



SECOND SUPPLEMENT
TO
The London Gazette

Of TUESDAY, the 17th of SEPTEMBER, 1946

Published by Authority

Registered as a newspaper

THURSDAY, 19 SEPTEMBER, 1946

The Air Ministry,
September, 1946

AIR OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM JANUARY 1ST,
1941, TO MAY 3RD, 1941.

The following despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for Air on November 24th, 1941, by Air Chief Marshal SIR ARTHUR LONGMORE, G.C.B., D.S.O., Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Royal Air Force, Middle East.

1. This Despatch covers the period from 1st January, 1941, to 3rd May, 1941. On this latter date I was recalled to England and did not return to resume command of the R.A.F., Middle East.

The main features to be recorded during these four months can be summarised as follows:—

(a) The complete defeat of the Italian Air Force in Libya; the successful and rapid advance to Benghazi (6th February) and the subsequent temporary stabilisation in Cyrenaica as far West as El Agaila.

(b) The reduction of British Forces in Cyrenaica, both Army and Air, in order to meet fresh Greek Commitments due to development of the threat to Greece from German Forces which had crossed from Roumania into Bulgaria. The decision being made on the 22nd February to send British Land Forces to Greece.

(c) The subsequent German-Italian offensive in North Africa leading to the withdrawal of British Forces in Cyrenaica to the Frontier and to the isolation of Tobruk.

(d) The German invasion of Yugo-Slavia and Greece on 5th April, resulting in the capitulation of the Armies of both countries and the evacuation of British Forces to Crete and Egypt.

(e) Intensified attacks on Malta and Naval communications in that area by German aircraft based in Sicily.

(f) The successful offensives against Italian East Africa from Kenya and Sudan, including the re-occupation of Berbera.

Note: A separate report has been rendered on the R.A.F. operations in Crete from the 17th April to the 31st May, the control of which ceased to be my responsibility from the 3rd May. On that date the German Air Invasion of the Island had not yet developed.

The full report on Air Operations in East Africa from 10th February to 5th April, 1941, has been forwarded to Air Ministry, but a Summary of these operations is included in this Despatch.

2. The location of units in the Middle East Command on 1st January, 1941, is the same as that given in Despatch No. 1 for the 31st December, 1941, and is repeated at Appendix "A".* Appendix "B" gives the location of units as at 30th April, 1941.

Libya.

3. In my previous Despatch I recorded in para. 28 that by 31st December, 1940, the whole territory East of the Italian-Egyptian frontier was in our hands. The Army had already advanced to positions surrounding Bardia and forward patrols had already penetrated towards Tobruk.

4. Air operations were continued in direct support of the Army, all types of aircraft contributing to this end during the advance, the role of squadrons being as follows:—

Heavy bombers attacked military objectives by night, such as Bardia and Tobruk, prior to the assault by our troops. At other times their objectives included Benghazi Port and aerodromes.

* Appendices not reproduced.

Medium bombers, immediately prior to attacks on Bardia, Tobruk and Derna, were employed in a similar role to the heavy bombers both by day and night and at other times attacked enemy aerodromes. No. 113 Squadron, and later No. 55 Squadron, continued to provide strategical reconnaissance.

The activities of our fighters were varied. They provided reconnaissance, made low flying attacks on mechanical transport on the enemy's lines of communication, in addition to providing air protection to our own troops against enemy air action.

Army Co-operation aircraft were employed mainly on tactical reconnaissance with Hurricanes or Gladiators. Lysanders were used to a limited extent for spotting artillery bombardments.

Early in January the Italian Air Force was still very active despite the heavy losses already inflicted on it.

5. As a prelude to the Army's assault, Bardia was subjected to a heavy Naval and Air bombardment. Thus, during the night 1st/2nd January, following many previous attacks, Wellingtons and Bombays, together with Fleet Air Arm Swordfish, dropped over 20,000 lbs. of bombs on enemy defences and troop positions. Blenheims continued to attack during the day on 2nd January making 44 bombing sorties, followed during the night of 2nd/3rd January by further efforts of Wellingtons and Bombays which dropped another 30,000 lbs. of bombs. The total load of bombs dropped during this series of attacks amounted to over 40 tons.

At the same time Blenheims bombed enemy aerodromes concentrating on Gazala, Derna and Tmimi. Hurricanes of Nos. 33, 73 and 274 Squadrons maintained offensive patrols over Bardia during the attack.

6. The Army attacked Bardia at dawn on 3rd January, the assault being made by armoured forces in co-operation with Australian infantry. During the battle, Blenheims effectively bombed troop concentrations while aircraft of No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron co-operated with artillery. Gladiators of No. 3 R.A.A.F. (Australian) Squadron maintained low flying offensive patrols to cover our troops as they advanced.

As soon as the attack had been launched a large proportion of our bombing effort was turned on to aerodromes in Cyrenaica, with the intention of pinning down and destroying the enemy air force.

Fighting at Bardia continued until 1330 hours on 5th January, when the enemy ceased to offer any further resistance.

7. By the 6th January our Armoured Forces, advancing under cover of offensive fighting patrols, had reached the outer perimeter defences of Tobruk. They also occupied El Adem aerodrome on that date, capturing 40 unserviceable aircraft which had been abandoned by the Italians on the landing ground there. A further 35 burnt out aircraft were found by armoured patrols at Gazala a few days later.

8. On 10th January, Headquarters No. 202 Group, together with the Western Desert Squadrons, started to move forward. By the middle of January, Headquarters, No. 202 Group was established at Sollum, and bomber and fighter squadrons had moved forward to

landing grounds in the Sollum-Bardia area, with No. 208 Squadron and No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron further forward at Gambut.

9. Operations now passed through a stage of preparation and consolidation before the attack on Tobruk. During this period heavy bombing attacks were continued against Tobruk to wear down the enemy and destroy his defences. Enemy aerodromes were consistently and effectively bombed, particular targets at this time being Berka and Benina, near Benghazi, to which the enemy had been compelled to withdraw his bomber forces as a result of our continued attacks on his more forward aerodromes. Port facilities and shipping at Benghazi and military objectives at Derna were also attacked. It now became evident that the aircraft losses inflicted on the enemy, both on the ground and in the air, were resulting in reduced activity of his air force, and from that time onwards our own aircraft operated with comparative immunity.

10. As in the case of Bardia, the assault on Tobruk was preceded by a Naval bombardment and heavy bombing attacks from the air. On the night of 19th/20th and 20th/21st January, Wellingtons and Blenheims dropped 20 tons of bombs, inflicting heavy damage on the defences and other military objectives at Tobruk, including the A.A. guardship, "San Georgio". The assault on Tobruk was launched at dawn on 21st January and, simultaneously, Blenheims of Nos. 45, 55 and 113 Squadrons, operating in direct support of our troops, attacked enemy positions within the Tobruk defences, maintaining their attacks throughout the day, and making a total of 87 sorties. The Gladiators of No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron, and Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons maintained offensive patrols Westwards of Tobruk to cover ground operations, but very few enemy aircraft appeared and only one engagement took place.

Operations continued on 22nd January. Aircraft of No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron provided close support for our troops. Early in the morning the Australians entered the town, while the Free French companies penetrated the perimeter near the sea to the West. All organised resistance was at an end by the evening.

Between the fall of Tobruk and 1st February the following moves were made. Headquarters, No. 202 Group moved forward to Sidi Mahmoud; Nos. 73 (F) and 274 (F) Squadrons to Gazala and No. 3 R.A.A.F. (A.C.) Squadron and No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron to El Tmimi.

11. The main body of our forces now pushed on Northwards to Derna and our armoured formations Westwards to Mechili. Enemy air activity was on a small scale, but as the advance approached Italian base aerodromes a certain number of fighters continued to attack our forward troops. They were, however, successfully dealt with by our own fighter patrols which prevented the enemy from inflicting any serious casualties or from materially influencing the rapid progress of the advance. The intensity of our own air operations at this stage was also somewhat reduced, due partly to unserviceability through long flying hours under desert conditions, but also through our inability to establish forward landing grounds sufficiently rapidly to keep pace with the advance. The over ponderous standard squadron organisation did not lend itself to such conditions, and,

moreover, very few transport aircraft were available. However, the Blenheims and Wellingtons, not being so dependent on advanced landing grounds, were able to continue bombing enemy aerodromes.

12. Our armoured forces entered Mechili on 27th January, and on 30th January Derna fell to the forces which had advanced to the North. Like Bardia and Tobruk, Derna had already been regularly and heavily bombed for a considerable period and was not, therefore, subjected to concentrated bombing attacks immediately prior to the assault. Fighter patrols, however, provided constant cover for the troops and continued to harass the enemy on his lines of communication throughout the operations.

The advance continued and Cyrene was occupied on 3rd February. A rapid withdrawal of enemy forces now took place; M.T. and troop convoys retreating Westwards from Barce were repeatedly attacked by Blenheims and harassed by fighters.

13. The Australians now advanced on Benghazi from the North, while on 4th February our armoured forces started their remarkable dash across the desert from Mechili to the coastal road South of Benghazi. The interception, which completely surprised the enemy, took place at Beda Fomm, approximately 30 miles South of Solluch on 5th February. The enemy, supported by strong armoured car formations, tried to break through, but were repulsed with heavy losses and the greater part of their forces were captured or destroyed.

Meanwhile, as the Australians advanced on Benghazi, our medium and heavy bombers maintained their attacks on Berka and Benina aerodromes and on the railway at Barce which was being used by the enemy for the withdrawal of his forces from that area.

14. Our troops occupied Benghazi on 6th February, meeting little resistance in the final stages. The R.A.F. occupied Benina aerodrome on 10th February and found 87 un-serviceable and damaged enemy aircraft there, which, together with those found at other aerodromes, notably El Adem and Gazala, were an indication of the effectiveness of the numerous bombing attacks made on enemy air force objectives and accounted very largely for the virtual collapse of the Italian Air Force during the latter stage of the advance.

15. Following the British occupation of Benghazi, the remnants of the enemy forces retreated Westwards into Tripolitania, while the Italian Air Force had been so depleted as to be incapable of offering any serious threat for the time being. Thus it appeared improbable at that time that the enemy would be able to stage an early counter-offensive in Libya. Meanwhile, the increasing gravity of the situation in Greece called for the early despatch of further air reinforcements to that theatre and the consequent reduction of the Royal Air Force in Cyrenaica.

16. The next phase, therefore, consisted of the reorganisation and redistribution of forces. H.Q. No. 202 Group, Nos. 45 and 113 (B) Squadrons, and No. 274 (F) Squadron were withdrawn to the Delta area in the middle of February. No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron was withdrawn at the end of February, but was replaced by No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron of which two

flights were at that time already in Cyrenaica, the remainder of the Squadron being transferred to Aqir (Palestine).

H.Q., R.A.F., Cyrenaica was formed at Barce on 25th February, 1941, under the command of Group Captain L. O. Brown, D.S.C., A.F.C.

The Squadrons remaining in Cyrenaica in March, 1941, were disposed as follows:—

No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F., which by that time was completely re-armed with Hurricanes, was located at Benina to provide the air defence of Benghazi.

No. 73 (F) Squadron, at first located at Gazala, was moved to Bu Amed on 14th March to defend the Tobruk area.

The Headquarters and one flight of No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron (Hurricanes and Lysanders) was at Barce, with a flight at Agedabia and sections at other landing grounds in Western Cyrenaica.

No. 55 (B) Squadron was at Bu Amed until 10th March, when it moved to Maraua.

17. Enemy air activity increased shortly after our occupation of Benghazi. It was at this time that German aircraft, operating from landing grounds near Tripoli began to attack our forces in Cyrenaica, at first using J.U.87's and Ju.88's. German fighters started to operate at a slightly later date from advanced landing grounds, Me.110's making their first appearance, followed shortly afterwards by Me.109's. Before the end of February the Germans had assumed a leading role in the enemy air effort.

The enemy's main bombing objective at first was Benghazi, which was attacked regularly and with some intensity between 14th and 20th February. Subsequent attacks, however, covered a wider range of objectives including Tobruk, our aerodromes in Cyrenaica and troops in the forward area at Agheila and Agedabia. It was in fact due to this somewhat unexpected increase of enemy air activity, coupled with the presence of German fighters, that No. 73 (F) Squadron was retained in Cyrenaica when it had previously been intended to withdraw it from that front to provide further reinforcement for Greece.

18. Reconnaissance of Tripoli harbour from the middle of February onwards revealed considerable quantities of shipping using the port, and it soon became evident that the enemy was being rapidly reinforced. In addition to sea borne reinforcements, the enemy carried considerable numbers of troops to Tripoli by air in Ju.52's. German troops were included in the reinforcements and early in March it was estimated that the greater part of a German division had already arrived in Tripolitania.

It was essential therefore to maintain attacks on shipping and harbour facilities at Tripoli to impede the flow of enemy reinforcements and supplies to Libya. Wellingtons of Nos. 38 and 70 (B) Squadrons, operating from landing grounds in Cyrenaica, accordingly bombed these objectives, making a total of forty sorties against Tripoli during February and March. Further attacks on Tripoli were made by F.A.A. Swordfish as well as Wellingtons operating from Malta. Considerable damage was inflicted during these operations but the total effort which could be made available was insufficient to cause any serious obstruction to the arrival of enemy reinforcements. Other

Wellington operations included attacks on aerodromes in Tripolitania and on shipping at Sirte which the Germans were developing as a forward base.

19. A brief appreciation of the air situation, dated the 6th March, was prepared for the information of the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Eden, who had arrived in Cairo in company with the C.I.G.S. on 19th February. A copy is attached—Appendix "D" (not reproduced).

It was at this time, particularly, that the weakness in number of modern aircraft at my disposal, chiefly Hurricanes and Blenheims, caused me the gravest concern. It had been anticipated that with the defeat of the Italian Air Force in Cyrenaica a quiet period on that front would justify considerable reduction in air strength. This proved to be far from the case, and it became apparent that air reinforcements would have to be sent to Cyrenaica immediately to prevent the enemy thrust from developing into a serious threat to Egypt.

We were already heavily committed in Greece and more help had been promised. Squadrons were awaiting new aircraft in replacement of wastage, yet the promised arrival in Egypt of large air reinforcements from home both via Malta and Takoradi, in spite of periodical emergency ferrying operations by Aircraft Carriers, did not materialise and it was not until the latter end of April that the situation in this respect began to improve. Moreover, though ships were arriving via the Red Sea at Suez quite regularly, there was no steady supply of cased aircraft by this route during the whole of January, February and March.

American Tomahawk fighters, which were beginning to come over from Takoradi, were at this time suffering from various "teething troubles" and were not yet ready for effective operation.

Not only was the Air Force at my disposal insufficient for the commitments which had arisen, but the rate of replacement, either actual or within reach, was not sufficient to keep pace with wastage. Whereas the losses from all causes from the 1st January, 1941 to 31st March, 1941 were 184, during the same period the actual arrivals in Egypt via Takoradi and Malta were 147 and 19 respectively, or a total of 166.

As will be seen later in this Despatch, during the whole of March and April this factor of waning resources had to be taken into account in deciding how to employ the Air Force at my disposal economically and to the best advantage.

20. Early in March, increasing numbers of enemy M.T. were observed by air reconnaissances to be moving eastwards along the coastal roads, and by the 10th March large enemy concentrations were located in the area immediately West of Agheila. Simultaneously the enemy established forward landing grounds at Tamet, Syrte and El Makina.

By the middle of March it was estimated that the German forces in Libya had been built up to two divisions, one of which was armoured. With this increase of strength in personnel and equipment, the enemy forces gradually assumed an offensive role. At the same time enemy aircraft reconnoitred our forward positions apparently with the object of ascertaining the strength of our forces.

On 19th March an enemy patrol occupied the landing ground at Marada, about 80 miles South of Agheila. This move was a forerunner of increased activity by strong enemy patrols which necessitated the withdrawal of our outposts from Agheila, the enemy occupying the fort there on 24th March. Italian infantry, supported by German armoured forces and dive-bombers, moved East of Agheila on 30th March, and on 31st March our forward troops were compelled to fall back on Agedabia. Blenheims of No. 55 Squadron bombed and machine-gunned enemy M.T. concentrations, while the landing ground at Misurata, from which enemy aircraft were operating in support of their advance, was successfully attacked by Wellingtons and Blenheims. The superior weight of the enemy enabled him to continue his advance, however, despite the opposition of our troops and aircraft.

21. On 2nd April, the enemy continued to advance in Cyrenaica, compelling our forward troops to withdraw from Agedabia. The situation in Benghazi thus became precarious, and orders for demolitions were issued. Preparations were made for the withdrawal of all R.A.F. Units from that area, and Benina was evacuated during the early evening of 2nd April, all demolitions having been completed.

Although handicapped by the frequent moves of the ground echelon necessitated by rapid withdrawal, squadrons continued to operate in direct support of the Army. Blenheims of No. 55 (B) Squadron, reinforced by No. 45 Squadron, provided reconnaissances, attacked concentrations of enemy M.T. and A.F.V's., and bombed forward enemy aerodromes. Hurricanes of No. 3 Australian Squadron and No. 73 (F) Squadron maintained constant patrols, covering our troops as they withdrew to new positions and making many effective attacks on enemy M.T. concentrations. Wellingtons also made night attacks on enemy M.T. in addition to maintaining their offensive against Tripoli whilst they were still within striking range of that objective. No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron continued to operate directly under the control of the Army and provided such tactical reconnaissances as were possible with their limited capacity and under conditions in which their ground echelons, like those of the other squadrons, were constantly on the move.

22. For the next few days complete details of the movement of our own and enemy troops remained somewhat obscure. At times it was difficult for Army Co-operation aircraft to keep track of the movements of the particular force with which they were working. For instance, on April 2nd, both the Flight of No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron and the H.Q. of No. 2 Armoured Division with which they were operating spent the night at Antelat, but on the morning of the 3rd April the Flight discovered that Div. H.Q. had left and no information was forthcoming as to their movements. The Flight subsequently moved to the landing ground at Msus where Free French troops were unable to give any information concerning our troops in the area, nor did they know where Div. H.Q. was situated. It was not until noon that a message was received from Second Div. H.Q. which gave their position at that time as 30 miles West of Msus. A tactical reconnaissance about this time, taken by an aircraft of this Flight from Msus, reported

enemy A.F.V's. and M.T. moving towards Msus. Whether this column was, in fact, an enemy one still remains uncertain, but according to the pilot the lorries were Italian and the personnel inside them opened 'fire' on his aircraft.

23. On the 4th April, enemy armoured forces threatened to outflank the Australian Division holding the Benina-Tocra position, necessitating their withdrawal to new positions on the Barce escarpment.

In the meantime, as the Army withdrew to new positions, our Squadrons moved to landing grounds further East. On the 4th April, No. 3 Australian Squadron, No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron and Advanced H.Q., Cyrenaica, moved to Maraua, No. 55 Squadron to Derna and H.Q., Cyrenaica to Tobruk. On the same day 8 Blenheims of No. 45 Squadron reinforced No. 55 Squadron.

The Australian Division withdrew to the Barce escarpment on the 5th April, covered by Hurricane patrols of Nos. 3 and 73 Squadrons. The Hurricane patrols were also extended to cover elements of our troops retiring towards Mechili. In these operations, on 5th April our fighters destroyed 14 enemy aircraft for a loss of 2 Hurricanes.

By the 7th April the Australian Division and support group had withdrawn, first to Derna and then to Gazala area. Meanwhile, our armoured forces, which had already suffered heavy losses, had fallen back on Mechili and joined up with the Indian Motor Brigade. At this stage R.A.F. Squadrons had withdrawn to aerodromes in the Tobruk area, and further movements were necessary on the 8th April when the Blenheim Squadrons and No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron withdrew to landing grounds East of the Cyrenaica-Egyptian frontier, and the Wellingtons to their bases in the Fuka area. No. 6 (A.C.) and 73 (F) Squadrons continued to operate from landing grounds within the Tobruk perimeter.

The Australian Division withdrew to the outer perimeter of Tobruk on the 10th April. The following day enemy A.F.V's. cut the road between Tobruk and El Adem and our support group retired towards Sollum. From Mechili the enemy's forward troops continued their advance, and by the 13th April they had occupied Bardia and the Sollum escarpment where their advance was temporarily halted.

24. The situation by 13th April had become more stabilised and was as follows:—

The enemy's thrust in the forward area at Sollum had lost momentum and there were indications that his troops there were experiencing administrative difficulties as a result of their rapid advance.

Tobruk was held by a strong force of our troops and was invested by the enemy whose troops were concentrated West and South of the perimeter, with armoured forces astride the El Adem road.

H.Q. No. 204 Group, which formed at Maaten Bagush on the 12th April under the command of Air Commodore R. Collishaw, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., D.S.C., D.F.C., had taken over the control of the Squadrons in the Western Desert from H.Q. Cyrenaica.

The tasks of the R.A.F. at this stage were:—

(a) To continue to attack lines of communication to aggravate the enemy's existing M.T. difficulties.

(b) To provide close support for the Army by attacking enemy A.F.V's., M.T. concentrations and troops both in the forward areas and at Tobruk.

(c) To attack enemy aerodromes, primarily with the intention of destroying his transport aircraft which he was using to supply his forward troops.

(d) To bomb harbour facilities and shipping at Benghazi in order to interrupt the use of the port by the enemy and thereby prevent him from shortening his long lines of communication from Tripolitania.

(e) To provide the fighter defence of Tobruk.

25. Soon after the investment of Tobruk it became evident that it would no longer be possible to maintain No. 6 (A.C.) and No. 73 (F) Squadrons on the aerodrome within the perimeter. In addition to frequent dive bombing attacks, which were liable to destroy or damage the aircraft beyond repair capacity available, the landing ground was within range of enemy artillery fire. These Squadrons were accordingly withdrawn to aerodromes in the vicinity of Maaten Bagush, with advanced landing ground near Sidi Barrani for re-fuelling.

Owing to the distance of Tobruk from these aerodromes and even from the advanced landing ground at Sidi Barrani (120 miles from Tobruk), the task of maintaining fighter defence over Tobruk Harbour at such long range became extremely difficult. In addition, the depth of enemy penetration to the East put Tripoli out of range of our Wellingtons operating from the Western Desert, and made it most difficult to provide fighter escorts to our ships supplying the Tobruk garrison. On the other hand, it enabled the enemy to develop repeated bombing attacks on Tobruk without regular fighter interference, and it reduced the distance for his bombers operating against Alexandria or ships in the Eastern Mediterranean.

26. After a German-Italian attack on Tobruk on April 14th, during which No. 73 (F) Squadron shot down 9 E/A for loss of 2, there followed a period of comparative inactivity from a military standpoint. In the Sollum area, patrols of our mobile forces made raids well behind the enemy's forward troops. The enemy, however, continued to supply his forward areas by means of M.T. and transport aircraft, although harassed by the activity of our mobile patrols and the continued attacks of our aircraft on his lines of communication and forward aerodromes.

Enemy air activity at this stage was concentrated largely on Tobruk, apparently with the primary intention of denying the port to us. Hurricanes of No. 73 Squadron, providing the fighter defence of Tobruk, on several occasions engaged greatly superior numbers of the enemy with success, although not without loss to themselves. As an example, in a series of raids on Tobruk during 22nd and

23rd April in which the enemy employed a total of 100 bombers and about 150 fighters, Hurricanes destroyed 12 enemy aircraft and probably destroyed a further 2 with a loss to themselves of 3 Hurricanes.

The scale of our attack against enemy aerodromes was somewhat increased from about 20th April to the end of the period under review. More than 60 sorties by Wellingtons and Blenheims were made during this particular period, the main weight of this effort being directed against the enemy's forward aerodromes at Derna and Gazala, and the base aerodrome at Benina.

By this time our squadrons in the Western Desert had been further reinforced by detachments of No. 274 (F) Squadron—Hurricanes and No. 39 (B) Squadron—Marylands, the latter being employed mainly for strategical reconnaissances. No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. was withdrawn from the Western Desert on 21st April and moved to Aboukir for rest after continuous fighting since 7th November, 1940.

27. Towards the end of the period under review, military activity increased, both in the frontier area and at Tobruk. The enemy's forward troops on the Sollum escarpment after being heavily reinforced with A.F.V's. advanced Eastwards on the 27th April and occupied Halfaya Pass. This appeared to be his main objective for, after establishing a forward line between Halfaya and Sidi Omar he made no attempt to continue his advance.

At Tobruk the enemy made a further determined attack on 1st May, employing 60 tanks supported by infantry and accompanied by heavy air attacks on our troops and defences. The enemy succeeded in breaking the outer defences of the perimeter but failed to pierce our main defences. Fighting continued for two days and on the 1st May, Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons maintained fighter patrols to protect our troops and, artillery against enemy fighter and bomber action. The Hurricanes encountered enemy fighters, in greatly superior numbers but shot down 4 Me.109's in flames, with the loss of 1 Hurricane. Our troops successfully counter-attacked, destroying 11 enemy tanks and inflicting other heavy losses. The enemy however, retained a hold on 5,000 yards of the outer perimeter and our line was adjusted accordingly. A further attack by the enemy on the 2nd May was repulsed, after which the enemy effort there appeared to be temporarily spent.

28. A feature of the operations of this period was the high scale of effort maintained by a comparatively small air force working under the difficult conditions imposed by the enemy's rapid advance. From 1st April to 3rd May more than 400 bomber and fighter sorties were made against enemy M.T. convoys and concentrations, A.F.V's. and troops. Over 70 Wellington and 80 Blenheim sorties were made against enemy aerodromes and 64 Wellington and 12 Blenheim sorties were made against Benghazi. In addition, Hurricanes on several occasions machine-gunned aerodromes and in the course of numerous patrols destroyed 73

enemy aircraft in combat and probably destroyed a further 16, with a total loss of 22 Hurricanes.

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.

29. From January to Mid-February Air Commodore R. Collishaw, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., D.S.C., D.F.C., continued in command of No. 202 Group, R.A.F. in these successful operations which culminated in the occupation of Cyrenaica. He maintained the high standard of resource and initiative which I had grown accustomed to expect from him, and he was an inspiration to all those under his command. At Appendix "H" will be seen a tribute to the work of his Group by Lieutenant-General O'Connor, Commander of the XIII Corps (not reproduced).

Group Captain L. O. Brown, D.S.C., A.F.C., continued to render most valuable service on the Staff of the G.O.C. in arranging the tasks of the reconnaissance Squadrons under the operational control of the Army. On February 25th he assumed command of the reduced Air Force in Cyrenaica and remained in command during the subsequent withdrawal, during which time he contrived to operate his small Force to the best advantage under most difficult conditions.

The work of No. 3 Royal Australian Air Force, under the command of Squadron Leader I. D. Maclachan, D.F.C., was outstanding. They were continuously in the Western Desert or Cyrenaica for six months, first with a mixture of Gladiators, Gauntlets and Lysanders and later with Hurricanes. Their high morale and adaptability to Desert conditions were remarkable.

Other Squadrons which particularly distinguished themselves on this front were No. 73—Hurricane—Fighter Squadron and No. 55—Blenheim—Bomber Squadron, which did most of the long distance strategical reconnaissance.

Mention must also be made of No. 2 R.A.F. Armoured Car Company which remained working with the Armoured Division throughout the successful phase of the operations, attached to the XI Hussars.

Greece.

30. The Greek advance had lost its impetus by the beginning of the year as the result of increased enemy resistance, lengthened lines of communication and severe winter conditions. The Greeks still retained the initiative, however, and after operations had apparently become static, they made a further advance, capturing Kelcyre on the 8th January, 1941, and thereafter making slow progress along the Northern side of the Kelcyre-Tepelene gorge. There was little activity in other sectors.

The R.A.F. Squadrons based in Greece, under the command of Air Vice-Marshal J. H. D'Albiac, D.S.O., on the 1st January, 1941, were:—

- No. 30 (F) Squadron (Blenheim Fighters).
- No. 80 (F) Squadron (Gladiators).
- No. 84 (B) Squadron (Blenheims)
- No. 211 (B) Squadron (Blenheims).

In addition, detachments of Wellingtons of Nos. 37 and 70 (B) Squadrons based in Egypt operated during moon periods from aerodromes in Greece.

The continued arrival of Italian reinforcements in Albania presaged an offensive, to counter which the Greeks would require the maximum air support that could be made available. Thus No. 112 (F) Squadron (Gladiators) was withdrawn from the Western Desert early in January, and No. 11 (B) Squadron (Blenheims) and No. 33 (F) Squadron (Hurricanes) were also withdrawn after the capture of Bardia and despatched to Greece, as follows:—

No. 11 (B) Squadron—24th January.

No. 112 (F) Squadron—10th February.

No. 33 (F) Squadron—19th February.

A situation calling for further reinforcements for Greece was created by the threatened German invasion through the Balkans. Accordingly, by the 31st March, No. 113 (B) Squadron (Blenheims) had also been despatched from Egypt to Greece and No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron (Hurricanes and Lysanders) was re-equipping and preparing to move at an early date.

31. Although the Greek Air Force operated with success in the early days of the war its activities were much reduced latterly by the inability of the Greeks to make good their aircraft casualties. Thus, practically the whole of the air effort in this theatre devolved upon the R.A.F. which was consequently called upon to attack strategical objectives, to operate in direct support of the Greek Army, necessary in order to maintain their high morale, and to provide the fighter defence of the Athens area. To meet these requirements Squadrons were employed in the following roles:—

Wellingtons operating by night attacked ports in Albania and to a less extent in S. Italy to interrupt the flow of enemy supplies and reinforcements to Albania.

The primary role of the Blenheims was to provide direct support for the Greek Army by attacking:—

(a) enemy lines of communication and important centres behind the forward area to prevent the distribution of supplies and reinforcements, and

(b) enemy positions in the forward area.

Blenheims also attacked ports in Albania by night and day and provided strategical reconnaissance of ports in Southern Italy and Albania.

Hurricanes and Gladiators were employed in escorting Blenheims during many of their daylight bombing attacks, in maintaining offensive patrols and in protecting the Greek troops against enemy air action.

Blenheim fighters continued to provide the air defence of the Port and Air Bases in the Athens area.

In addition to the commitments already referred to, Wellingtons and Blenheims operating from Greece were called upon to attack enemy aerodromes in the Dodecanese from which enemy aircraft were carrying out mine-laying operations in the Suez Canal, as well as air attacks on our convoys proceeding to Greece.

32. For the first two months of the year extremely unfavourable weather conditions persisted, preventing our aircraft from operating with any degree of intensity. Although both sides were similarly handicapped, it was more

to our disadvantage in that, inter alia, it prevented our own aircraft from attacking ports in Albania and Southern Italy with sufficient intensity to do more than embarrass their use by the enemy. Thus, despite the damage inflicted and the nuisance value of our attacks, the Italians still continued to land reinforcements and supplies in Albania.

The bad weather prevailing at the time of the Greeks' capture of Kelcyre on the 8th January prevented our aircraft from operating in close support of their troops during their advance; in fact, until the middle of February operations were of necessity of a sporadic nature, the weather and state of aerodromes on occasions preventing our aircraft from operating for several days at a time. Subsequently, on the 10th January, as the Greeks continued to make slow progress towards Tepelene, Blenheims attacked enemy troops retiring from Kelcyre towards Berat. Otherwise support to the Greek forces at this time was confined to Blenheim attacks on the bases at Berat, West of the Central Sector and Elbasan, beyond the Northern Sector.

Towards the end of January the fighting round Tepelene increased in intensity as reinforcements reached the Italians, enabling them to stiffen their resistance against the Greek thrusts. During this period and up to the middle of February periodical attacks continued against Elbasan in the North, and Berat, Boulsar and Dukaj in the Tepelene area where military buildings and troop concentrations were bombed.

33. By the middle of February there were indications that the threatened Italian counter offensive would not be long delayed. With the Greeks retaining the initiative the ground operations had developed into a series of attacks by the Greeks followed by fierce Italian counter attacks, this activity being concentrated in the Tepelene area. A brief spell of improved weather conditions at this time enabled our aircraft to operate with greater freedom, 108 sorties being made between 11th and 18th February in support of the Greek forces which were making a strong effort at that time to capture Tepelene. In these operations, stores, M.T. convoys and enemy troop and gun positions in the Tepelene area were persistently and effectively attacked by bomber and fighter Blenheims.

Air activity reached a peak on 13th-14th February when, following a series of ineffective Italian counter-attacks, the Greeks launched a new offensive against enemy positions around Tepelene. Our aircraft made 50 sorties in direct and close support of the Greek troops as they advanced and captured important positions in the mountains to the North and South of Tepelene.

Following this short favourable spell, weather conditions again deteriorated after the middle of February, but although this curtailed operations to some extent our aircraft continued to provide support for the Greek Army which maintained its pressure on the enemy. Between 19th February and 4th March approximately 90 Blenheim sorties were made against enemy troop concentrations, gun emplacements and M.T. convoys in the Southern and Central Sectors in an endeavour to wear down the enemy resistance.

34. Owing to enemy fighter activity Blenheims taking part in these operations were on most occasions escorted by Gladiators or Hurricanes. Several combats with large enemy fighter formations took place, to the marked advantage of our own fighters. As an example, during a particular week of activity ending 3rd March, 33 Italian fighters were destroyed and a further 8 probably destroyed, against which our own fighter losses were only 1 Gladiator destroyed, the pilot being safe, and 2 other fighters damaged. Such successes were by no means limited to this period and further reference is made later to the activities of our fighters.

By the beginning of March the continued arrival of enemy reinforcements by sea and air had built up the strength of Italian forces in Albania to an estimated total of 29 divisions. The Greeks, however, retained the initiative, repeatedly repulsing counter-attacks and inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. On the 7th March, the Greeks, taking advantage of improving weather conditions, resumed their offensive against Tepelene, again assisted by our bombers which with fighter escorts continued their attacks against enemy troop positions and lines of communication. The Greeks made local progress.

35. The Italians launched their counter-offensive on the 9th March on a front of about 20 miles, extending from Tepelene in the Southern Sector to the Greek lines West of Corovode in the Central Sector. The enemy forces, which were estimated at about 10 divisions, supported by large numbers of bomber and fighter aircraft, made continuous attacks until the 14th March, but the Greeks, defending resolutely, repulsed all attacks and inflicted very heavy losses on the enemy. The Italians were unable to gain any ground and on the 14th March the Greeks made a successful counter-attack, taking some prisoners.

Throughout these operations, which continued at maximum intensity between the 9th and 14th March, Blenheims escorted by fighters made 43 sorties against enemy troops, gun positions and M.T. columns, concentrating largely on objectives in the Buzi-Gilave area. At the same time Hurricanes and Gladiators engaged on escort duties and offensive patrols made 15 and 122 sorties respectively. They fought several successful combats with enemy fighters during which they destroyed 35 enemy aircraft and probably another 9, with a total loss of 2 Gladiators and 1 Hurricane, the pilots of which escaped.

By the 15th March the Italian offensive was reduced in intensity, although the enemy continued to make local attacks without success until the 27th March. Air operations continued against enemy positions and lines of communication in all sectors although on a somewhat reduced scale as the result of a further deterioration of weather conditions.

36. During the period under review, Wellingtons made 4 sorties and Blenheims 30 sorties against shipping and port facilities at Valona. Against Durazzo Wellingtons made 11 sorties. This effort was augmented by F.A.A. Swordfish operating from Paramythia which made bomb and torpedo attacks against shipping at these objectives, comprising 7 sorties against Durazzo and 12 against Valona. A feature of these operations was the effectiveness of the

F.A.A. Swordfish torpedo attacks in which five direct and two probable hits were claimed on shipping. Much damage was inflicted on port facilities, warehouses, military buildings and barracks by the Wellingtons and Blenheims. In Southern Italy, Brindisi was twice attacked by Wellingtons, the railway station being the objective on the first occasion and the aerodrome on the second. A further attack in the Brindisi area was made when fighter Blenheims successfully machine-gunned grounded aircraft at the aerodrome at Lecce (S. Italy).

37. One of the most outstanding features of the campaign in Albania was the marked superiority which our fighters gained over those of the Italians. In a series of combats during the first three months of the year (1941) our fighters destroyed 93 enemy aircraft and probably destroyed another 26, the greater proportion of the total being fighters. Against this our own fighter losses in combat amounted to 4 Hurricanes and 4 Gladiators destroyed, from which 6 of the pilots escaped by parachute.

Enemy aircraft operating from aerodromes in the Dodecanese periodically mined the Suez Canal and also attacked our sea convoys sailing to Greece. It became necessary, therefore, to divert a portion of the available bomber forces in Greece to attack aerodromes in the Dodecanese, with harbours and shipping as an alternative.

The main objectives were the aerodromes at Rhodes, viz. Maritza, Cattavia and Calato, against which 20 Wellington sorties and 25 by Blenheims were made from Greece. Blenheims also made a further 9 sorties against the aerodrome at Scarpanto and shipping at Stampalia. Many fires were started at the aerodromes, and damage was caused to aerodrome buildings and dispersed aircraft. Direct hits were also obtained on one ship at Stampalia.

Other attacks on the Dodecanese were made by Wellingtons operating from Egypt, the total effort from Greece and Egypt combined during the period under review amounting to 70 Wellington sorties and 34 Blenheim sorties.

38. A further operation of note was the combined Naval and R.A.F. action against enemy Naval forces at the Battle of Matapan on 28th March.

Acting on Sunderland reconnaissance reports, Blenheims operating from Greece made five attacks comprising 24 sorties against enemy warships, reporting direct hits with S.A.P. bombs on two cruisers and one destroyer. One cruiser which was hit with a 500 lb. S.A.P. bomb was apparently seriously damaged. At Appendix "J" is a copy of a Signal conveying appreciation by the Board of Admiralty on the part played by the R.A.F. in this action (not reproduced).

39. Towards the middle of February it had become clear that the German infiltration into Roumania was likely to develop into a "drive" through Bulgaria, with Salonika as the preliminary objective. The Greek Government recognised this as a very real threat, but they were anxious to avoid any action originating from their territory which might precipitate events. Though they were continually calling for more air support, they did not accept the offer of British Troops until 22nd February when at a Conference held at Tatoi, attended by the King of Greece, Prime Minister Korysias (who had succeeded the late General Metaxas),

Mr. Eden (Foreign Secretary), General Sir John Dill (C.I.G.S.), General Sir Archibald Wavell (C.-in-C. M.E.), Captain Dick, R.N. (representing C.-in-C. Mediterranean) and myself, the decision was taken to despatch British Troops at the earliest opportunity to form on the Aliakmon line to the West of Salonika.

It followed, of course, that an increased air commitment would be involved both in support of the British Army on this new front and also for air protection of the ships transporting men to Greece. Nevertheless, since the Greeks had decided to oppose a German invasion of Macedonia there was clearly no alternative to giving them the maximum assistance possible. Moreover, though German air and land forces had arrived in Tripoli these might well have been to prevent our further advance, and there was no reason on that particular date to suspect the imminent preparation of a counter-offensive in Libya. It is true, however, that such a threat developed almost immediately after the Greek commitment had been accepted.

40. The landing of British Troops in the Athens area during March proceeded with little or no interference from the air; German infiltration into Bulgaria continued but their air activity was limited to occasional reconnaissances over Macedonia. By the 1st April it was evident that the German invasion of Greece through the Balkans was imminent. Consequently, with the prospect of fighting the war on two fronts, two air formations were created, viz. Eastern Wing and Western Wing. H.Q. Eastern Wing was at Tsaritsani, in close touch with G.H.Q. British Forces and controlled Nos. 11 and 113 (B) Squadrons (Blenheims), No. 33 (F) Squadron (Hurricanes) and No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron (Hurricanes and Lysanders). The role of this force was to provide direct support for the British and Greek Armies against the prospective German attack from the North. H.Q. Western Wing was at Yannina and controlled No. 112 (F) Squadron (Gladiators) and No. 211 (B) Squadron (Blenheims), the role of this formation being to support the Greeks on the Albanian Front. The remainder of the squadrons in Greece, viz. No. 30 (F/B) Squadron (Blenheim Fighters), No. 80 (F) Squadron (Hurricanes and Gladiators) and No. 84 (B) Squadron (Blenheims), together with detachments of Nos. 37 and 38 (B) Squadrons (Wellingtons), were at aerodromes in the Athens area directly under the control of H.Q., B.A.F., Greece. No. 815 Squadron Fleet Air Arm was based on Paramythia and No. 805 Squadron Fleet Air Arm on Maleme (Crete).

41. Germany declared war on Greece and Yugo-Slavia on the 5th April, 1941, and launched her attack at dawn the following day, crossing the Greek frontier into Macedonia by four routes, with the main thrust along the Struma Valley. Simultaneously they advanced Westwards into Yugo-Slavia along the Strumica Valley in the South, from Dragoman to Nis in the North, and by other intermediate routes. The Greeks resisted strongly at Rupel, temporarily checking the German advance through the Struma Valley, but despite this opposition the Germans succeeded in penetrating Thrace and Macedonia and occupied Salonika on the 8th April.

Throughout the German advance the primary task of our Squadrons was to attack his A.F.V's., M.T. columns, troops and lines of communication on the Macedonian and Yugo-Slavian Frontiers. Practically the whole of our air effort was directed to this end, Wellingtons making night attacks, Blenheims operating both by night and day, with fighters constantly in support maintaining offensive patrols, making low flying machine-gun attacks on the enemy, and escorting our bombers by day. The first encounter with the German air force on this front took place on 6th April. A patrol of 12 of No. 33 Squadron Hurricanes engaged 30 Me.109's and shot down 5 of them without loss to themselves. During the night of 6th/7th April, 6 Wellingtons of No. 37 Squadron successfully bombed the railway station and marshalling yards at Sofia. From 7th to 9th April, as the Germans advanced in strength, Blenheims of Nos. 11, 84 and 113 Squadrons made heavy and effective attacks on large columns of their M.T., A.F.V's. and troops near Petrich in Bulgaria, on the Strumica-Lake Doiran Road in Yugo-Slavia and at Axiopolis and Polykastron in Macedonia.

42. By this time the German armoured forces, supported by dive-bombers, advancing Westwards from Bitolj, had overwhelmed the Yugo-Slav Army and had succeeded in joining up with the Italians in Albania. They then advanced Southward from Bitolj to Florina, threatening to isolate the Greeks in Albania from our own forces further East. The Greeks were thus compelled to withdraw from the Northern front of Albania, while our Armoured Brigade and an Australian Infantry Brigade were moved Westwards to close the Florina Gap, where they were joined by a Greek cavalry division from the Koritza area. On 10th April, as the enemy continued his Westward thrust into Yugo-Slavia, Blenheims attacked enemy M.T. columns and A.F.V's. on the Prilep-Bitolj road inflicting heavy damage on them. During the night of 11th/12th April, Wellingtons followed up this effort with further attacks on the enemy at Prilep and Kilkis.

Meanwhile, our forces holding the Florina Gap had been hotly attacked by the Germans on 9th April and compelled, after a strong resistance, to withdraw on 11th April. By the evening of 12th April, our front had been formed roughly on a line extending from the coast near Mount Olympus, along the Aliakmon River to Servia, thence N.W. towards the Albanian lakes. Continued bombing and machine-gun attacks by Blenheims and Hurricanes contributed to the delay of the enemy's advance during the critical periods in which our troops were falling back on new positions. These operations were inevitably accompanied by considerable losses and in one raid on the 13th April, for example, a complete formation of 6 Blenheims of No. 211 Squadron was destroyed by Me.109's. Wellingtons continued to attack more distant objectives. On the night of 13th/14th April a force of 10 Wellingtons from Nos. 37 and 38 Squadrons made a further effective attack on the railway goods yard at Sofia, destroying a large number of trucks containing explosives. At the same time other Wellingtons bombed and machine-gunned M.T. convoys at Yannitsa and Gorna Djumaya. In operations on the following night Wellingtons destroyed the bridge over the Vardar River at Veles and Blenheims dropped bombs on

enemy columns on the road from Ptolomais to Kozani. Our aircraft continued to attack similar objectives during the night of 15th-16th April and throughout the following day, to impede the enemy's advance on Katerini and Kozani.

43. Meanwhile the Army had stubbornly held the Mount Olympus-Aliakmon Line until 14th April when it was turned by the Germans forcing the Kleisoura Pass. Our forces started to fall back on the Thermopylae Position on 15th April, completing the withdrawal by the 20th April. This new situation necessitated the withdrawal of all R.A.F. Squadrons to the Athens Area on 16th April and from that date onwards they were controlled directly by H.Q., B.A.F., Greece. Eastern and Western Wings were consequently disbanded.

Continuous enemy attacks on our aerodromes, coupled with losses from enemy fighter action, had by this time considerably reduced the effective striking power of our Squadrons. In a series of attacks on one day alone, the enemy destroyed 10 Blenheims on the ground at Niamata and damaged several other aircraft which had to be subsequently destroyed and abandoned. Several such attacks were made, during which many aircraft were destroyed or rendered unserviceable, but owing to the loss in several instances of unit records during the ultimate evacuation, full details of enemy raids are not available. Towards the end the repeated enemy attacks on our aerodromes in the Athens Area caused further heavy losses, and as a final blow a force of Hurricanes retained at Argos to cover the evacuation was almost wiped out when 13 of them were destroyed on the ground during intensive enemy air attacks on 23rd April.

In turn our aircraft attacked the German occupied aerodromes on the Salonika and Larissa Plains in an endeavour to reduce the scale of the enemy's air effort. Thus between 15th and 22nd April Blenheims made effective night attacks on the aerodromes at Sedes, Katerina, Kozani and Larissa, starting several large fires. The effort could not, however, be maintained on a sufficiently heavy scale to cause any material reduction of the enemy's air effort, bearing in mind the comparatively large numbers of aircraft and reserves available to him.

Nevertheless, our Squadrons continued to operate until, in the end, the use of aerodromes was virtually denied to them by constant enemy air attacks. In the concluding stages Blenheims attacked enemy columns advancing on the Larissa Plain, concentrating on road bridges between Kozani, Grevena and Kalabaka to impede the enemy's progress. One particularly successful attack was made when Blenheims bombed a large M.T. convoy concentrated in front of a broken bridge across the Aliakmon River a few miles from Kalabaka. Similarly our fighters continued to engage formidable enemy formations with success. Throughout the campaign they had gained many victories against the numerically superior enemy, but at no time was their skill and high morale more in evidence than in the concluding stages. In a number of combats during the period of intensive enemy air activity on 19th and 20th April, Hurricanes of Nos. 33 and 80 Squadrons destroyed a total of 29 German aircraft and probably destroyed another 15. In addition,

Fighter Blenheims of No. 30 Squadron probably destroyed 2 Italian bombers. These successes were achieved with a loss of 7 Hurricanes brought down and 2 damaged, a truly remarkable record in view of the increasing disparity of strength between the R.A.F. and the German Air Force.

44. At the beginning of these operations the combined strength of the German and Italian Air Forces amounted to approximately 1,100 aircraft, of which over 40 per cent. were fighters, a little less than 40 per cent. bombers and dive-bombers, and the remainder reconnaissance aircraft. The total strength of the R.A.F. in Greece with reserves was approximately 200 aircraft, of which about half were bombers. Although outnumbered, our Squadrons operated with success in the initial stages of the German advance. It is probable that unfavourable weather and the lack of forward all-weather aerodromes at that stage prevented the enemy from making the best use of his superior numbers. As the enemy advanced, however, he was able to establish forward aerodromes, at first in the Salonika Area and subsequently on the Larissa Plain, from which he was able to exploit his numerical superiority to the fullest advantage. He was thus able to concentrate an overwhelming force which took an increasing toll of our aircraft both on the ground and in the air. These casualties could not be replaced at that time from the slender reserves available in the Middle East, particularly in view of the dangerous situation which had arisen in the Western Desert. The odds which our Squadrons had to face, therefore, increased disproportionately until the Germans had gained virtual air superiority. With that achieved they were able to concentrate the main weight of their attack against our troops, lines of communication, and ports. By 20th April our much-depleted Squadrons were concentrated at the few remaining aerodromes in the Athens Area, where, as already described, they were exposed to continuous air attack. With the complete collapse of the Greek resistance it became evident that even the shortened Thermopylae front could not be held against the superior weight of the enemy and the decision was made to withdraw all British Forces to the coast and embark them for Crete or Egypt.

45. The scheme for the evacuation of R.A.F. personnel aimed at the removal of air crews and certain key personnel by air in Squadron and transport aircraft and flying boats. The remainder were to be evacuated by sea with other British and Imperial Forces. Wellingtons of Nos. 37 and 38 Squadrons had already flown to Egypt on the 17th and 18th April, the personnel and equipment following by sea on 23rd April. In addition, 14 Blenheim Fighters of No. 30 Squadron flew to Crete on 18th April to provide convoy protection during the projected sea evacuation. The remaining aircraft of Nos. 11, 84, 113 and 211 (B) Squadrons and 208 (A.C.) Squadron, amounting to 24 Blenheims and 4 Lysanders, flew to Egypt on 22nd and 23rd April, the Blenheims having previously made several journeys between Greece and Crete evacuating air crews.

The enemy air attack on Argos on 23rd April, already referred to, had reduced the remaining strength of Nos. 33 and 80 Squadron

Hurricanes to 6. These and 14 Gladiators of Nos. 80 and 112 Squadrons were flown to Crete on 23rd April to defend Suda Bay against enemy air attack and to take part with No. 30 Squadron in providing cover for sea convoys engaged in the evacuation. Sunderlands started to evacuate R.A.F. personnel on 19th April, when they flew a 30 Squadron party to Crete. The previous day they had also carried King Peter of Yugoslavia and other important political personages to Egypt, having taken them off from Kotor (Yugoslavia) on 17th April. Sunderlands continued the evacuation of essential personnel in stages from Greece to Crete, thence to Egypt. The King of Greece and members of the Greek Royal Family were included among other important passengers flown to Crete in Sunderlands on 22nd and 23rd April.

46. On 23rd April the Sunderlands were reinforced by two B.O.A.C. Flying Boats which operated between Crete and Egypt and rendered valuable service. These efforts were further augmented on the same day by Bombays of No. 216 Squadron which took two parties from Eleusis to Bagush, and the following day by Lodestars of No. 267 Squadron which carried three parties from Argos to Bagush. Enemy air attacks rendered Eleusis and Menidi aerodromes unusable after 23rd April, and Argos was similarly out of action from 24th April. The Bombays and Lodestars thereafter continued to carry personnel from Crete to Egypt. The last Sunderland loads to leave Scaramanga were taken off on 24th April and included Lieutenant-General Sir T. Blamey, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., and Air Vice-Marshal J. H. D'Albiac, D.S.O., and their respective staffs.

On 24th April 1,700 R.A.F. personnel were at Argos awaiting evacuation by sea but by the next day the majority of these had moved to Kalamata and Gytheon, three Sunderland loads being taken off from the former, and one from the latter and flown to Crete. Subsequently all personnel remaining there were evacuated by sea, many of them crossing in small boats to Kythera whence they were later taken off in destroyers. Further Sunderland evacuations from Greece, were made from Nauplia (Morea), transporting Prince Paul of Greece, the Greek Prime Minister and other important passengers including General Sir Maitland Wilson and Generals Mackay and Rankin.

Meanwhile flying boats of Nos. 228 and 230 Squadrons and landplanes continued the evacuation from Crete to Egypt, the last flight being made by a Sunderland on 2nd May. The total number of personnel evacuated by air from Greece to Crete was over 600, and from Crete and Greece to Egypt 870. Two Sunderlands were lost in these operations, one of which crashed while alighting by night at Kalamata, and the other was destroyed by enemy air action at Scaramanga.

47. The main evacuation from Greece of British and Imperial Forces was effected between 24th and 30th April in convoys of H.M. Ships and other vessels. All available aircraft operated in support to protect the convoys against the heavy enemy air attacks to which they were constantly subjected, and which were causing heavy losses. The forces available in Crete were 14 fighter Blenheims of

No. 30 Squadron, 9 fighter Blenheims of No. 203 Squadron (recently sent to Crete from Egypt to take part in this operation) and the remaining 6 Hurricanes and 14 Gladiators of Nos. 33, 80 and 112 Squadrons. At this stage, however, only 6 of the 14 Gladiators were serviceable.

Blenheims usually operating in patrols of six aircraft provided such cover for convoys as was possible in the vicinity of the mainland of Greece, while Hurricanes and Gladiators provided patrols over convoys approaching Crete and during their disembarkation at Suda Bay. At the same time, Sunderlands provided Ionian and Mediterranean reconnaissances to guard against possible raids on our convoys by units of the Italian Navy.

During the six months' campaign in Greece our Squadrons contended throughout with numerically superior enemy air forces, emerging in the end with much credit although sadly depleted in strength. Our total aircraft losses amounted to 209, of which 82 had to be destroyed and abandoned by our own forces during the withdrawal and subsequent evacuation. Many of the latter had been damaged during enemy attacks on our aerodromes and in normal circumstances might have been repaired. Our total losses of aircraft, missing and in combat with the enemy were 72.

As a comparison, the losses inflicted on the enemy totalled 259 aircraft destroyed and 99 probably destroyed, with several others damaged. Of these, 231 were destroyed and 94 probably destroyed in combat with our aircraft.

Our personnel losses in Greece amounted to 148 killed and missing and 15 taken prisoner. Of the total, 130 were aircrews. Such losses cannot be considered unduly heavy, bearing in mind the difficulties of the campaign and the hazards of the subsequent evacuation.

48. I cannot speak too highly of the work of Air Vice-Marshal J. H. D'Albiac, D.S.O., who commanded the British Air Force in Greece during the whole six months' campaign. His initiative, his personality and tact in dealings with the Greek High Command, enabled him, right up to the end, to obtain the maximum results in support of the Greeks from the small force at his disposal.

Of those under his Command, the most outstanding for their valuable services were:—

Group Captain A. H. Willets, Senior Air Staff Officer during the whole period.

Wing Commander P. B. Coote, who commanded the Western Wing (The Albanian Front) and himself took part in many of the fighter patrols and bombing raids of his Squadrons, from the last of which he is missing.

Wing Commander J. R. Gordon-Finlayson, D.S.O., D.F.C., commanding No. 211 Squadron, and later the Eastern Wing. A fine leader and an inspiration to his Squadron, with which he had completed over one hundred raids.

Squadron Leader E. G. Jones, D.F.C., commanding No. 80 (F) Squadron; his leadership maintained the high morale and efficiency of this Squadron whose six months' record in Greece, mostly in Gladiators, was quite remarkable.

Wing Commander Lord Forbes, Intelligence Officer on the Staff, who carried out many special missions in his Q.6 aeroplane, some of which were of an unusual and hazardous nature.

Italian East African Campaign.

49. The successful land operations against I.E.A., which resulted in the complete collapse of Italian resistance in that area except for a small "pocket" in the region of Gondar, were supported by Air forces from Sudan, Aden and Kenya. In deciding on the actual strength of the Air force required to give full support to the Land forces operating from the North and South, it was necessary to take into account the fact that:—

(i) It was still possible for the Italians, and Germans if they so decided, to send reinforcements of aircraft direct by air from Tripoli to I.E.A.

(ii) To meet the commitments in Libya and Greece the release of Air and Mechanised forces from this front was important. There was, therefore, need for speed if the campaign was to be completely successful before the rains started in April.

(iii) The majority of our aircraft were of obsolete or obsolescent type which needed the cover of a few modern fighters to enable them to operate by day in face of the Italian C.R.42 fighters which were still active until towards the close of the campaign.

(iv) Patriot activities required constant air support to maintain enthusiasm and morale.

(v) The Red Sea shipping route still remained potentially a very vulnerable line of communication. Its security was the more important since traffic through the Mediterranean had virtually ceased.

50. In the Sudan, at the beginning of the year the R.A.F. under Air Commodore L. H. Slatter, O.B.E., D.S.C., D.F.C., consisted of five Squadrons and one Flight. No. 1 South African Air Force (F) Squadron—Hurricanes and Gladiators, No. 237 Rhodesian (A.C.) Squadron—Hardys, No. 47 (B) Squadron—Wellesleys, No. 223 (B) Squadron—Wellesleys, and No. 14 (B) Squadron—Blenheim IV's. In addition, "K" Flight's (Gladiators) move to Egypt was cancelled pro tem. and they were retained in the Sudan. These Squadrons were mainly used during the whole period to defeat the Italian Air Force and to support the advance of the Army into Eritrea. Other commitments which were met included the Air defence of Port Sudan, occasional special convoy escort work in the Red Sea, attacks on the harbour of Massawa and support of the increasing activities of the Abyssinian Patriots further South, Haile Selassie having entered Abyssinia on the 20th January, 1941.

51. Pressure by General Platt's force on the Kassala area resulted in the fall of the town on January 19th and the retreat of the Italian Forces into Eritrea. Steady progress by two parallel columns continued, Agordat and Barentu falling on the 1st and 2nd February. Early in March the advance was halted in front of the formidable defences on the Keren

heights. Here the Italians made a determined stand until March 27, when they were forced to withdraw Southward.

In these operations at Keren the R.A.F. played a prominent part in the close support of the Army. Wellesleys, Vincents, Lysanders, Gauntlets and Hardys were employed for continuous bombing of targets both in and behind the enemy's battle positions. Without doubt this heavy and continuous bombing, combined with the effect of artillery fire, seriously weakened Italian morale and contributed very largely to the capture of this formidable position.

Meanwhile, the offensive against enemy aerodromes, lines of communication and aircraft in the air was continued by Blenheims, Hurricanes and Gladiators. Enemy fighters, whose appearance became less frequent as time went on, continued to "shoot up" our aircraft on the ground, occasionally with success, but their air effort gradually dwindled until by the time Asmara was occupied on March 31st it had virtually ceased.

The Hurricanes of No. 1 South African Squadron were especially prominent in these operations. In two attacks on enemy aerodromes they destroyed 6 C.A.133's, 4 C.R.42's and 6 S.79's, besides damaging a further 3 S.79's.

During the attack on Keren a particularly successful bombing attack on lines of communication resulted in the destruction of an ammunition train reported to be carrying over 20,000 shells.

52. Further South bombing attacks were made in support of the Patriots to help in sustaining their morale; Gubba, Gondar, Asosa, Burye and Debra Marcos being among the places attacked. Blenheims of the Free French Flight took part in these operations. Pilot Officer R. A. Collis, D.F.C., of No. 47 (B) Squadron (Wellesleys), made a series of 19 flights up to a distance of 200 miles into Abyssinia, carrying at various times ammunition, money and supplies for the Patriot forces, and on other occasions representatives of the Emperor and Army Officers.

North of Lake Tana the Italians contrived to maintain themselves in the Gondar area, but South of the Lake the Patriots succeeded in capturing Burye and Debra Marcos and in reaching the Blue Nile.

53. After the occupation of Asmara on the 1st April, the advance continued on Massawa. As our threat to that objective developed, five Italian destroyers based at Massawa left harbour in a Northerly direction on 2nd April. This force was located and attacked on 3rd April by Swordfish of the F.A.A. (H.M.S. Eagle) by No. 14 Squadron (Blenheims) and No. 223 Squadron (Wellesleys). The Swordfish torpedoed two of the destroyers, sinking one of them and leaving the second in a sinking condition, the latter being subsequently bombed and sunk by a Blenheim. A further two destroyers were driven aground on the Hedjaz Coast twelve miles South of Jedda, where they were bombed and destroyed by Blenheims and Wellesleys operating in conjunction with H.M.S. Kingston. The surviving destroyer escaped and returned to Massawa, where she scuttled herself.

Our troops occupied Massawa on 8th April. The capture of this Port, combined with the destruction of the enemy naval forces, greatly reduced the potential threat to our Red Sea communications.

The successful progress of the campaign, coupled with the almost complete destruction of the enemy air force on all fronts of Italian East Africa, now enabled the greater part of the Squadrons previously contained in the Sudan to be released to other theatres. Thus, during the early part of April the remaining forces operating there were reduced to No. 47 (B) Squadron (Wellesleys), No. 237 (B) Squadron (Hardys, Lysanders and Gladiators) and the Free French Flight (Blenheims). Other units, consisting of No. 1 Squadron, S.A.A.F., No. 14 Squadron, No. 223 Squadron, "K" Flight and No. 1430 Flight were moved with what aircraft remained to them to Egypt where they arrived about the middle of April. Nos. 14 and 223 Squadrons took part in the action against enemy naval forces described below before their departure.

54. In the subsequent advance from Asmara towards Dessie the greater part of the offensive effort against objectives in the Dessie area was made by aircraft from Aden and East Africa. These operations are referred to later. Wellesleys of No. 47 Squadron and Gladiators, Lysanders and Hardys of No. 237 Squadron nevertheless made attacks on a light scale on objectives in the vicinity of Amba Alagi where our advance from the North was held up. Bombing and machine-gun attacks were made on enemy troops and M.T. at Mai Ceu, Alomata and Amba Alagi and on the aerodromes at Alomata, Cercer and Sifani. The scale of attack in this area was considerably increased after 27th April when our column from the South captured Dessie, Nos. 47 and 237 Squadrons making over 80 bomber and fighter sorties on enemy positions around Amba Alagi between 28th April and 3rd May to break down the remaining resistance. The enemy was still holding out, however, at the end of the period under review, although the forces there, under the Duke D'Aosta, subsequently capitulated on 16th May.

Operations at Gondar and in the Lake Tana area were continued throughout this period, 27 medium bomber sorties being made by Free French Flight Blenheims and Wellesleys of No. 47 Squadron, the former providing more than half the total effort. The main weight of this attack was against enemy positions and M.T. at Gondar, while other attacks were made on similar objectives at Bahr Dar South of Lake Tana, at Chelga, Gorgora and on the Gondar-Adowa Road.

It appeared likely at the end of this period that, with our troops held up in the Volchit Pass, Gondar would be the last serious military objective in Italian East Africa.

55. Great credit is due to the A.O.C., Air Commodore L. H. Slatter, O.B.E., D.S.C., D.F.C., for his most efficient handling of the R.A.F. and for his excellent team-work with the Army. No praise can be too high for the pilots and aircrews for their accomplishments. Many were flying in obsolescent single engine aircraft. The country was difficult, and much of the flying had to be done at low heights over hostile positions. Great devotion to duty and a high standard of skill were needed to achieve success under these exacting conditions.

56. In Kenya, under the command of Air Commodore W. Sowrey, D.F.C., A.F.C., the Air Force consisted of six South African Squadrons and one Flight of Glenn Martins, No. 2 (F) Squadron—Furies and Gauntlets, No. 3 (F) Squadron—Hurricanes, No. 11 (B) Squadron—Battles, No. 12 (B) Squadron—J.U.86's, Nos. 40 and 41 (A.C.) Squadron—Hartebeestes; a total of 94 aircraft all told.

During January the establishment of advanced landing grounds was completed as far forward as possible on the fronts facing Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland. The advance of General Cunningham's Force started on 10th February and met with some opposition from Italian aircraft operating from Afmadu and Gobwen, but the destruction of 7 C.A.133's and 3 C.R.42's in the first two days went a long way towards establishing the complete air superiority eventually achieved, and which, without doubt, affected the whole course of future operations.

57. On the 11th February, Afmadu was captured and after a further rapid advance Kismayu was occupied on 14th February.

After the fall of Kismayu our aircraft assisted the turning operations which resulted in the forcing of the River Juba and the dash on Mogadiscio. Gobwen, Afmadu, Jelib, Bardera and Dolo were among the targets attacked, also Ischia, Baidoa and Bur Agaba further North.

By the middle of March the forces had reached Gabredarre, having advanced 755 miles in 39 days.

During the remaining operations in March against Harar and Diredawa intense air attacks were made on these places, on military targets in the Jijigga area and on the railway and stations of the Addis Ababa-Djibuti line. Direct hits by bombs were scored on several trains as well as on M.T. on the roads, and traffic was largely immobilised.

Hurricanes of No. 3 S.A.A.F. Squadron "ground-strafed" Diredawa aerodrome on 15th March, damaging 2 S.79's and 5 G.R.32's. Other enemy fighters were shot down in the air over Diredawa.

At this time enemy bombers made a number of attacks on our forward troops at Marda Pass near Jijigga, but did no damage.

On 28th and 30th March enemy fighters machine-gunned Jijigga aerodrome, damaging four of our aircraft on each occasion. Two of the raiders were shot down.

Glenn Martins of the S.A.A.F. did regular long distance reconnaissances in the Addis Ababa direction. Further South in the Boran Area the rains set in early in March, hampering operations. Our bomber aircraft attacked enemy positions at Yavello, Neghelli, Moyale and Mega in support of the Army, and Neghelli was occupied in March. Thus, by the end of March, our forces were firmly established within the Southern boundaries of Abyssinia and further North were already threatening Addis Ababa along the railway.

On this front alone the enemy show any activity in the air, but it was only spasmodic, and in no way hindered the advance of the Army.

58. After occupying Diredawa on 29th March our forces resumed their advance and after a brief check at Awah moved on to Addis Ababa which surrendered on 6th April. From

Addis Ababa our forces advanced in three directions. One column moved North East towards Dessie, a second column advanced North West towards Debra Marcos to join forces with the Patriots, while a third column moved South West on Gimma to engage the considerable enemy forces in the Galla Sidamo. In the Gojjam the Patriots achieved much success, capturing Debra Marcos, the principal town, on 7th April. By the end of this period the Gojjam was practically cleared of the enemy.

Squadrons of the S.A.A.F. continued to operate in support of our troops, their activities consisting largely of offensive reconnaissances during which bombing and machine-gun attacks, the latter chiefly by fighters, were made on various enemy objectives.

During the advance of our forces on Addis Ababa effective attacks were made on enemy positions and M.T. in the Awash area, and on the aerodrome at Addis Ababa where some of the few aircraft remaining to the enemy were concentrated.

With the advance of the three columns from Addis Ababa in diverging directions, air operations in support of our troops were continued over widely separated areas. The main military objective at this time was Dessie which our troops were approaching from the North and South. The main effort of the S.A.A.F. at this stage was, therefore, against objectives in that area, bombing and machine-gun attacks being made by S.A.A.F. Battles, J.U.86's and Hurricanes on enemy troops and M.T., and against Combolcia (Dessie) aerodrome. Our forces advancing from the South captured Dessie on the 26th April but the enemy still retained his positions at Amba Alagi, holding up our advance on Dessie from the North.

Operations by Nos. 40 and 41 Squadrons, S.A.A.F. (Hartebeestes) and No. 11 Squadron S.A.A.F. (Battles), were carried out against widely scattered groups of the enemy in the Gojjam and the Lakes area and North East of Yavello.

In the Galla Sidamo, operations were concentrated largely against the Gimma area where No. 41 Squadron (Hartebeestes) and No. 3 Squadron (Hurricanes) attacked the aerodrome, enemy troops and M.T. Engagements with the enemy fighters were few at this time, but on the 10th April a formation of No. 3 Squadron Hurricanes attacking Gimma aerodrome encountered two of the remaining enemy fighters and shot them down over their own aerodrome.

59. As was the case in the Sudan, the general success of the campaign in Italian East Africa enabled two Squadrons to be released from the East African Command. No. 2 Squadron, S.A.A.F., and No. 14 Squadron, S.A.A.F., the latter subsequently re-numbered No. 24 Squadron, were therefore transferred to Egypt during the latter part of April, where they awaited re-equipment.

The South African Air Force are to be congratulated on the important and successful part they played in this campaign. They were operating over difficult country and under conditions which tested their initiative, stamina and technical efficiency to the utmost. They contributed largely to the complete defeat of the Italian Air Force in I.E.A. and to the

destruction of 300 aircraft, which is the estimated total of enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground or in the air in that theatre of war.

60. At Aden, under the command of Air Vice-Marshal G. R. M. Reid, C.B., D.S.O., M.C., there remained the following Squadrons at the beginning of the year:—

No. 8 (B) Squadron—Blenheims and Vincents, No. 203 (GR/L) Squadron—Blenheim IV's, and No. 94 (F) Squadron—Gladiators (not complete).

Though the Italian Air Force was within easy striking distance of convoys passing up and down the Red Sea they made no attempt to interfere with this line of communication, which was of vital importance to our Forces in Egypt. Whilst they were still capable of such attacks it was necessary to provide Red Sea reconnaissance, and a certain degree of air protection both to convoys and to Aden. The principal effort, however, of these Aden Squadrons during the period under review was in support of the campaigns from North and South into Abyssinia.

Repeated raids were made on Assab, Dessie, Diredawa, Addis Ababa, Alomata and Makalle. Besides damage to buildings, depots and repair shops, numbers of aircraft were destroyed on the ground in the course of these raids, 8 S.A.133s being set on fire at Alomata in one raid by two Blenheims.

In support of the operations, which resulted in the recapture of Berbera by landings from the sea on 16th March, 21 sorties were made against Diredawa aerodrome, 10 enemy aircraft being destroyed on the ground and 8 others damaged. Offensive reconnaissances were also carried out to neutralise possible enemy air action.

61. In April, operations in support of the Army in Italian East Africa were carried out almost entirely in the Dessie area and on the Assab-Dessie Road. Blenheims made a number of successful attacks on M.T. concentrations and troops in these areas and, in addition, attacked the aerodromes at Combolcia (Dessie) and Macaaca (Assab). The scale of effort at this stage was not heavy, only 31 offensive sorties being made during the period, including a number of machine-gun attacks by No. 203 Squadron (Blenheims) engaged on offensive reconnaissances.

Prior to the action on the 3rd April, already described, when four Italian destroyers were sunk or disabled, the considerable force of destroyers and other Italian Naval units at Massawa was a constant threat to our Red Sea communications. Regular reconnaissances of Massawa, Dahlak Island and Assab and the Eritrean Coast were therefore maintained, and a constant check kept on the movements of Italian ships and Naval units. After the occupation of Massawa on the 8th April this threat was greatly reduced, since Assab was the only port then remaining to the enemy. Thereafter operations in the Red Sea were largely confined to reconnaissances of the port.

The reduction of Red Sea reconnaissances, combined with the general success of the campaign in Italian East Africa, enabled No. 203 Squadron to be transferred to Egypt on the 16th April, 1941.

Malta.

62. Early in January, the arrival of the German Air Force in Sicily and Southern Italy changed the situation at Malta very considerably. Whereas the Italian air effort against Malta had been half-hearted, the Germans made determined and persistent attacks on the Grand Harbour, aerodromes and flying boat anchorages.

As these attacks by day, and later more frequently by night, became more numerous and intense, the defence of the Island and of the aircraft base there became more difficult. Some of our aircraft were damaged on the ground, as also were hangars and buildings, although casualties to R.A.F. personnel were fortunately light.

At the beginning of January there were operating from Malta:—

No. 261 (F) Squadron—Hurricanes, No. 228 (F/B) Squadron—Sunderlands, No. 431 G.R. Flight—Glenn Martins and No. 148 (B) Squadron—Wellingtons.

The aircraft strength of these units varied, but seldom, if at any time, were they up to establishment. Moreover, repair and maintenance under conditions of constant bombing became extremely difficult. Flying boats at their moorings were particularly vulnerable. Also, a certain amount of congestion resulted at times on the aerodromes when reinforcing flights which used Malta as a "stage post" arrived from England en route to Egypt. It was necessary to pass them on without delay in spite of enemy interference.

63. Under these circumstances I considered it advisable, after discussion with A.O.C. Malta, temporarily to reduce the number of aircraft based on the Island. In deciding which units to retain, the needs of the Navy had to be considered as well as the requirements of local Fighter Defence. The spirit of the garrison and the morale of the Maltese reacted remarkably to the Hurricanes' successes in air combats over Malta. This was a most important consideration, and it was obvious that as many fighters as possible should operate whilst the "game" remained plentiful and enterprising.

Next in importance came the reconnaissance of enemy ports, their approaches, and of the Eastern Mediterranean itself. The former was done by the Glenn Martins at Malta, within their limited capacity—there were seldom more than three serviceable. A P.R.U. (Photographic Reconnaissance Unit) Spitfire, which was at Malta for special photographic work, proved invaluable for this port reconnaissance, but after its loss, through a forced landing in Italy, no replacement was made available from home. The Sunderlands of Nos. 228 and 230 (F/B) Squadrons on their Ionian Sea and Eastern Mediterranean reconnaissances, could still carry on from Alexandria and Suda Bay, and the work of the Wellington Squadron operating against objectives in Italy, Sicily and North Africa could still be done, though on a reduced scale by Wellingtons "on passage". Thus, No. 228 (F/B) Squadron returned to Alexandria and the Wellingtons of No. 148 (B)

Squadron moved to Egypt, detachments being left behind to maintain such Sunderlands as occasionally used Malta, and the Wellingtons on passage to Egypt.

64. In spite of these reductions it was still found possible to operate "passage" Wellingtons occasionally from Malta. An especially successful attack was made on Catania aerodrome on the night of 15/16th January, when 35 German aircraft which had recently arrived were reported to have been destroyed on the ground by 9 Wellingtons.

The Glenn Martins of No. 431 G.R. Flight reconnoitred and photographed Sicilian and Italian Harbours and aerodromes as far North as Naples and Brindisi. They also searched the sea for enemy shipping between Malta, Tunis and Tripoli as well as the West Ionian Sea, supplementing the wider strategical reconnaissance of No. 228 Squadron.

During the period of our occupation of Cyrenaica, Tripoli had remained within range of Wellingtons and Blenheims operating from Benghazi area which reduced the calls on Malta in that direction. However, after the Italian-German counter-offensive in Cyrenaica, which led to our withdrawal to bases outside the range of Tripoli, it became essential to resume operations against that objective from Malta. A detachment of No. 148 Squadron (Wellingtons) was accordingly sent back to Malta during early April, and aircraft of this detachment made 34 night sorties against Tripoli between 13/14th and 24/25th April, dropping upwards of 50 tons of H.E. and incendiary bombs on harbour facilities and shipping with successful results. Fleet Air Arm Swordfish also made torpedo and bombing attacks on convoys off the Tunisian Coast and against shipping at Tripoli.

Towards the end of April Malta was reinforced from home by Blenheims of No. 21 (B) Squadron which made two very effective attacks on enemy shipping. On 1st May, 6 Blenheims of this Squadron bombed and obtained several direct hits on a destroyer and a merchant ship of 3,000 tons near the Kerkenna Islands off the Tunisian Coast. On the following day four Blenheims made another effective bombing attack on a convoy of Italian Naval and merchant ships South-west of Malta, obtaining direct hits on a destroyer and three merchant ships.

65. During the whole period under review the enemy continued to make persistent and heavy scale air attacks at frequent intervals on the Island. The enemy's main objectives appeared to be the Grand Harbour and naval dockyards, as well as the three aerodromes and flying boat anchorage. Especially severe fighting took place over the Island during the repeated dive-bombing attacks on the Grand Harbour and aerodromes on the 16th, 18th and 19th January, and on the Aircraft Carrier H.M.S. "Illustrious" and convoy ships which had arrived in the Harbour on 10th January. The first attacks were recklessly pressed home, and the enemy suffered heavy losses from our fighters and A.A. Batteries. It is reckoned that between the 10th and 19th January, 196

enemy aircraft were destroyed or damaged, including 44 destroyed in two raids by Wellingtons on the Catania aerodrome.

Another heavy attack, this time mostly by night, took place over a period between 28th April and 1st May when 9 enemy aircraft were destroyed and a "probable" 6, for a loss of 6 Hurricanes.

It is noteworthy that once the German Air Force was established in Sicily, Italian bombers scarcely again appeared over Malta. C.R.42's continued to act as escorts and to make a few low machine-gun attacks, but the Germans clearly preferred escorts of their own Me.109's or 110's for their dive-bombers.

To deal with these attacks the number of Hurricanes of No. 261 Squadron was gradually increased to 34 aircraft, partly by reinforcement from the Middle East and partly as a result of operations by Aircraft Carriers from the Western Mediterranean, in which Hurricanes were "flown off" to Malta. In addition, pilots were double-banked to cope with the increased raids and larger number of enemy aircraft taking part in them. This Squadron was in action almost every day and on many nights. Though losses of our own aircraft were serious, a fair proportion of pilots were saved.

66. At the end of the period under review, despite the enemy's persistent air effort, Malta could still be regarded as an effective air base for fighters for a limited offensive against enemy communications in the Mediterranean and as a "stage post" for the reinforcing aircraft en route for Egypt. The damage done to buildings and hangars made conditions of life and work uncomfortable and repair work was difficult.

In spite of these drawbacks, the fact that operations had been carried on throughout this testing period is a great tribute to the spirit and determination of the pilots, aircrews and ground personnel under the very able direction of Air Vice-Marshal F. H. M. Maynard, A.F.C. Amongst those under his Command who rendered valuable service during this period may be mentioned the Senior Air Staff Officer, Group Captain A. C. Sanderson, D.F.C.; Group Captain R. G. Gardner, D.S.C.; Wing Commander A. D. Messenger, the Senior Signals Officer; Squadron Leader P. S. Foss, No. 148 Squadron, and Flying Officer A. Warburton, D.F.C., of the Glenn Martin Reconnaissance Unit.

Palestine and Trans Jordan.

67. During the period covered by this Despatch there is little to record of the activities in this area. No further enemy raids took place on Haifa, or elsewhere. Aqir aerodrome was completed and opened early in the year. Gaza was developed and Lydda taken over as an R.A.F. Station. These aerodromes were prepared for and subsequently occupied by the Squadron personnel evacuated from Greece, for the purpose of re-forming and re-arming them.

Iraq.

68. The political situation described in my previous Despatch continued to deteriorate, particularly after the coup d'état by Raschid Ali and the subsequent removal of the Regent Emir Abdulla Ali. We were at this period more than fully occupied in Greece and the

Western Desert, and the only aircraft available in Iraq were those of No. 4 F.T.S. at Habbaniya and the Vincents of No. 244 Squadron at Shaibah. Towards the middle of April it became obvious that air reinforcements would be necessary. The training aircraft of No. 4 F.T.S. had as far as possible been placed on an operational footing, but it was not until the 28th April that it was possible to spare some Wellingtons for Iraq. On that date 10 Wellingtons of No. 37 Squadron flew to Habbaniya and 10 Wellingtons of No. 70 Squadron to Shaibah, followed on the 1st May by a detachment of No. 203 Squadron (Blenheims).

By this time a landing of British troops at Basra had been effected and ships with additional troops were nearing Basra. It was at this moment, on the 30th April, that the Iraqis disclosed the result of their Axis intrigue by surrounding Habbaniya with a strong Iraqi force, including artillery.

Egypt.

69. At the beginning of January the Fighter defence of Egypt consisted of No. 252 Fighter Wing under Group Captain C. B. S. Spackman, D.F.C., who had most ably improvised an organisation which operated one Squadron at Amriya and a Sector Headquarters at Helwan, controlling the defensive patrols of the 2 R.E.A.F. Fighter Squadrons at Almaza and Suez respectively. Information was provided by No. 256 A.M.E.S. Wing.

During January, as a result of minelaying attacks on the Suez Canal, it was decided to build up an organisation, on the lines that had proved so successful in the U.K. Nos. 252 and 256 Wings were amalgamated as the controlling authority, the Sectors being at Amriya, Heliopolis, Fayid and Port Said. As an interim measure, a temporary Sector was formed at Ismailia to deal with the Suez Canal Zone.

In March I decided to re-form No. 202 Group, under Air Commodore T. W. Elmhirst, A.F.C., to co-ordinate all operational problems concerning the air defence of Egypt, and to co-operate with H.Q., B.T.E., on problems concerning A.A. artillery and searchlights.

Experience showed that communications in Egypt were so poor that it proved impossible to operate even 3 Sectors efficiently from one controlling authority, and accordingly the decision was taken to divide the Delta into two by a line from Baltim through Mansura, thence approximately South Eastwards to the Gulf of Suez, and to form two separate Wings each with its own filter room. No. 250 Wing formed at Ismailia to control the Sectors at Port Said and Fayid and be responsible for the defence of the Suez Canal Zone and Eastern portion of the Delta Area. No. 252 Wing was then made responsible for the control of the Sectors at Amriya and Heliopolis, and the defence of Alexandria, Cairo and the Western portion of the Delta.

70. During the actual period of this report the enemy's effort against Alexandria, Suez, Port Said and the Canal, was small in comparison to his activities elsewhere considering the many important and tempting targets open to him. There were, however, two or three effective raids on the Suez Canal which resulted in its being closed for periods up to a week or ten days on account of mines. Only one attack

was made on the Fleet Base at Alexandria, and it was not until later that attacks increased in intensity.

A Balloon Barrage was established at Alexandria under the very able control of Squadron Leader G. M. Trundle, who commanded No. 971 Squadron.

71. Mention must be made of the work of No. 267 Communication Squadron, ably commanded by Wing Commander S. F. Wynne-Eyton, D.S.O., and of No. 216 Bomber Transport Squadron. Their respective functions involved long and frequent flights to all parts of Middle East Command, stretching from Libya to Kenya and from Greece to Takoradi. Frequent use was also made of the services of the British Overseas Airways Corporation on their regular air routes. Their efficiency and reliability was of great assistance in meeting the very heavy demands for air transport.

Health and Morale.

72. The general health of the Command as a whole remained good during the period under review. This was especially noticeable during the advance in Libya and during the operations in Greece where climatic conditions were extremely hard. The morale of all ranks, especially flying crews, remained high throughout.

As recorded in my previous Despatch, credit is due to Air Commodore A. E. Panter, the Principal Medical Officer, and to his Deputy, Group Captain F. J. Murphy. Squadron Leader, The Rev. F. D. Morley, continued his active interest in the welfare of the airmen.

Administration.

73. The work of endeavouring to maintain the Squadrons throughout the Command with replacement aircraft, spare engines and equipment of all kinds, proved most difficult in the absence of regular supplies from home. Re-equipment with new aircraft of those Squadrons using obsolescent types was in most cases seriously delayed. In spite of these handicaps, everything possible was done by the Air Officer in charge of Administration, Air Vice-Marshal A. C. Maund, C.B.E., D.S.O., within the means at his disposal.

Air Commodore F. L. Fay, M.C., the Chief Engineer, continued most successfully to press on with the construction of the new aerodromes and landing grounds.

The ever-increasing financial problems were most ably handled by the Command Accountant, Group Captain T. H. Evans, O.B.E., and in connection with which Mr. C. W. Evans, my Financial Adviser, was of considerable assistance.

74. No praise can be too high for the work of the ground personnel, Officers and men alike, who, in their various capacities, maintained the aircraft, usually under the most trying conditions; whether in the winter snow or slush on the Greek-Albanian Front, or the sand and heat of Aden, Egypt and the Sudan, their devotion to duty, cheerfulness and faithful service remained the same. All maintenance units, repair and salvage organisations, worked to their utmost capacity to keep the Squadrons supplied.

Air Staff.

75. Air Marshal A. W. Tedder, C.B., whose arrival on the 9th December, 1940, I recorded in my previous Despatch, gave me most valuable support at all times as Deputy Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief.

Amongst others who continued to function most efficiently under extremely high pressure conditions were Air Vice-Marshal R. M. Drummond, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., the Senior Air Staff Officer; Air Commodore H. E. P. Wigglesworth, D.S.C., Plans; Group Captain N. S. Paynter, Senior Intelligence Officer; Wing Commander C. Bray, Senior R.A.F. Press Officer; Wing Commander T. A. B. Parselle, Air Communications; Squadron Leader Sir Arthur Curtis, K.C.V.O., C.M.G., M.C., my personal Staff Officer. Great credit is also due to Group Captain W. E. G. Mann, D.F.C., the Senior Signals Officer, and all his Staff, for the efficient signal organisation which met each new increase with complete efficiency.

76. In reviewing the part played by the R.A.F. in the Middle East during the period of my Command (May, 1940-May, 1941), the following is a summary of some interesting and prominent features worthy of being placed on record:—

(a) The unexpected survival of Malta as an operational air base. It started without fighters: after one year of war it had 50. It has continued to function as a link on the air reinforcing route to Egypt and as a base for bomber and reconnaissance Squadrons.

(b) The security of the Red Sea shipping route and its comparative immunity from Italian bombers or submarines; a tribute to the Aden and Port Sudan Squadrons and no compliment to the Regia Aeronautica.

(c) The part which the occupation of territory plays on the Mediterranean Littoral, as elsewhere, in adding to or reducing the potential scale of air attack on ships at sea and on our Naval, Army and Air Bases. Instance the Dodecanese (later of course, Greece and Crete), and particularly the North African Coast.

(d) In this respect, the advantage to the enemy of regaining Cyrenaica and the coastal strip of the territory between Tobruk and Sollum. In contrast, our difficulty in providing fighter defence to isolated Tobruk, and the disadvantage to our bombers and reconnaissance aircraft of the increased distance to enemy bases.

(e) The speed of advance by motorised or armoured forces after breaking resistance in breadth, and the importance of mobility of those R.A.F. Squadrons with short range aircraft which must operate at once from rapidly established forward landing grounds if they are to keep pace with, and continue, effective support of the advanced ground forces. Instance the advance into Cyrenaica, December to February, and also General Cunningham's rapid drive into Abyssinia through Italian Somaliland.

(f) The losses in grounded aircraft sustained during a rapid withdrawal through aerodromes being overrun; also the difficulty experienced by Squadrons in offering effective air resistance whilst the ground personnel are constantly on the move to the rear.

Instance the Italian withdrawal in Cyrenaica, and later our own experience in Greece. It was, however, less marked in the case of our withdrawal from Cyrenaica in April.

(g) Finally, the importance of taking into account the "time lag factor" when accepting Air commitments beyond the immediate capacity of the existing force. The interval, which must inevitably elapse with long lines of communication between the date when a decision is taken at home to despatch aircraft from the U.K., until the time they become operationally ready in the Middle East. Though this was considerably shortened by air deliveries in the case of long range aircraft, and also by Aircraft Carrier reinforcing operations, the spares and ground equipment to maintain these aircraft must still come by sea. The figures given at Appendix "C"* of this report show

* Appendices not reproduced.

the state of weakness to which my force had been reduced after the campaigns in Greece, Libya, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland.

77. In concluding this Report, I must again pay tribute to the ready co-operation and support of the Naval C-in-C., Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, G.C.B., D.S.O., and of General Sir Archibald Wavell, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., with whom it was my privilege at all times to work in the closest accord.

To His Excellency the Ambassador, Sir Miles Lampson, G.C.M.G., C.B., M.V.O., once again my thanks and gratitude for his unfailing help and support in dealings with the Egyptian Government.

ARTHUR M. LONGMORE,
Air Chief Marshal.

1st November, 1941.

LONDON

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

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