		
No. 6 Squadron } No. 7 Squadron }	13 - S.79 (9.12.40.)	El Tonioni (c) (28.12.40.)
<u>No. 45 Wing</u>		
No. 2 Squadron } No. 22 Squadron }	7 - S.79 (9.12.40.)	El Tonioni (c) (28.12.40.)

(H.Q. was removed to Castel Benito)

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>No. 10 (Bomber) Air Regt.</u> No. 30 Wing No. 55 Squadron)	20 - S.79 (Estimated)	Benina (b) (presence in Libya confirmed 4.12.40.)
<u>No. 33 (Bomber) Wing</u> (cf No. 11 (Bomber) Air Regt.) No. 59 Squadron) No. 60 Squadron)	10 - S.79 (Estimated)	El Gazala (c) (20.12.40.)
<u>No. 42 (Bomber) Wing</u> (of the 12th Air Regt.) No. 206 Squadron) No. 207 Squadron)	12 - S.79 (15.12.40.)	El Tonioni (c) (18.12.40.)
<u>No. 278 (Torpedo) Squadron</u> (Section also in Next Section)	2 - S.79	Unknown
<u>Bomber-Transport</u> <u>Unidentified formation</u>	10 - S.82	Berka (b) or Benina (b)
<u>Fighters - (Land)</u>		
<u>No. 2 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u> No. 8 Wing No. 92 Squadron) No. 93 Squadron) No. 94 Squadron)	20 - C.R.42 (Estimated)	Benina (b) (21.12.40.)
<u>No. 13 Wing</u> No. 77 Squadron) No. 78 Squadron) No. 82 Squadron)	20 - C.R.42 (Estimated)	Benghazi (c) Berka (b) (22.12.40.)
<u>No. 4 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u> No. 9 Wing No. 96 Squadron) No. 73 Squadron) No. 97 Squadron)	31 - C.R.42 (25.12.40.)	El Tonioni (b) (25.12.40.)
<u>No. 13 Wing</u> No. 84 Squadron) No. 90 Squadron) No. 91 Squadron)	34 - C.R.42 (27.12.40.)	Gazala (Satl) (b) (30.12.40.)
<u>No. 5 (Fighter) Air Regt.</u> No. 7 Wing No. 86 Squadron) No. 76 Squadron) No. 98 Squadron)	10 - Breda 88 (Estimated)	Benghazi (b)
<u>No. 19 Wing</u> No. 100 Squadron) No. 101 Squadron) No. 102 Squadron)	10 - Breda 88 (Estimated)	Benghazi (b)
<u>No. 151 (Fighter) Wing</u> No. 366 Squadron) No. 367 Squadron) No. 368 Squadron)	24 - C.R.42 (31.12.40.)	Agedalia (c) With a section at Benina (b) (31.12.40.)

<u>Formation and Component Units</u>	<u>Strength and Types of A/C on date shown</u>	<u>Location on date shown</u> (b) = believed (c) = confirmed
<u>No. 151 (Fighter) Squadron of the 2nd Wing</u> No. 6 Air Regiment	10 - C.R.42 (20.12.40.)	Benina (b)
<u>Recco - Land</u> <u>No. 73 (Recco.) Wing</u> No. 127 Squadron No. 137 Squadron	13 - R.O.37 (4.12.40.)	Unknown
<u>Colonial</u> <u>No. 2 (Colonial) Wing</u> No. 16 Squadron } No. 23 Squadron }	21 - Ghibli) 4 - C.A. S10) 4.12.40. 5 - S.81) 1 - S.A. 39	El Gubli (2.1.41.) but probably withdrawn.
<u>Recco - (Sea)</u> No. 142 Squadron (Section) No. 143 Squadron No. 143 Squadron No. 145(?) Squadron No. 171 Squadron (Section)	1 - CANT.Z.501 (29.12.40.) 4 - CANT.Z.501 (30.12.40.) 3 - CANT.Z.501 2 - CANT.Z.501 (2.1.41.) (photo recce.) 3 - CANT.Z.501 (or 506) 29.12.40.	Menclao Bay (b) (18.12.40.) Benghazi (Juliana Harbour) (30.12.40.) Menclao Bay (c) (30.12.40.) Benghazi (c) (Juliana Harbour) (2.1.41.) Menclao Bay (b) (18.12.40.)
<u>Bomber - (Sea)</u> No. 141(?) Squadron (Section) No. 614 Squadron	1 - CANT.Z.506 (2.1.41.) (photo recce.) 3 - CANT.Z.506 (2.11.40.)	Benghazi (b) (Juliana Harbour) 2.1.41. (photo recce.) Menclao Bay (b) (2.11.40.)
<u>In East and West Sectors</u> <u>Saharan Battalion</u> Headquarters } No. 12 Squadron } (Less 1 section) } No. 26 Squadron } No. 99 Squadron } One section } One section } One section } One section }	17 - Ghibli (6.12.40.)	Hon (c) Beni-Mid (c) Cufra (c) Hon (c) Ghat (c) (2.9.40.) Sebha (c) Murzuk (c) Giald (c)

ENEMY AIRCRAFT LOSSES IN EGYPT-LIBYA FROM
11/6/40 - 11/2/41.

Note:- Other Types and unidentified aircraft are included in the totals.

Date	Aircraft	Confirmed	Unconfirmed
11/6/40 - 21/6/40	Fighters	4	1
	Bombers	2	2
	Total	16	3
21/6/40 - 28/6/40	Fighters	2	-
	Bombers	2	-
	Total	4	-
28/6/40 - 5/7/40	Fighters	15	2
	Bombers	-	1
	Total	16	4
5/7/40 - 15/7/40	Fighters	-	-
	Bombers	-	3
	Total	-	3
15/7/40 - 22/7/40	Fighters	-	-
	Bombers	1	-
	Total	1	-
22/7/40 - 29/7/40	Fighters	8	5
	Bombers	7	-
	Total	15	5
29/7/40 - 5/8/40	Fighters	6	-
	Bombers	-	-
	Total	6	-
5/8/40 - 12/8/40	Fighters	15	-
	Bombers	1	-
	Total	16	-
12/8/40 - 19/8/40	Fighters	-	-
	Bombers	11	2
	Total	14	2
19/8/40 - 26/8/40	Fighters	-	-
	Bombers	1	2
	Total	1	2
26/8/40 - 2/9/40	Fighters	-	1
	Bombers	1	-
	Total	1	2
2/9/40 - 9/9/40	Fighters	-	-
	Bombers	-	-
	Total	1	1

/9/9/40

Date	Aircraft	Confirmed	Unconfirmed
9/9/40 - 16/9/40	Fighters Bombers Total	- 13 14	- 1 2
16/9/40 - 23/9/40	Fighters Bombers Total	1 12 13	2 - 3
23/9/40 - 30/9/40	Fighters Bombers Total	7 4 11	- - -
30/9/40 - 7/10/40	Fighters Bombers Total	- - -	- - -
7/10/40 - 14/10/40	Fighters Bombers Total	- - 1	- - 1
14/10/40 - 21/10/40	Fighters Bombers Total	- - -	- - -
21/10/40 - 28/10/40	Fighters Bombers Total	- - -	1 - 1
28/10/40 - 4/11/40	Fighters Bombers Total	1 8 9	1 3 4
4/11/40 - 11/11/40	Fighters Bombers Total	- - -	- - -
11/11/40 - 18/11/40	Fighters Bombers Total	1 3 4	- - -
18/11/40 - 25/11/40	Fighters Bombers Total	6 - 6	3 - 4
25/11/40 - 2/12/40	Fighters Bombers Total	4 - 4	2 - 2
2/12/40 - 9/12/40	Fighters Bombers Total	1 3 4	- - -

/9/12/40

3.

Date	Aircraft	Confirmed	Unconfirmed
9/12/40 - 16/12/40	Fighters Bombers Total	49 18 76 67	13 5 18
16/12/40 - 22/12/40	Fighters Bombers Total	8 11 19	7 4 11
22/12/40 - 30/12/40	Fighters Bombers Total	3 6 9	6 2 8
30/12/40 - 6/1/41	Fighters Bombers Total	12 7 29	2 1 6
6/1/41 - 14/1/41	Fighters Bombers Total	5 4 17	1 - 1
14/1/41 - 21/1/41	Fighters Bombers Total	1 2 5	- - -
21/1/41 - 28/1/41	Fighters Bombers Total	5 1 7	- - -
28/1/41 - 4/2/41	Fighters Bombers Total	6 4 19	1 - 1
4/2/41 - 11/2/41	Fighters Bombers Total	1 3 7	- - -
	GRAND TOTALS	345 336	84

SECRET

APPENDIX XIX

STATEMENT OF AIRCRAFT STRENGTH BY SQUADRONS IN
MED.M.E. AREA 1ST AND 15TH DECEMBER, 1940

Squadron No.	Type of Aircraft	1st December 1940		15th December 1940	
		Serviceable	Unserviceable	Serviceable	Unserviceable
<u>Mediterranean</u>					
261	Hurricane	11	3	12	2
	Sea Gladiator	3	-	-	3
148	Wellington	12	4	12	5
<u>Middle East</u>					
45	Blenheim	13	2	14	3
55	"	14	1	12	3
11	"	In process of transfer from Aden		2	1
39	"			3	1
113	" IV	13	2	13	2
216	(Bombay	9	1	9	-
	(Valentia	6	1	8	-
6	Lysander	12	3	10	4
3 R.A.A.F.	(Gauntlet	5	1	-	6
	(Gladiator	10	2	9	4
	(Lysander	6	-	9	4
250	(Gladiator I	3	1	3	1
	(" II	-	-	6	-
112	(Gladiator I	19	7	10	10
	(" II	4	-	4	-
274	Hurricane	15	1	15	5
33	"	14	6	19	4
208	(Hurricane	6	-	6	-
	(Lysander	9	1	10	-
70	(Valentia	2	-	-	-
	(Wellington	8	6	9	5
37	Wellington	11	-	9	3
38	"	14	-	13	2
73	Hurricane	In process of transfer from U.K.		20	-
Totals		219	42	234	62

C.S.B. 3.

27.3.47.

G.131954

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APPENDIX XX

SUMMARY OF BOMBING OPERATIONS - FROM MALTA

(October 28th - December 8th)

PORTS AND BASES

Aircraft Employed:- Heavy Bombers : Wellingtons

<u>Target</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Number of Effective Sorties</u>			<u>TOTALS</u>
		<u>Heavy</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Light</u>	
Naples	2 Nov.	10	-	-	10
Naples	9/10 "	5	-	-	5
Taranto	13/14 "	10	-	-	10
Taranto	22/23 "	1	-	-	1
Naples	2/3 Dec.	4	-	-	4
		30	-	-	30

AERODROMES & LANDING GROUNDS

Aircraft Employed:- Heavy Bombers : Wellingtons

<u>Target</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Number of Effective Sorties</u>			<u>TOTALS</u>
		<u>Heavy</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Light</u>	
Catania	2/3 Dec.	1	-	-	1
Augusta	2/3 "	1	-	-	1
Castel Benito	7/8 "	11	-	-	11
Mellaho	7/8 "	3	-	-	3
		16	-	-	16

SUMMARY OF BOMBING OPERATIONS - FROM MALTA

9th December, 1940 - 28th February, 1941

Ports and Bases

Aircraft employed:- Heavy Bombers: Wellingtons, 148 Sqdn., F.A.A.
aircraft: Swordfish

Number of Effective Sorties

<u>Target</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Heavy</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Misc.</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Crotone	13/14 Dec. 1940	1	-	-	1
Naples	14/15 " "	8	-	-	8
Tripoli	13/14 " "	-	-	1+	1+
"	20/21 " "	-	-	10	10
"	23/24 " "	9	-	-	9
Naples	29/30 " "	7	-	-	7
Taranto	30/31 " "	5	-	-	5
Crotone	30/31 " "	1	-	-	1
Palermo	30/31 " "	1	-	-	1
Tripoli	1/2 Jan. 1941	10	-	-	10
"	5/6 " "	5	-	-	5
"	6/7 " "	5	-	-	5
Naples	8/9 " "	8	-	-	8
Palermo	8/9 " "	2	-	-	2
Messina	9/10 " "	7	-	-	7
Palermo	10/11 " "	-	-	6	6
Syracuse	21/22 " "	1	-	-	1
Naples	27/28 " "	2	-	-	2
Tripoli	31/1 Feb. 1941	6	-	-	6
"	8/9 " "	-	-	6	6
"	24/25 " "	9	-	-	9

Aerodromes and Landing Grounds

Aircraft employed:- Heavy bombers: Wellingtons, 148 Squadron.

Number of Effective Sorties

<u>Target</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Heavy</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Misc.</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Castel Benito	20/21 Dec. 1940	9	-	-	9
" "	23/24 " "	1	-	-	1
Catania	12/13 Jan. 1941	10	-	-	10
"	15/16 " "	9	-	-	9
"	20/21 " "	8	-	-	8
Comiso	21/22 " "	1	-	-	1
Augusta	21/22 " "	1	-	-	1
Catania	21/22 " "	3	-	-	3
Naples (Capodachinus)	27/28 " "	3	-	-	3
Catania	27/28 " "	3	-	-	3
Comiso	27/28 " "	1	-	-	1
Castel Benito	2/3 Feb. 1941	7	-	-	7
Comiso & Catania	11/12 " "	4	-	-	4
Catania, Comiso & Gela	15/16 " "	3	-	-	3
Catania	20/21 " "	4	-	-	4
Comiso	20/21 " "	2	-	-	2
		69	-	-	69

COFY

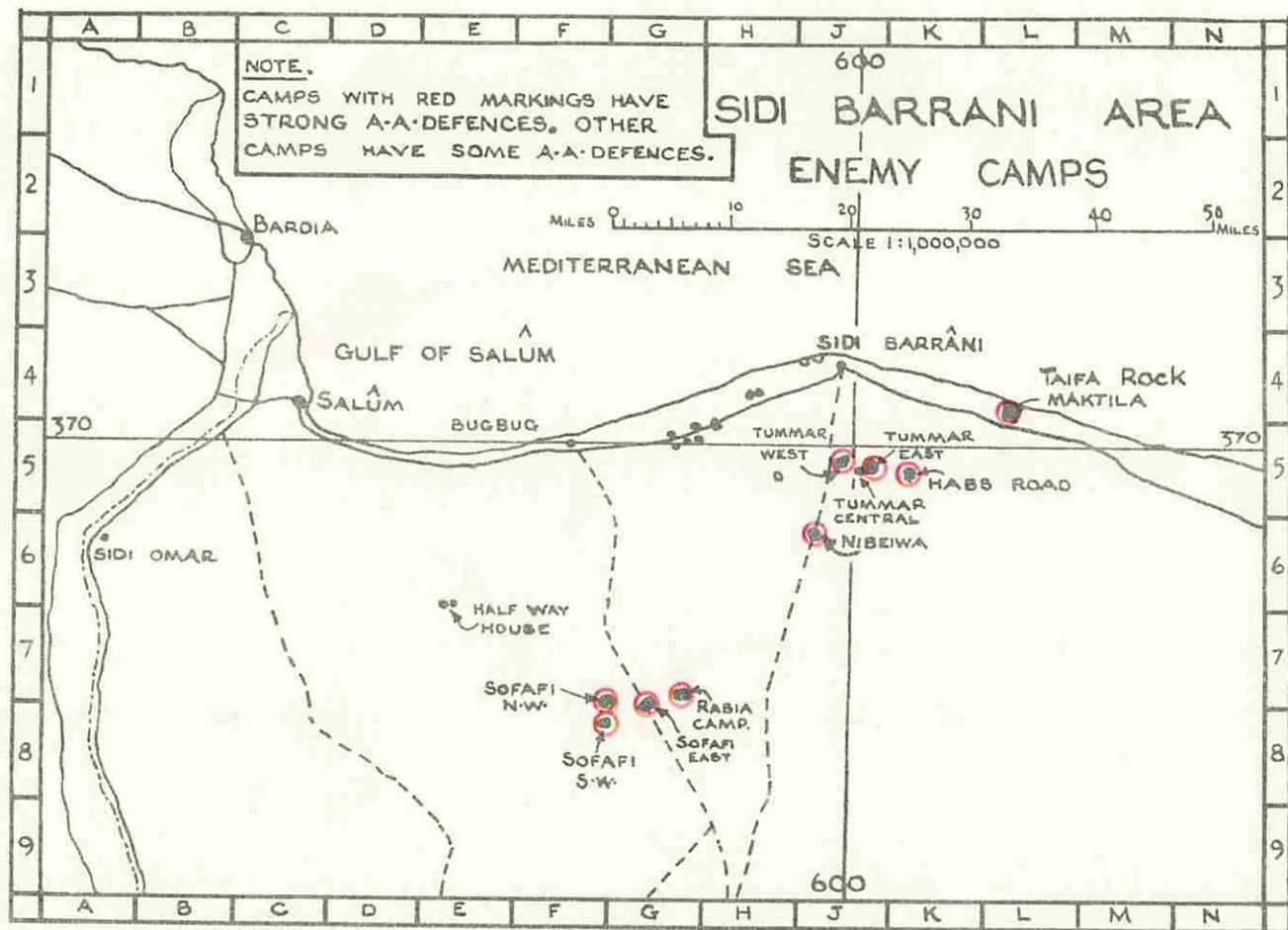
TO: 33 Squadron

FROM: H.Q., 202 Group

A.978

DATE: 6/12

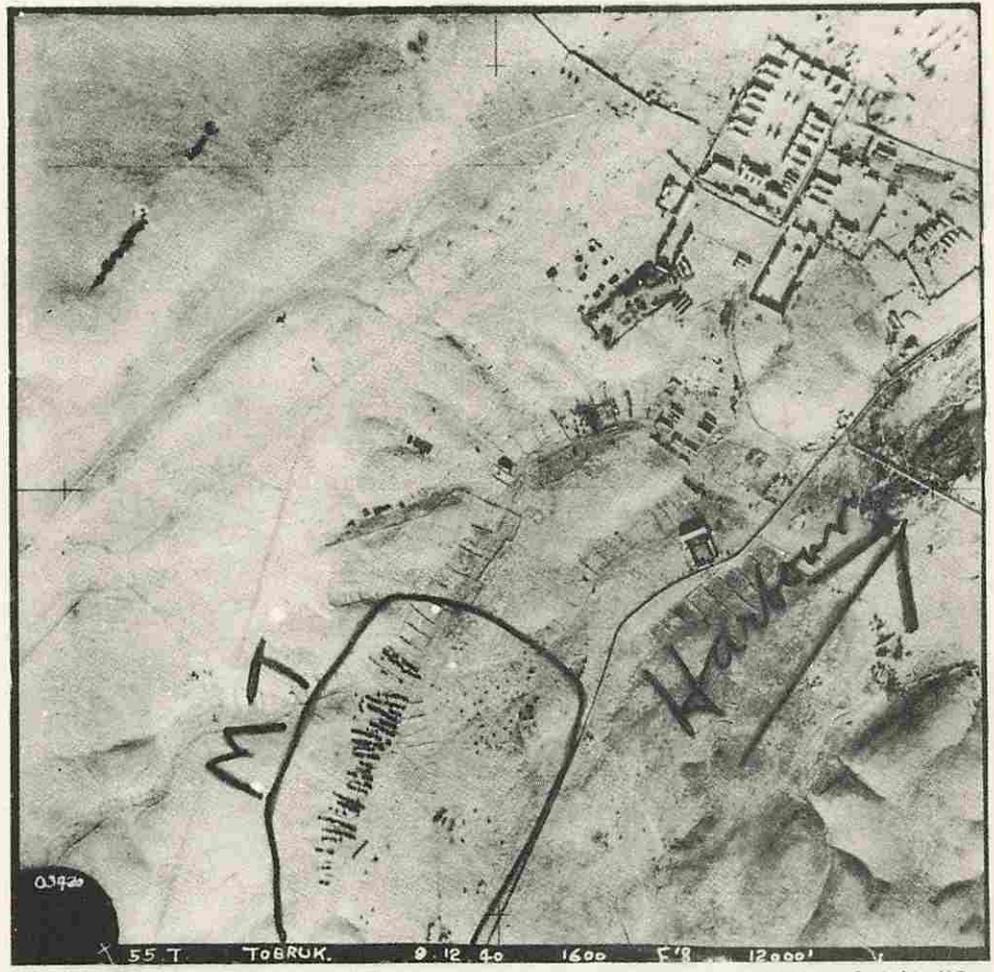
Most Secret. Whenever 33 Squadron aircraft are ordered to attack M.T. on the move, or motorised troops on the move, the following standing orders will apply:- Pilots are to consult the diagrams issued to 33 pilots (herewith). 33 Pilots are to avoid attacking any of the camps shown in red; instead M.T. and motorised troops or second line M.T. Vehicles are highly desirable as 33 targets as A.A. fire cannot effectively be brought to bear on the move. For operational reasons Pilots of 33 are to comply with the following directions whenever possible. (a) Refuel at BIR KENAYIS outward bound. (b) Climb to 20,000 ft. to avoid EA. Watch for movement of enemy M.T. by observing dust and when in position to attack dive rapidly to attack flying along the length of the road to infalide the various targets. (c) On having committed your aircraft to a low flying attack keep on at high speed and do not manoeuvre in climbing turns near A.A. fire. Do not attack M.T. second line columns or motorised troops in the defended positions guarded by A.A. and shown in red on the diagram map. Objects of 33 squadrons potential low flying attacks. (a) To seriously damage the enemy by casualties to personnel and equipment. (b) To hit him hard at his weakest point. (c) To place E.A. Fighters on the defensive so they will be ordered to be withdrawn to ineffectively chase Hurricanes withdrawing at higher speed.



A.H.B.1 MAP No. 306

SECRET

SECRET



A.H.B.I DIA.No.112

(Dept. C.A.)

COFY

S.35818/Pt.II(S.9)

November, 1939.

S E C R E T

Sir,

I am commanded by the Air Council to inform you that they have had under consideration certain difficulties which appear to have arisen regarding the relations of the Air Officer in charge of Administration and the Senior Air Staff Officer in connection with the control of Command Headquarters policy in the temporary absence of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief.

2. The organisation provides that the Air Officer in charge of Administration should be senior to the Senior Air Staff Officer, and in consequence, there has developed a tendency for the Air Officer in charge of Administration, by virtue of his seniority, to give rulings on matters of policy in the temporary absence of the Commander. It is conceivable that such rulings might, under certain circumstances, be given without the knowledge of the Senior Air Staff Officer and that there is a danger that the continuity of policy might be broken. It will readily be appreciated that the Air Officer in charge of Administration who deals mainly with personnel and equipment matters, might not necessarily be aware of all the factors involved in the operation policy decisions of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, which are the primary concern of the Air Staff.
3. For this reason, therefore, the Council feel that it is inappropriate that, in the temporary absence of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief the rulings referred to should be given by the Air Officer in charge of Administration and they have accordingly decided that in the temporary absence of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief the responsibility for giving decisions on matters concerning operations and higher policy should properly rest with the Senior Air Staff Officer.
4. In reaching this conclusion the Council do not wish to disturb the existing arrangements whereby, in the event of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief becoming a casualty in emergency, the Senior Officer would take over the command, but, in these circumstances, the Air Officer in charge of Administration if the next senior, would cease to act in that capacity and become the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief.
5. I am to add that the foregoing rulings will shortly be promulgated in a revised edition of A.P.1301, War Manual, Part II.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient Servant,

(Sgd.) CHARLES EVANS.

A.O.C.-in-C. Bomber Command.
" " Coastal "
" " Training "
A.O.C. Maintenance Command.
" Reserve Command.
A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East.
A.O.C. Iraq
" Mediterranean Command.
" Far East Command.

G.181954

STATEMENT OF REINFORCEMENT OF AIRCRAFT TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Owing to the lack of specialised and regular reports on the subject a statement on reinforcements to the Middle East must necessarily comprise a rough estimate rather than an accurate assessment, and since there is no indication of how much material is lacking the figures given must be accepted simply as the only ones available and as subject to serve limitations. It is not certain whether they represent an overall total for the period or simply a proportion of it, and therefore they should not be used as a basis for firm conclusions.

During the period June 1940 - Jan. 1941, the sources to which there is access indicate that the main types of aircraft chosen for reinforcements were Hurricanes, Blenheims and Wellingtons. Concerning these aircraft, a considerable amount of information is available and perhaps this may be most usefully employed in a comparison between the policy for reinforcements and the actual consignments dispatched, as far as these can be discovered. The general intention was to commence reinforcement by re-equipping and enlarging existing Squadrons already in the Middle East rather than by sending out entire new Squadrons. This applied particularly to Hurricane and Blenheim reinforcements but in the case of Wellingtons two Squadrons were sent out late in the year to bring the number of Heavy bomber Squadrons up to four.

Hurricanes

E.R.P.19

It was decided in June that Hurricanes were to be sent out at the rate of twelve per month, starting immediately. In July this was altered to twenty-four immediately followed by twelve a month. In September the policy was altered to eighteen per month and in October to twenty-four. After this the policy appears to have remained unchanged.

Against the policy figures the actual numbers of aircraft dispatched compare fairly well: although the consignments were less frequent than was intended, they were proportionately larger. As far as the numbers of dispatched aircraft can be estimated, they compare with the policy figures roughly as follows:-

		June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total
E.R.P.19	Policy Figs.	12	24	12	12	18	24	24	126
DO/AML/9	Dispatch Figs.	14	60(arr.)	-	-	22	50	-	146
M.E.1.F.04			(Sept.)						

IID/2/245
10A

Ibid. 30A

By the end of October there should have been ninety-six Hurricanes. This figure although exceeding the Target of the policy compared very favourably with a statement sent to the Prime Minister, on 16th November, that A.C.M. Longmore had fifty-nine serviceable or repairable Hurricanes in the Middle East. The total for the year again compares favourably with the policy figures and with a further statement by Longmore on 10th February 1941, in which he estimated his Hurricanes at seventy-eight immediately available and a hundred and twenty available in fourteen days.

M.E.1.F.04
S.6724
DO/AM2/9
53A Pt.2

For Malta the Hurricane consignment was small; the policy only allowed for half a squadron and after 18 had been sent, six in June and twelve in August, no further reinforcements were allotted until November when a further twelve were flown out to bring the squadron, now No.261, up to a strength of 16+.

/Blenheims

Blenheims

E.R.P.
Meetings

In June a policy of twelve Blenheims a month was decided upon, twelve being sent immediately, but it was altered in July to thirty-six immediately followed by thirty-six per month. This remained unaltered until October when the monthly consignment was raised to forty-eight.

The policy figures and the numbers of aircraft dispatched compare as follows:-

	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>Aug.</u>	<u>Sept.</u>	<u>Oct.</u>	<u>Nov.</u>	<u>Dec.</u>	<u>Total</u>
F.04 Policy	12	36	36	36	36	48	48	252
Dispatches	3	-	23	22	38	88	en route or wait- ing.	178

S.5117
50A

There appears to be no explanation why the Blenheim policy was so far from being carried out whilst the Hurricanes exceeded the target figure. The non-arrival of some Blenheims can be accounted for however: when thirty were held up in September after the majority of a flight had been lost en route it was considered unwise to dispatch more until the following moon period: therefore only six of the September consignment got through to the Middle East.

Wellingtons

S.5117
50A & 59A

M.E. Fort-
nightly
Opsum Nos.2&3

App.F to
R.A.F. Med.
Command
Operating
Intelligence
Summary
Oct.40-Feb.41

At the E.R.P. meeting in July it was decided that Wellingtons should be ferried out at the rate of six per month, and this programme was carried out in August and September. In October, however, the reinforcements were increased, and it would appear that an extra twenty-three aircraft were sent out during the month. Towards the end of the year two Squadrons were sent out, Nos.37 and 38, and Wellingtons had begun to use Malta as a permanent-base: No.70 Squadron had been re-equipping with Wellingtons since September. Altogether, by the end of December a considerable increase in the Wellington strength had been achieved. No. 70 Squadron was entirely re-equipped, Nos.37 and 38 Squadrons had been established in the Middle East, and No.148 Squadron had been established at Malta.

Other types of aircraft were being sent to the Middle East in smaller quantities including in particular Lysanders, Gladiators, Magisters and Proctors. A large consignment of Glenn Martins off French orders failed to materialise however, and only a comparatively small number of this type of aircraft reached the Middle East during this period. A more general idea of the increase in aircraft and Air Force Units, and of the rate of replacement of older types by new can be obtained by a comparison of the Orders of Battle for the R.A.F. given at Appendix IV-IX. Not all the units shown there however, were sent to the Middle East from the United Kingdom.

R.A.F. RECONNAISSANCE REPORTS SUPPLIED TO
THE ARMY

February - March 1941

- G.H.Q. M.E. Intelligence Summary
19/2 Air reports two small camps at Bir Bu Retma (12 miles west of Sirte) road Sirte - Misurata congested with troops moving west.
- G.H.Q. G Cyrenaica Command War Diary
21/2 Tac/R saw column of 16 enemy M.T. 4 miles east of Ras El Aali (about 15 miles west of El Agheila). The cars were 8 wheeled and crews had light blue uniform. These may have been German though there is no evidence pointing to this yet.
- Idem 22/2 Air reports indicate German armoured cars are in the forward area; unconfirmed reports received that a German division is to be sent to Libya.
- G.H.Q. M.E. Intelligence Summary
24/2 Air force reported 2 medium tanks, two light tanks, 14 M/C combinations and 3 guns believed to be German attacking our forces at El Agheila.
- Idem 25/2 Strat/R reports M.T. movement both ways on road Tauorga/Gheddahia. Groups of tanks Tauorga and Bir Dufen. Two small ships and 200 troops on shore Buerat el Hsun. Groups of M.T. about En Nofilia.
- Operations XII (a) Mediterranean Area General
26/2 Strat/R reports considerable movement main area between Sirte and Misurata.
- Idem 27/2 Strat/R reports considerable M.T. movement between Birchela (on coast 50 miles El Agheila) and Misurata, one ship at Buerat el Hsun (75 miles east of Misurata) and total of 52 enemy aircraft on ground between Misurata and Birchela.
- Idem 1/3 Strat/R reports M.T. road W. of Tauorga, 60 area west of Buerat El Hsun, approx. 350 L.G. Sirte and 70 area En Nofilia.
- Operations XII (a) Mediterranean Area General - C.-in-C. M.E. Telegram.
2/3 Latest air recce shows considerable increase in M.T. on Tripoli - Sirte road Shipping risks, difficulty of communications and approach of hot weather make it unlikely that such an attack could develop before end of summer.
- G.H.Q. G Cyrenaica War Diary
8/3 Strat/R saw 33 enemy aircraft on Machina L.G.
- Report by Gen. Neame - MO1 Records Document MS/BM/1242
8/3 Referring to Neame's visit to G.H.Q. Cairo: he discussed the possibilities of a German attack 'which was not regarded at G.H.Q. at this date probable' and expressed the opinion the Germans had not come to Libya for nothing and would not long rest content with a defensive role.

- G.H.Q. G Cyrenaica War Diary - not stated as air report
9/3 Enemy M.T. concentrations in frontier area continue to increase: there were at least 1600 M.T. between Nofilia and the frontier.
- G.H.Q. M.E. Intelligence Summary
15/3 Air reports 5 medium tanks east of Tripoli - Cyrenaica frontier and 1,250 M.T. within area Giaretas Sidra - U El Hagiag.
- MO5 War Office Summary of Operations
15/3 Strat/R reports 1,300 M.T. dispersed area between Cyrenaica - Tripoli frontier and Ras Lanuf (40 miles west of Agheila) (see above)
- G.H.Q. M.E. Intelligence Summary
16/3 Air reports M.T. and camps Bir Cahela and M.T. at En Nofilia, Buerat el Hsun, Misurata, Garabulli. Enemy A.Cs about Ras El Asli and El Agheila.
- H.Q. 2nd Armoured Division (G) - War Diary
23/3 The enemy advanced and occupied El Agheila driving in our patrols. Air reports large concentrations of enemy vehicles moving East at El Agheila, these included armoured cars, tanks artillery and M.T.
- G.H.Q. M.E. Intelligence Summary
25/3 Air reports 1000 M.T. at Ras Lanuf 30 moving east in Mlaga El Trugh area and 40 dispersed before Bir el Merdura.
- G.H.Q. (G) Cyrenaica War Diary states shortage of Tac/R pilots reported by Cyrenaica Command to C.I.G.S.
- MO5 War Office Summary of Operations
26/3 Tac/R reports 1000 M.T. in region Ras Lanuf.
- G.H.Q. M.E. Intelligence Summary
27/3 Air recce reports 100 M.T. 20 miles west of El Agheila, huts being erected there. 20 M.T. seen north of Joifer. Enemy aircraft on L.G. Misurata Sultan and En Nofilia. It has been reported from thoroughly reliable sources 3 German Divisions between Tripoli and Sicily.
- MO5 War Office Summary of Operations
Strat/R Reports Marada unoccupied.
- G.H.Q. M.E. Intelligence Summary
During afternoon air recce reports 200 M.T. between Birchela and Ras Lanuf, 800 between Ras Lanuf and Ras Aali, 370 between Ras Aali and Agheila, 50 at Agheila and 50 moving south from there, 40 at Maaten Giofen, 200 Armoured Fighting Vehicles Stationary at Mersa Brega.
- Report by Lt. Gen. Neame - MO1 Records Document MS/EM/1242
31/3 Air Force: at this time there were available daily average of 3 Hurricanes for Tac/R, 5 Blenheims for Strat/R and day bombing, 6 Wellingtons for night bombing, a few Lysanders for work in safe areas, one Fighter Squadron to cover Benghazi and one Fighter Squadron for Tobruk.

EXTRACT FROM HALDER'S DIARY: GERMAN ESTIMATE OF BRITISH AIR STRENGTH. 15 FEBRUARY 1941

Mediterranean	Bomber & Transport	Fighter	Close Recce & Multiple purpose	Long Range Recce	Total
Egypt Libya Sudan	300	180	70	35	585
Greece Crete	120	60	-	-	180
Malta Gib.	20	30	-	10	60
	440	270	70	45	825

FUEHRER DIRECTIVE, 5 FEBRUARY 1941: CONDUCT OF
GERMAN TROOPS IN ITALIAN THEATRES OF OPERATIONS

The Fuehrer and Supreme Commander Fuehrer Headquarters, 5 Feb. 1941.
of the Armed Forces.

OKW/WFSt./Abt. L (I Op.) Nr.
44075/41 Gk. Chefs.

TOP SECRET

Re: Conduct of German Troops in Italian Theatres of Operations

The German troops fighting shoulder to shoulder with our allies in the Mediterranean must be conscious of their lofty military and political mission.

They have been selected for the purpose of rendering valuable assistance in both a psychological and a military way, to our allies, who in every theatre are struggling against an enemy greatly superior in numbers and who, on account of the limited productive capacity of Italy's war economy, are insufficiently equipped with modern weapons.

Despite their just recognition of their own value and of their accomplishments they must be free from any offensive arrogance. They are to earn the respect and appreciation of our allies solely through their actions, their exemplary discipline, their courage and military prowess.

Their employment will be regulated by the following principles, as agreed on with the Italian General Staff:

1. The German troops in Libya (and, if occasion arises, also in Albania) will be under the direct tactical command of the Italian Commanders-in-Chief of these theatres of operation. Otherwise they will be under the Commander-in-Chief Army, who is to keep in touch with the local Italian commanders-in-chief through liaison officers.
2. They may be committed to battle only in all-German formations at least in divisional strength. Exceptions are permissible only if, in the opinion of the German commander, the German unit is directly threatened before it has been completely assembled, or in the case of such a crisis as could result in the loss of the entire theatre of operations if not dealt with at once.
3. When the German unit is committed according to plan, it must be united in the hands of the German commander, and not split up among the various sectors of the front.
4. Should the German unit receive an assignment whose execution would, in the opinion of its commander, lead to a grave failure and thus damage the reputation of the German troops, the German commander has the right and duty to request my decision through the Commander-in-Chief, Army, notifying the German general attached to the Italian High Command in Rome.
5. The X Air Corps will remain subordinate to the Commander-in-Chief, Air Force, Reichsmarschall Goering. It is to perform its duties, subject to his instructions, in close co-operation with all competent Italian authorities.

signed: Adolf Hitler.

KIETEL DIRECTIVE, 3 APRIL 1941: 'SONNENBLUME'
FUTURE POLICY FOR GERMAN AFRICA CORPS

Armed Forces High Command

Fuehrer Headquarters
3 Apr. 1941.

Nr. 4444/41 g.K. Chfs. WFSt/Abt. I (I Op.)

No.2 of thirteen copies.

TOP SECRET

Re. "Sonnenblume"

Ref. OKH/GenStdH. Op.Abt. (II b) Nr.516/41 g.K.Chfs of 25 Mar. 1941.

The Fuehrer decided the following on 2 Apr.

1. The prime task of the German Africa Corps remains to safeguard the positions reached and to tie up as many British forces in North Africa as possible.

The resulting attacks with limited objectives must not be extended further than the few available forces allow before the 15th Panzer Division arrives. Under no circumstances should the open right flank be endangered, which would necessarily be the case in an advance to the north on Benghazi.

2. Even after the arrival of the 15th Panzer Division a large-scale offensive aimed perhaps at Tobruk should not be launched.

The set tasks in other theatres of the bulk of the X Air Corps as well as of the Italian forces, which for the time being cannot be motorised any further, will probably prevent us expanding our objectives prior to fall 1941.

These plans could be changed only if the bulk of the British armoured forces were withdrawn from Cyrenaica, in which case new orders will be issued.

3. As regards command authority over Italian forces, for the time being only one additional motorised division (102nd) will be placed under the German Africa Corps if this is necessary.

New Orders will be issued in case of a later large-scale offensive.

4. The German General at the Italian Armed Forces Headquarters is ordered to procure the approval of the Italian High Command concerning these directives.

The Chief of Staff, Armed Forces High Command.

signed: Keitel.

R.A.F. BOMBING OPERATIONS - WESTERN DESERT APRIL 1941

Aircraft employed: Heavy bombers, Wellingtons of Nos. 37, 38, 70 and 146 Squadrons.

Medium bombers, Blonheims of Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons.

Operations against enemy ports

Target	Date	Number of effective sorties		
		Heavy	Medium	Total
Tripoli	April 1/2	5		5
"	3/4	4		4
"	5/6	1		1
"	6/7	4		4
Benghazi	7/8	1		1
"	18/19	5		5
"	19/20	1		1
"	21/22	2		2
"	22		8	8
"	22/23	5		5
"	24/25	4		4
"	25/26	4		4
"	26/27	2		2
"	28/29	4		4
"	29/30	4		4
"	30/1 May	4		4
Grand Total		50	8	58

Note: Between 13 and 25 April the offensive against Tripoli was maintained by No. 148 Squadron detachment at Malta. These Wellingtons flew a total of thirty-four sorties against the port.

Bombing Operations - Western Desert. April 1941 (Continued)

Operations against Enemy Airfields, Positions, Lines
of Communication

Target	Date	Number of effective sorties		
		Heavy	Medium	Total
	<u>April</u>			
Marble Arch L.G.	1	-	6	6
M.T. Mersa Brega & Nofilia	1/2	1	-	1
M.T. at Mersa Brega	2	-	4	4
M.T. on Mersa Brega - Jedabya Rd.	2	-	4	4
M.T. at Jedabya	3	-	5	5
M.T. Jedabya - Ras Lanuf	3/4	2	-	2
M.T. at Msus	4	-	2	2
Marble Arch L.G.	5	-	8	8
M.T. Convoy Tecasis	5	-	2	2
Troops at Tocra	5	-	1	1
M.T. Agheila Road	5/6	1	-	1
Jedabya L.G.	6	-	9	9
M.T. at Mekili	6	-	5	5
Homs L.G.	6/7	1	-	1
M.T. & troops - Mekili	7	-	18	18
M.T. - Mengar el Teschin	7	-	1	1
M.T. - Mekili	8	-	10	10
Capuzzo area	8/9	2	-	2
M.T. Mekili	9	-	2	2
M.T. near Bir Beloured	9	-	2	2
M.T. near El Adem	10	-	4	4
Tobruk Road	10/11	2	-	2
M.T. Tobruk	11	-	5	5
M.T. - Acroma	11	-	2	2
M.T. - Gaad el Amar	11	-	4	4
Gazala	11	-	2	2
Gazala	11/12	1	-	1
L.G. and troops at Msus	11/12	1	-	1
M.T. - Acroma	12	-	3	3
Troops at Tobruk	12	-	6	6
El Adem	12/13	1	-	1
Tobruk	13	-	19	19
Sollum area	13	-	2	2
El Adem	13	-	1	1
El Adem & Gambut L.G's	13/14	4	-	4
Derna		1	-	1
Sollum - Tobruk - Mekili area	14	-	26	26
Menastir, El Adem, Derna	14/15	4	-	4
Tobruk - El Adem area	15	-	8	8
M.T. Capuzzo	15	-	8	8
Derna L.G.	15/16	2	-	2
El Adem	15/16	1	-	1
M.T. and L.G. Gazala	15/16	1	-	1
Sollum area	15/16	2	-	2
Derna L.G.	16	-	5	5
M.T. - Acroma & El Adem	16	-	17	17

Operations against Enemy Airfields, Positions, Lines of
Communication (continued)

Target	Date	Number of effective sorties		
		Heavy	Medium	Total
	<u>April</u>			
El Adem	16/17	1	-	1
El Adem - Bardia Area	17	-	13	13
Derna L.G.	17	-	1	1
Capuzzo - Bardia area	17	-	5	5
Derna town	17/18	1	-	1
El Adem - Bardia area	18	-	10	10
M.T. - Acroma	18	-	1	1
M.T. - Tobruk	18	-	3	3
Derna L.G.	19	-	4	4
Bardia area	19	-	3	3
Tobruk - Gazala road	19	-	1	1
Tobruk - Bardia road	19	-	10	10
Gazala L.G.	19/20	1	-	1
M.T. - El Adem	20	-	4	4
M.T. - Acroma	20	-	6	6
Gazala	20/21	1	-	1
Capuzzo area	20/21	3	-	3
Derna L.G.	21	-	11	11
Gazala L.G.	21	-	15	15
Barce	21/22	2	-	2
M.T. near Bomba	22/23	1	-	1
Road near Benghazi	22/23	1	-	1
Gazala N. L.G.	23	-	4	4
M.T. - Tobruk	23	-	2	2
Benghazi area & coastal road	23/24	4	-	4
M.T. Bardia - Capuzzo	24	-	8	8
Derna L.G.	24	-	3	3
M.T. - Acroma	24	-	2	2
M.T. Benghazi area	24/25	1	-	1
Derna & Benina L.G 's	28	-	2+	2+
Derna town	29/30	1	-	1
Derna L.G.	30	-	4+	4+
Camp at Gazala	30/1 May	1	-	1
		45	303	348

DISTRIBUTION OF GERMAN AIRCRAFT IN SICILY, JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1941

(10003)127

2 JANUARY 1941	19 JANUARY 1941	22 FEBRUARY 1941
<u>CATANIA</u> LG 1 & F 121 3 Ju.88	<u>CATANIA</u> II/LG 1 20 Ju.88 III/LG 1 & Gesch.Stab 30 Ju.88 II/KG 26 2 He.111 1 (F) 121 9 Ju.88 61	<u>CATANIA</u> II/LG 1 24 Ju.88 III/LG 1 29 Ju.88 I (F) 121 17 Ju.88 70
<u>TRAPANI</u> 3 Stukageschwader 1 Ju.87	<u>TRAPANI</u> Stab Stukageschw.3 1 Do.17 I/Stuka 1 27 Ju.87 II/Stuka 2 31 Ju.87 59	<u>TRAPANI</u> Stab/St. G.3 5 Ju.87 I/St. G.1 30 Ju.87 II/St. G.2 38 Ju.87 73
<u>COMISO</u> II/KG 1 He.111	<u>COMISO</u> II/LG 1 1 Ju.88 II/KG 26 16 He.111 2/KG 4 8 He.111 II/Stuka 2 1 Ju.87 26	<u>COMISO</u> II/KG 26 30 He.111 2/KG 4 9 He.111 39
	<u>PALERMO</u> III/ZG 26 22 Me.110	<u>PALERMO</u> III/ZG 26 40 Me.110
	<u>CASTELVETRANO</u> II/Stuka 2 1 Ju.87	<u>GELA</u> 7/JG 26 14 Me.109 I/NJG 3 7 Me.110 21

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APPENDIX XXX

REPORT BY BRIGADIER A.F. HARDING AND AIR COMMODORE
L.O. BROWN ON CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE G.H.Q. M.E.
REPORT ON THE ACTION OF THE 2ND ARMoured DIVISION
DURING THE WITHDRAWAL FROM CYRENAICA, MARCH-APRIL 1941.
(Reference: A.H.B./ILJ6/78).

1. Brigadier Harding was the B.G.S. to H.Q. Cyrenaica Command, and Air Commodore Brown was commanding the R.A.F. in Cyrenaica at the time of the withdrawal.
2. On instructions from the A.O.C.-in-C. and the C.G.S. the report was examined with a view to determining the extent to which the statements in paragraphs 3, 4 and 7 in Appendix 'B' of the G.H.Q., M.E. report are justified. These paragraphs read as follows:-
 - (3) The false air reports on 3rd April, about the enemy being at Msus.
 - (4) The frequent changes of orders and regrouping consequent on these air reports, which resulted in the disintegration of formations and units.
 - (7) Lack of Tactical Reconnaissance particularly in the latter stages.
3. With regard to paragraphs (3) and (4), the air reports concerned are:
 - (i) A tactical reconnaissance carried out at 1400 hours on 3 April by a No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron (aircraft) operating from Msus landing ground. The pilot reported enemy A.F.Vs and M.T. moving towards Msus.
 - (ii) Strategical reconnaissance carried out by a pilot of No. 55 Squadron, which reported that at 1830 hours on 3rd April, 1941, there was a force of 100 tanks and M.T. in Msus. (Para. 19 of the G.H.Q. report refers to both these reconnaissances). As a result of the first reconnaissance report the Commander 2nd Armoured Division made a change in plan.
4. It is agreed that the reports were made, and there is nothing to disprove that forces were in fact there. The question as to whether they were enemy or friendly must have been appreciated at the time of this report. It is not known how it was established that the forces reported were enemy.
5. The facts surrounding the circumstances leading up to the first reconnaissance have been supplied by Flying Officer Fletcher (1) and are as follows:

The flight was under command of the 2nd Armoured Division from the time that Division took over the front south of Agedabia prior to the German advance.

At the commencement of the enemy advance Squadron Leader R.E. Weld, Commanding No. 6 Squadron, was sent forward to command the detached Flight in view of the impending operations.

 - (i) The Flight was ordered by Div. H.Q. to move from Agedabia to Antelat, which it did at 0400 hours on the 2 April. The Flight operated from Antelat on the 2 April under orders of Div. H.Q., which was then situated at Antelat.

(1) A pilot of No. 6 Squadron at that time.

- (ii) On the morning of the 3 April the Flight discovered that Div. H.Q., had left Antelat during the night without their knowledge, and no information was forthcoming until later regarding the new position of the H.Q. A reconnaissance was, however, ordered by Squadron Leader Weld in the area of Agedabia, and this reconnaissance reported the movement of forces from Agedabia N.E. towards Antelat. At this time there were none of our own troops, in the Antelat area. In the absence of orders from Div. H.Q. and in view of the situation, the Flight moved to Msus at about 0700 hours. On arrival at Msus, the only troops in the vicinity were a few Free French troops in the Msus Fort, about two miles north of the landing ground. These Free French troops were unable to give any information concerning the position of our own troops in the area, nor were they able to say where Div. H.Q. was situated. It was not until noon that a message was received from Div. H.Q., giving their position as just north of Esc-Sceleidima, about thirty miles west of Msus.
- (iii) At about 1330 hours on the 3 April, a tank recovery party with unserviceable tanks in tow passed through Msus aerodrome, and the officer i/c stated that he was the last party of our own troops to come back from the Antelat area, and that they were going further back as they had no idea of the position on the ground, nor did they know where Div. H.Q. was situated.
- (iv) No orders were received from Div. H.Q., for their requirements in Tactical Reconnaissance, but Squadron Leader Weld ordered a quick reconnaissance to be carried out along the track between Msus and Antelat at about 1400 hours. The pilot of this reconnaissance was Flying Officer Fletcher. On this reconnaissance he observed a column consisting of a few armoured cars and between fifty and sixty large Italian lorries filled with troops. The head of the column was five miles south of Msus. The personnel in the lorries opened fire on the reconnaissance aircraft. The pilot carried out a low-flying attack on the columns, and on his return to Msus found that the aerodrome had been evacuated. The pilot observed the C.O.'s car near the Msus fort and dropped his report near the car, after which he flew his aircraft back to the base aerodrome at Barce. On arrival at Barce, a report was submitted through the A.I.L.Q. to Force Headquarters. It was subsequently ascertained from Squadron Leader Weld that he ordered the evacuation of Msus aerodrome as he had observed the approach of the column from the ground. The ground party of this Flight had considerable difficulty in rejoining its Squadron, and during its retreat it caught up with Div. H.Q., at the Er Regima Pass east of Benina; this ground party eventually rejoined the Squadron at Maraua on 5 April.

6. At the time the Msus landing-ground was evacuated the Free French were still in the Fort. Although we have no confirmation, it seems probable that the information concerning the column approaching Msus reached the Free French from ground observation, or as a result of the Tactical Reconnaissance message which was dropped on Officer Commanding No. 6 Squadron, and, acting on their own initiative, they destroyed the dump. The destruction of this dump was not ordered by Command H.Q. It is understood that Captain Hore-Ruthven, K.R.R.C., was with the Free French at Msus at this time, and a report will be obtained from this officer, who is in Syria, and forwarded later.⁽¹⁾

(1) Attached.

7. Although it is stated that the first report on this day led the Commander 2nd Armoured Division to change his plan with the object of securing the dump at Msus before the arrival of the enemy force, considerations of time and space would have shown that this was impossible, and it can only be assumed, therefore, that the 3rd Armoured Brigade was allowed to proceed for other reasons.

8. With regard to the second reconnaissance report the same day, no further information is available. It is agreed that the report was based on the presence of some forces in Msus at the time. It seems most likely that the Free French had evacuated Msus at the time of this report, i.e. 1830 hours and the 3rd Armoured Brigade did not leave for Msus until first light on 4th April. The inference therefore is that the force observed in Msus at 1830 hours was the enemy, and may have been the force that later appeared at Mechili. The fact that the 3rd Armoured Brigade found Msus unoccupied on 4 April does not prove that there were no enemy there on the previous evening, and that the enemy column reported south of Msus might have halted there on its way to Mechili.

9. Further, with regard to the Recovery Section mentioned in the G.H.Q. M.E. Report as having gone through Msus, it will be seen from Flying Officer Fletcher's report that a Recovery Section passed through Msus before the first reconnaissance was carried out. We have been unable to trace the source of the report that L.R.D.G. might have been mistaken for an enemy column moving on Msus. The composition of this unit does not in any way tally with Flying Officer Fletcher's report of what he saw. Moreover Major Mitford who commanded L.R.D.G. states that this party went through Msus between 1630 hours and 1700 hours on 3 April.

10. The above facts show that neither of the two reports can therefore be clearly classified as 'False Air Reports'.

11. The reference to 'Frequent changes of orders and regrouping consequent on these air reports' is not understood. There appears to have been only one change in orders, namely the diversion of the 3rd Armoured Brigade from the Sceieidima Escarpment to Msus.

12. With regard to paragraph 7 of the G.H.Q. Report, i.e. 'Lack of Tactical Reconnaissance, particularly in the later stages', in our appointments as O.C., R.A.F. Cyrenaica, and B.G.S., H.Q. Cyrenaica Command, we were personally responsible for the co-ordination and provision of all air reconnaissance both Tactical and Strategical. Detailed orders for Tac/R carried out by the detached Flight were the responsibility of the 2nd Armoured Division, under whose control the Flight was operating.

13. During the period prior to the main German advance, the full requirements of the 2nd Armoured Division for Tac/R could not be met owing to the shortage of suitable aircraft, and it was necessary at times to lend aircraft from fighter squadrons for the purpose.

14. As a result of representations made by General Neame, the detached Flight had been made up in strength of aircraft by the time the main German advance began. Thereafter all Tactical Reconnaissance were met. It is agreed, however, that the general standard of efficiency of No. 6 Squadron pilots in Army Co-operation work was not of the high standard of the Army Co-operation Squadron that had co-operated with Western Desert Force and XIII Corps during the advance into Cyrenaica. This was due to the general inexperience of the terrain over which the pilots were operating as they only took over in March.

15. With regard to Strategical Reconnaissances, these were provided by the Bomber Squadron, and all demands from Command H.Q. were met, in addition to Strategical Reconnaissances required for R.A.F. purposes.

16. There is nothing in the body of the G.H.Q. M.E. Report that supports the statement made in paragraph 7 of Appendix 'B'. It does not correspond with our knowledge of the facts, and we do not know on whose reports or statements it was made.

17. Although not referred to in Appendix 'B', another 'False Air Report' is referred to in para.29 of the G.H.Q. M.E. Report, which reads as follows:

'Another False air report occurred on the evening of the 5 April, when Tactical Reconnaissance reported an enemy move northwards from Msus. Cyrcom was deceived into ordering an immediate renewal of the general withdrawal, but on being informed by Divisional H.Q. of the true facts they withdrew the order.'

18. We have no recollection of this report, and the order to continue the general withdrawal was given on receipt of an air report of the advance of an enemy column of considerable force on the El Charruba. Subsequent reports from K.R.R.C. patrols stated that this column consisted of elements of the 2nd Armoured Division: this led to the cancellation of the order for a further general withdrawal that night.

19. From ground and air reports received the following day it transpired that this column was in fact elements of the 2nd Armoured Division being followed by German forces, and orders were given for the general withdrawal to be resumed that night, (6/7th April) in consequence.

Signed: L.O. BROWN
Air Commodore

A.F. HARDING
Brigadier General Staff

25.7.41

REPORT BY CAPTAIN THE HON. A.H.P. HORE-RUTHVEN 2ND BN. RIFLE
BRIGADE CONCERNING THE SITUATION AT MSUS ON 3 April 1941

I was Liaison Officer attached to the 1st Motor Company of the 1st Free French Motor Battalion stationed at Msus on the 3rd April 1941. Our role was protection from sabotage and organisation of the Msus Dump. I was in close touch with the 208 (1) Squadron Det. operating from a landing ground just south of Msus. On the morning of the 3 April I received information from them that an enemy force was advancing in the direction of Msus from Antalat. Acting on this report I prepared the Dump for demolition, as I only had one weak Infantry company on the ground and no Anti-Tank guns or force capable of repelling an attack by armoured forces. At the time I had no W/T or other communication with Command Headquarters or Divisional Headquarters except the Long Range Desert Group, who had arrived at Msus on the evening of the 2nd and who were in W/T contact using cypher with Corps Commander.

2. In order to obtain further information prior to assuming the responsibility of blowing the Dump I asked 208 Det. (1) for a further Air Reconnaissance in the direction of Antelat to confirm the approach of an enemy column on Msus. A Lysander took off for this purpose at 14.00 hours promising to give me an answer by 14.30 hours. Just after 14.30 hours I sent a ~~vehicle~~ over to the Squadron Landing Ground, which returned at about 14.45 to say that the Landing Ground had been evacuated. At about this time a Recovery Section towing broken down tanks passed through Msus and I asked them but they could give me no information as to the enemy except that they thought they were in close proximity. Very shortly after this a Lysander flew low over Msus and dropped a message which I was unable to recover as it was picked up by someone else.

3. In view of the fact that the aerodrome had been evacuated and that the Recovery Section had passed through I assumed that there were no own troops between Msus and Antelat and also assumed that the message dropped confirmed that the column previously reported had been definitely established as hostile. My reasons for assuming that the aircraft message confirmed the approach of a hostile column were:-

- (i) That the Landing Ground had already been evacuated and
- (ii) That the aircraft made no attempt to land, which it could have done in the Msus area had the reconnaissance proved that the forces originally reported were our own troops.

4. After consulting Major Mitford O.C. Long Range Desert Group, who was in agreement that it was the only thing to be done I proceeded to destroy the Dump. This was completed by about 16.00 hours. I should say that the Msus area was finally clear of Free French troops by 16.30 hours and, when I left at this time, the Long Range Desert Group was preparing to move out Eastwards.

5. I then went across country to El Abiar where on the morning of the 4 April I reported to the Headquarters of the 2nd Armoured Division. I told the Divisional Commander the full circumstances of the destruction of the Dump at Msus and again reported this to General Neame at Maraua on the morning of the 5th. Both these officers concurred that in view of the information and forces at my disposal, and the lack of possibility of obtaining more specific instructions, my action was justified.

Signed:

A.H.P. Hore-Ruthven

Captain, 2nd Bn. The Rifle Brigade

23.7.41.

(1) Narrator's Note. Captain Hore-Ruthven was presumably referring to No.6 Squadron and detachment, which had recently replaced No.208 Squadron.

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APPENDIX XXXIII

GERMAN OPERATIONAL AIR LOSSES IN THE DESERT

7 February - 18 June 1941

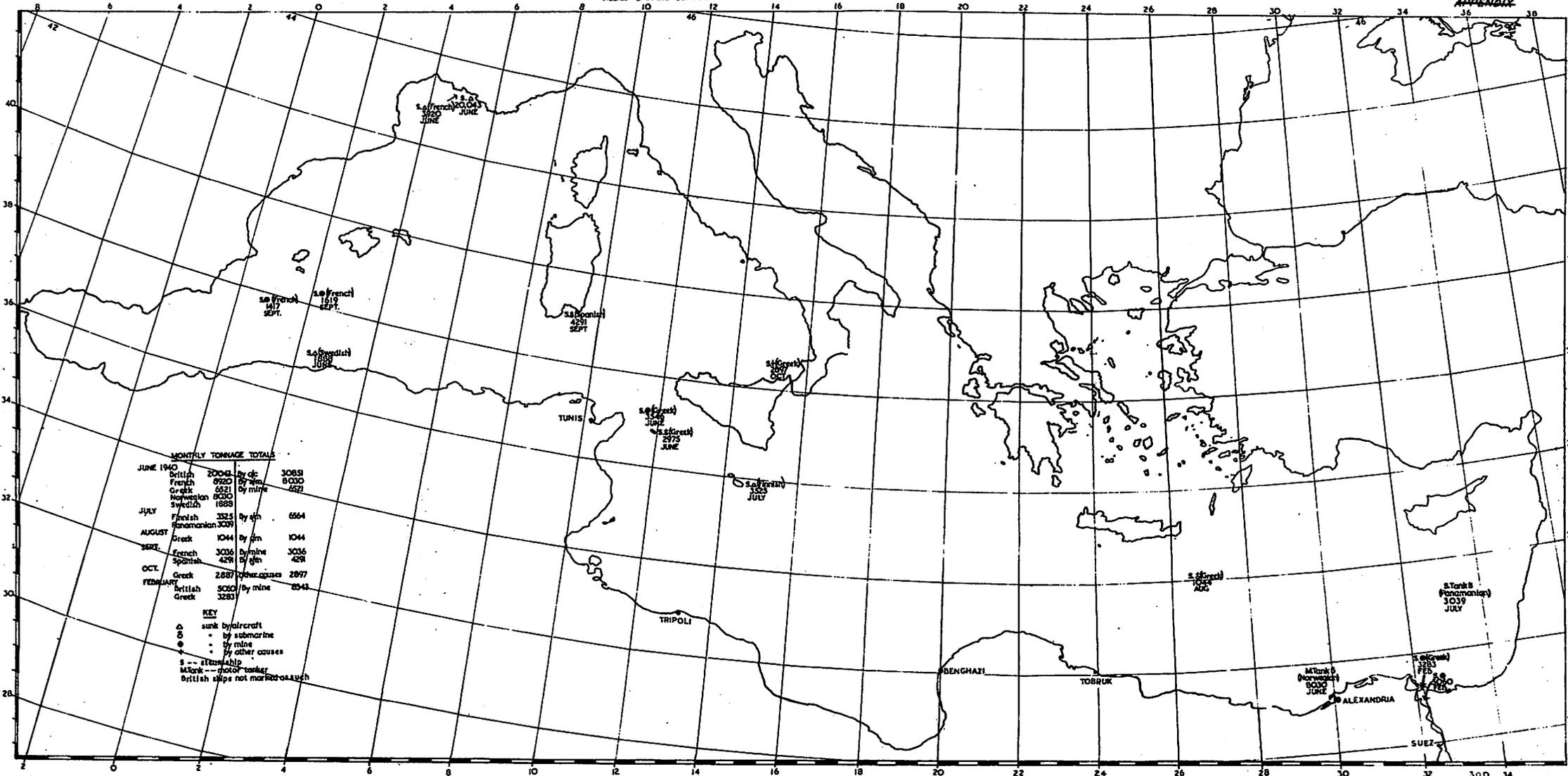
Fighters			Dive-Bombers	Bombers	Reconnaissance	Transport
<u>7 February - 30 March</u>						
14 Feb.	1	T.E.	14 Feb. 1 18 Feb. 1	15 Feb. 1 16 Feb. 1 19 Feb. 2 20 Feb. 1 21 Feb. 3 28 Feb. 1		
23 Mar.	1	T.E.	5 Mar. 3 21 Mar. 1	5 Mar. 1 21 Mar. 1	19 Mar. 1 30 Mar. 1	-
	2	T.E.	6	11	2	-
<u>31 March - 14 April</u>						
1 April	1	T.E.	1 April 1		3 April 1	
3 April	1	T.E.	3 April 2		7 April 1	7 April 2
9 April	2	T.E.	5 April 7		8 April 1	8 April 1
14 April	1	T.E.	6 April 2 12 April 3 14 April 3		9 April 1 12 April 1	9 April 1
	5	T.E.	18	-	5	4
<u>15 April - 13 June</u>						
19 April	1	S.E.		19 April 3	19 April 4	16 April 1
21 April	1	S.E.		23 April 1		17 April 3
	1	T.E.		26 April 1		20 April 2
22 April	1	S.E.				27 April 5
23 April	2	S.E.				
25 April	2	T.E.	30 April 1			
2 May	3	T.E.	25 May 1	8 May 4		
9 May	1	S.E.		13 May 1		
22 May	1	S.E.		29 May 1		
26 May	1	S.E.				
27 May	2	S.E.				
2 June	2	T.E.	3 June 2		1 June 1	
3 June	1	S.E.	10 June 1		10 June 1	
	1	T.E.				
	11 S.E.	9 T.E.	5	11	6	11
<u>Battleaxe 14 - 18 June</u>						
15 June	2	S.E.	16 June 1	15 June 1	14 June 3	
16 June	1	S.E.	17 June 1		15 June 1	-
	3	S.E.	2	1	4	-
Total for period	14 S.E.	16 T.E.	31	23	17	15

Source: Enemy Documents A.H.B. (6)

MAP 2

APPENDIX

ALLIED SHIPPING SUNK DURING PERIOD JUNE 1940 - FEBRUARY 1941



MONTHLY TONNAGE TOTALS

JUNE 1940			
British	2006	by ac	3083
French	6920	by sub	8030
Greek	6521	by mine	6721
Norwegian	8030		
Swedish	1889		
JULY			
British	3225	by ac	6664
Panamanian	3099		
AUGUST			
Greek	1044	by ac	1044
SEPT.			
French	3036	by mine	3036
Spanish	4291	by ac	4291
OCT.			
Greek	2887	other causes	2887
FEBRUARY			
British	5050	by mine	5043
Greek	3283		

KEY

- △ sunk by aircraft
- " by submarine
- " by mine
- ◇ " by other causes
- S - all tonnage
- M - tank
- T - tanker
- British ships not marked as such

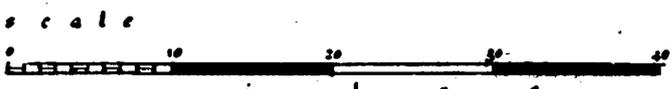
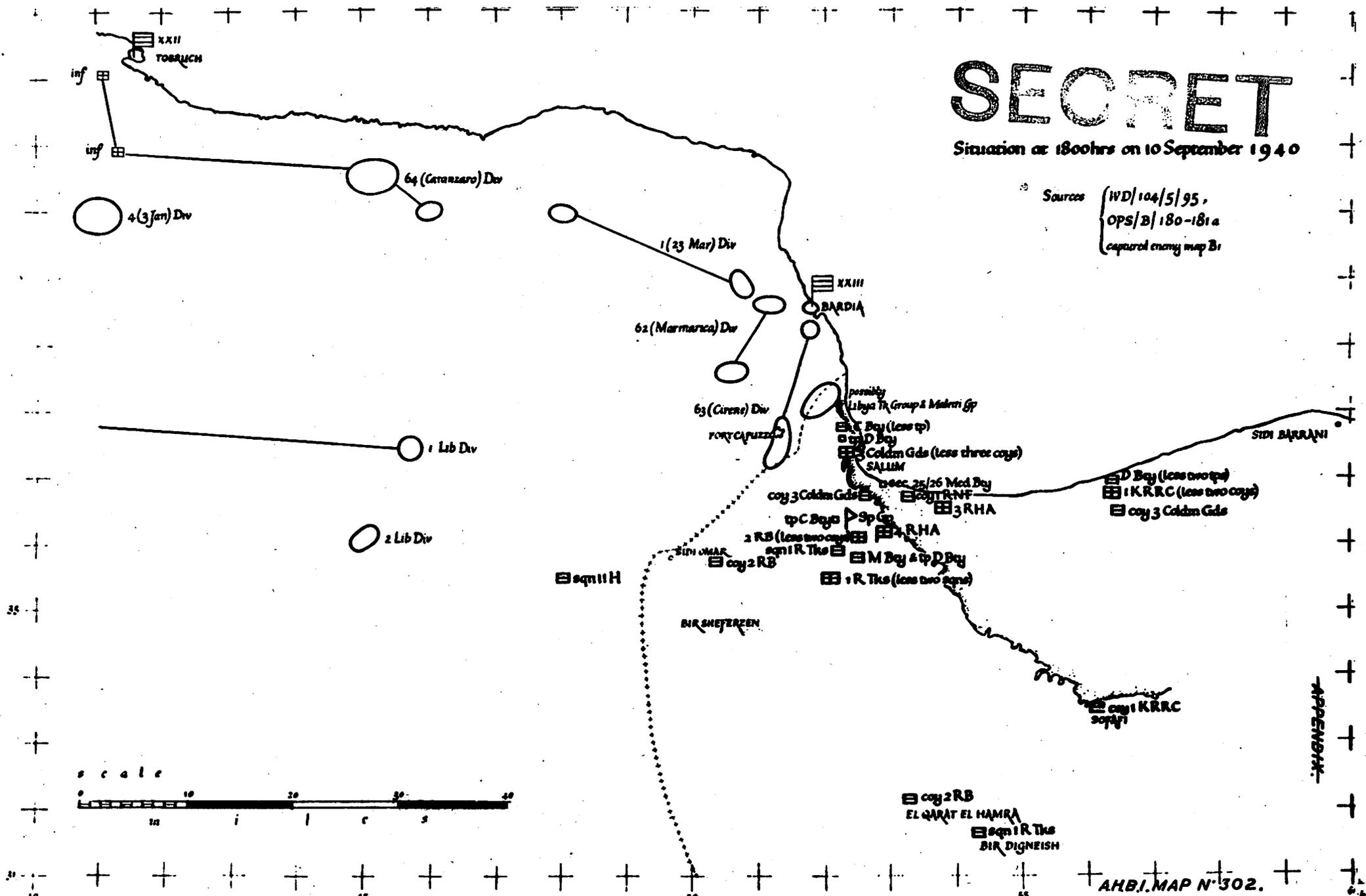
AMB MAP N 300.

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Situation at 1800hrs on 10 September 1940

Sources (WD/104/5/95,
OPS/B/180-181a
captured enemy map Br)



APPENDIX

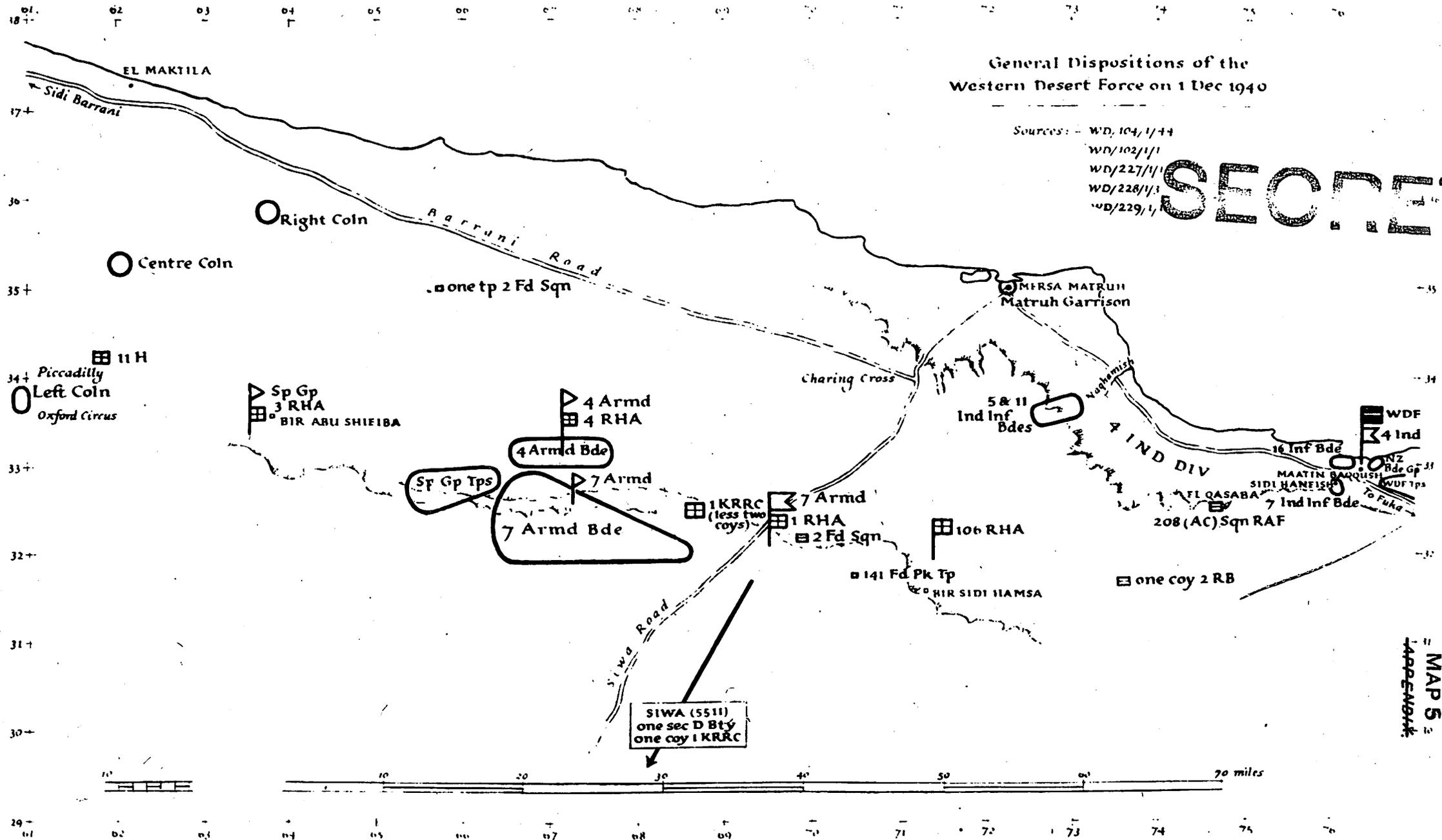
MAP 3

AHBI. MAP N°302.

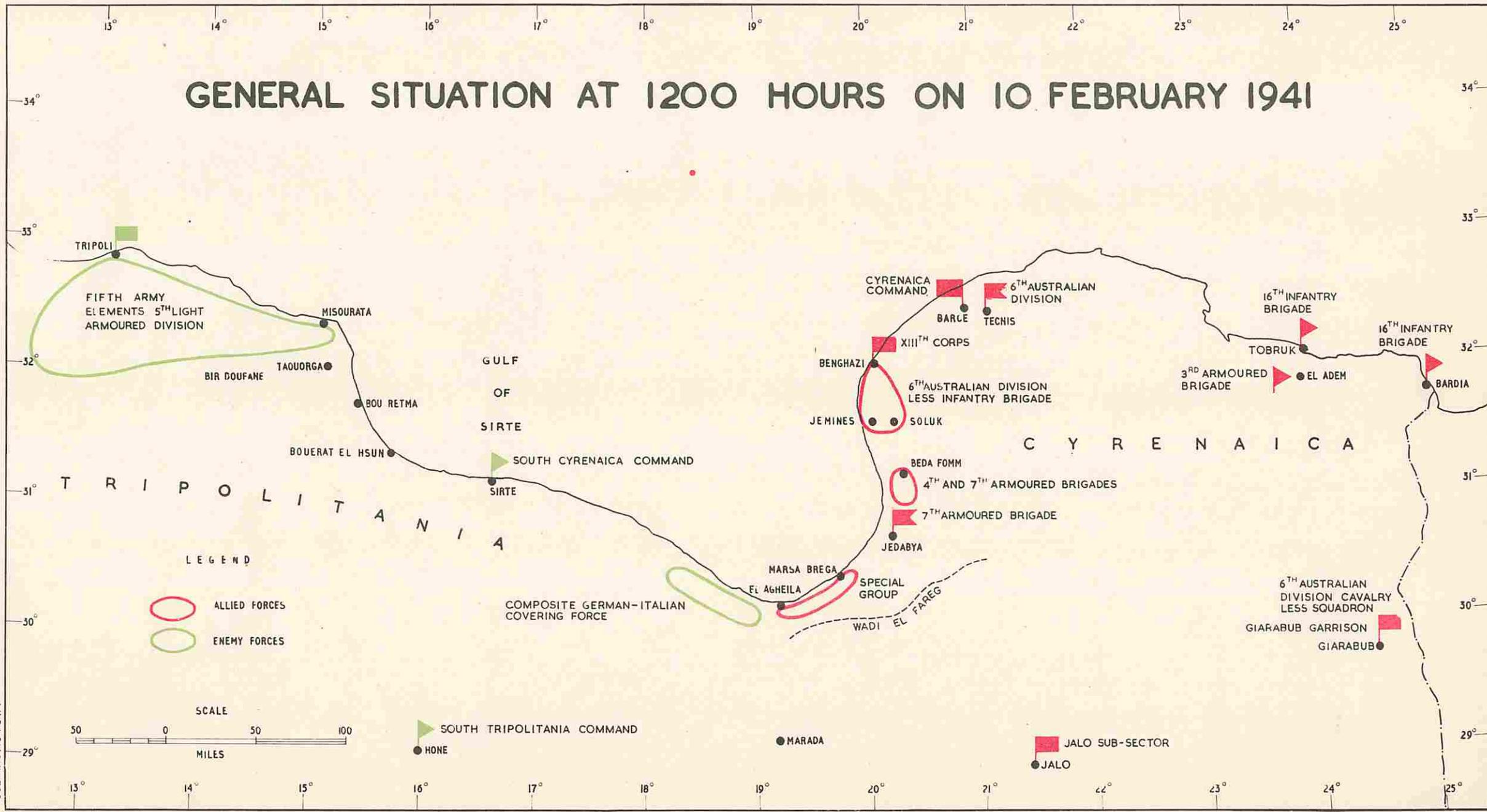
General Dispositions of the
Western Desert Force on 1 Dec 1940

Sources: - WD/104/1/44
WD/102/1/1
WD/227/1/1
WD/228/1/3
WD/229/1/1

SECRET



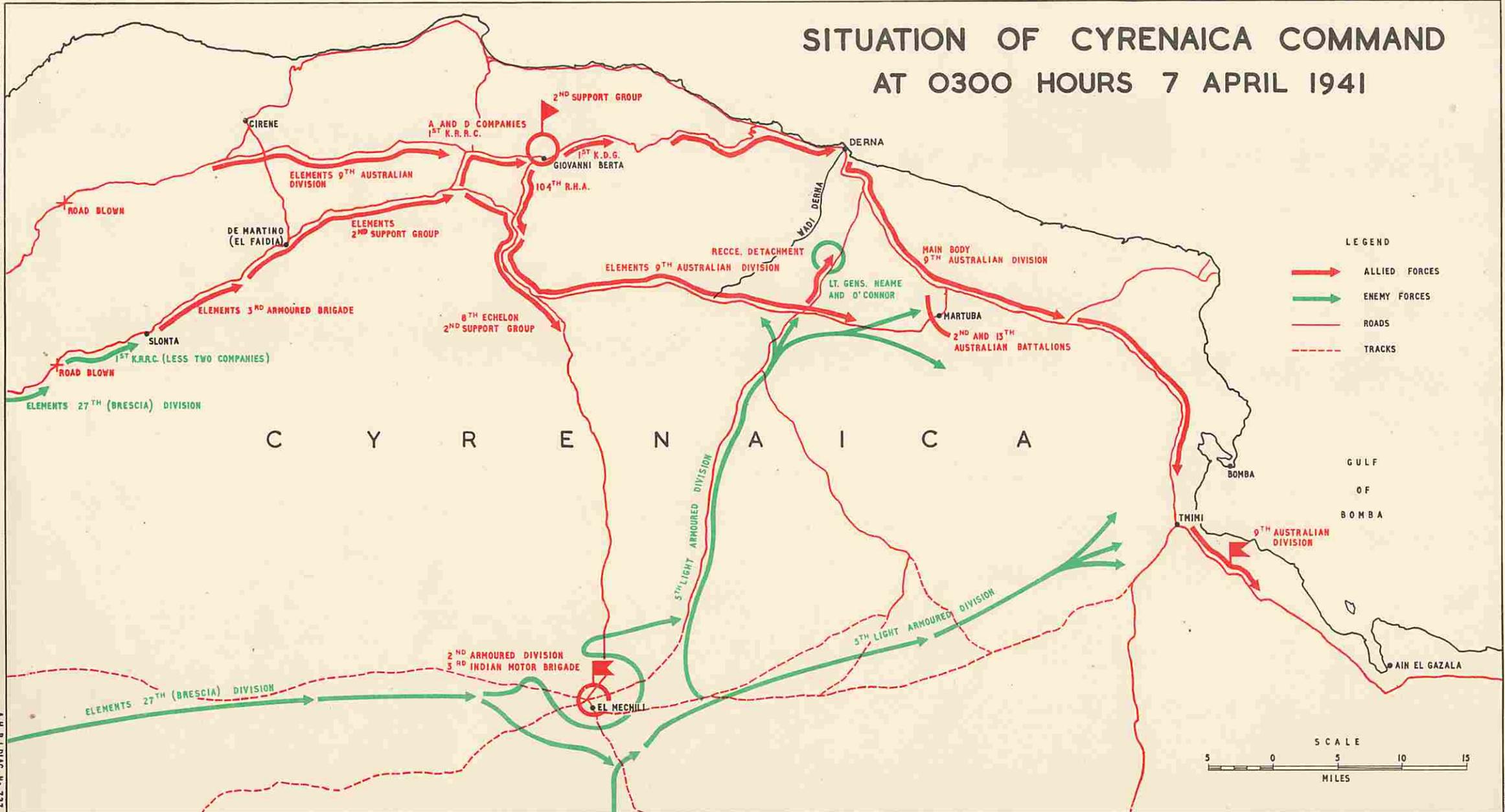
GENERAL SITUATION AT 1200 HOURS ON 10 FEBRUARY 1941



A.H.B.I. DIAG. No. 728

MAP 6

SITUATION OF CYRENAICA COMMAND AT 0300 HOURS 7 APRIL 1941



LEGEND

- ALLIED FORCES
- ENEMY FORCES
- ROADS
- - - TRACKS

GULF OF BOMBA

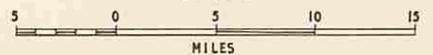
BOMBA

THIMI

9TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION

AIN EL GAZALA

SCALE



C Y R E N A I C A

EL MECHILI

2ND ARMoured DIVISION
3RD INDIAN MOTOR BRIGADE

5TH LIGHT ARMoured DIVISION

5TH LIGHT ARMoured DIVISION

2ND AND 13TH AUSTRALIAN BATTALIONS

MARTUBA

LT. GEN. HEAME AND O'CONNOR

RECCE. DETACHMENT
ELEMENTS 9TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION

MAIN BODY 9TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION

WADI DERNA

104TH R.H.A.
1ST K.D.G.
GIOVANNI BERTA

A AND D COMPANIES
1ST K.R.R.C.

2ND SUPPORT GROUP

CIRENE

ELEMENTS 9TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION

ELEMENTS 2ND SUPPORT GROUP

DE MARTINO (EL FAIDIA)

ELEMENTS 3RD ARMoured BRIGADE

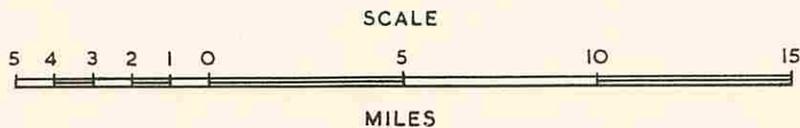
SLONTA

1ST K.R.R.C. (LESS TWO COMPANIES)

ELEMENTS 27TH (BRESCIA) DIVISION

ELEMENTS 27TH (BRESCIA) DIVISION

ENEMY DISPOSITIONS IN FRONTIER AREA 31 MAY 1941



LEGEND

-  ENEMY FORCES
-  ROADS
-  TRACKS
-  FRONTIER WIRE

