

CHAPTER 3

FIRST LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

TO both the Australian airman and the Australian soldier the term Middle East has a special significance, for there were born the traditions of the service to which both belong, although the significance of the Gallipoli campaign has eclipsed those in Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria and Egypt. Participation in Middle East campaigns in two wars was influenced by Australia's interest in preserving the Mediterranean route from England to the Pacific. From 1919 onwards an Australian link with the defence of British interests in this area was maintained by individuals who had chosen a career within the Royal Air Force, some, like Air Chief Marshals Mitchell and Longmore, Air Marshal Drummond and Air Vice-Marshal W. A. McCloughry rising to high positions of command there between the wars. Indeed most Australians within the R.A.F. had some knowledge of Middle East conditions because of the growth of the system of "control without occupation", by which air power largely replaced standing armies for internal security purposes in this zone. Drummond, then an acting squadron leader in charge of "H" Unit R.A.F., consisting of two aircraft only, between January and June 1920 played a leading part in quelling tribal disturbances in the Sudan. Later in the same year, a similarly small force put down the revolt of the "Mad Mullah", and, at the Cairo Conference of 1921, this "control without occupation" was adopted as a cheaper and more effective means of policing parts of the Arab world than had hitherto been possible. Thus throughout the next decade the Middle East was the main training ground and deployment area for the R.A.F. There was little fear of external aggression and the main task continued to be the maintenance of internal peace.

This situation changed radically in 1935 with the Italo-Abyssinian crisis. The threat of an apparently powerful Italian Air Force was sufficient to force a withdrawal of British naval units from Malta to Alexandria, and even there they were vulnerable to Italian bombers operating from airfields outside the range of available R.A.F. aircraft based in the Suez Canal zone. This crisis passed but valuable experience was gained by a force of nine squadrons under Ashton McCloughry which moved forward into the desert with an advanced headquarters at Mersa Matruh. "Operations," wrote Mitchell, the air officer commanding-in-chief, "would undoubtedly have been seriously affected by the dust This had a bad effect on engines, aeroplanes, guns and bomb gear Mechanical transport suffered to an even higher degree than aircraft engines, but the effect on personnel was as serious as that on material The factor of dust today may be as important as that of mud in former wars." The technical and tactical difficulties inherent in this situation were patiently studied during the succeeding years when war seemed ever more probable

as with each crisis in international affairs Italy aligned herself more positively with Germany. Major R.A.F. preparations were impeded, however, by "the desire of His Majesty's Government to do nothing which might impair the existing relations with that country" (Italy). The Middle East had now ceased to represent the main area of R.A.F. strength, because all endeavours were then being made to counter the German rather than the Italian threat. Nevertheless, although all actions had to be very circumspect, and although men, aircraft and equipment arrived tardily, every effort was made to bring into play the full value of existing resources, and an important improvement in the general situation became apparent with the construction of twelve new airfields under the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936.¹

Australian interest during this immediate pre-war period was increased by the appearance in the Middle East of men holding short-service commissions in the R.A.F. These, with their fellows on all squadrons, were set ever-higher standards of airmanship, navigation, bombing and gunnery. They undertook long flights into the desert familiarising themselves with conditions over notoriously featureless country and keeping an eye open for possible landing grounds. Few as they were they achieved some prominence. In September 1939, for example, Flight Lieutenant Fry² of No. 112 Squadron was selected to perform the trials on the first Hurricane fighter to arrive in the Middle East. During the spring of 1940 their numbers grew with the arrival of squadrons withdrawn from India and other remote areas; and before R.A.A.F. participation proper began in November 1940, 4 Australians commanded squadrons, 4 were flight commanders, 2 had won decorations for gallantry and 3 were dead. By June 1941 when the first products of the Empire Air Training Scheme were beginning their operational careers, four more of this little band were dead, one was a prisoner of war and another four had been decorated. The duties of these men spread over three continents in numerous campaigns of which not less than two were being fought at the same time during the first eighteen months of hostilities. This entailed a constant diversion of units towards consecutive centres of pressure and did involve some Australians in fighting of considerable variety although their contribution was naturally fragmentary.

When war actually came in September 1939, an uneasy calm existed in the Mediterranean because Italy's neutrality would obviously end as soon as she deemed the time ripe for profitable intervention. Thus, while the main focus of war was first on the Polish crisis, then on the apparent stalemate in western Europe, then on Scandinavia, and finally on the Low Countries and France, all that could be done in the Middle East was to plan joint action against eventual Italian aggression and to make administrative arrangements to implement these plans with whatever forces could

¹ Amiriya, El Hammam, Daba, Qasaba, Khatatba, Maaten Bagush, Ikingi Maryut, Burg el Arab, Fuka, Mersa Matruh, Bir Hooker and Sidi Barrani.

² F-Lt C. H. Fry, DFC, 40047 RAF, 267607; 112 Sqn RAF. Regular air force offr; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Newcastle, 29 Oct 1915.

be spared. For the Royal Air Force this meant in practice mainly an intensification of work on airfields in Egypt and Palestine, an attempt to overhaul supply and maintenance facilities and a new fluidity of control which came not only from delegation of operational responsibility but also entailed making individual squadrons as mobile as possible. However, although much training and a series of defence exercises were carried out, conservation of resources became a major consideration because of the prior needs of other areas, and in retrospect the transformation from peacetime to wartime readiness does not appear very rapid.

Certainly Sir Arthur Longmore, who took over control of Middle East air forces from Sir William Mitchell on 13th May, had sound reasons for uneasiness. His directive defined the primary role of his air forces as the defence of Egypt, the Suez Canal, and the communications route through the Red Sea. All Royal Air Force units stationed or operating in Egypt, the Sudan, Palestine and Transjordan, East Africa, Aden and Somaliland, Iraq and adjacent territories, Cyprus, Turkey, the Balkans, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf came under his control. This magnificent geographical responsibility was backed, however, by pitifully small means. Discounting the small Egyptian Air Force, whose degree of cooperation was unpredictable except that they might be expected to help with the fighter defence of Cairo, Longmore disposed in Egypt and Palestine only 40 Gladiators, 70 Blenheims, 24 Bombay and Valentia transports, 24 Lysanders and 10 Sunderlands. Farther afield in Kenya, the Sudan and Aden there were 85 Wellesleys and Blenheims and a few more Gladiators. In Kenya there were also three squadrons of the South African Air Force—one of Gladiators, one of Battles and one of Ju-86 aircraft. There were patently no modern fighters and no long-range bombers in the entire Middle East Command and even at that very moment (10th May) with the Germans breaking through the French line at Sedan, it was clear that early British reinforcements were unlikely and, conversely, that French air strength in Tunisia and Syria upon which depended joint action against Italy, might soon be called upon to redress the adverse balance in metropolitan France. There was, moreover, the possibility that either or both Greece and Turkey might become involved in the war, necessitating even greater dispersal of existing forces.

Against this scattered, obsolescent and difficult-to-reinforce British force, it was estimated the Italians could immediately dispose approximately twice the number of aircraft both in the Eastern Mediterranean and East African theatres, and that the former at least could be readily reinforced at will from Italy.³ However, Longmore felt confident that

³ The estimates made late in May 1940 and the actual strengths were:

				Libya and Dodecanese					
				Estimated strength		Actual strength			
Libya:									
Bombers	-	-	-	84	Savoia types	Bombers	-	-	157
					(Sm. 79, 81)	Fighters	-	-	101
				56	Ghibli	Miscellaneous	-	-	72
Fighters	-	-	-	144					
Miscellaneous	-	-	-						
Reece									
Support, etc	-	-	-	57					

what his forces lacked in quantity would, in any real prolonged test of strength, be compensated by the offensive spirit and more solid experience and training of his air and ground crews. Accordingly the outline plan for the defence of Egypt (revised on 7th June) showed no sign of pessimism. No. 202 (Bomber) Group at Maaten Bagush was to control four bomber, one fighter and one army-cooperation squadron for offensive action in the forward area, either independently or in concert with naval or ground forces. No. 252 (Fighter) Wing at Alexandria was to control all other fighters with the general role of destroying enemy aircraft attacking any objective in lower Egypt, with particular reference to the protection of Cairo, the Suez Canal and the fleet base at Alexandria. Headquarters R.A.F. Middle East at Cairo was to keep under its own direct operational control the flying-boats of No. 201 (Naval Cooperation) Group, the bomber-transport squadrons and reserve units.

As Allied resistance waned in France towards the end of May Italy's hostile intentions were no longer in doubt. Faced with apparently overwhelming enemy numbers, the R.A.F. decided that when Italy actually entered the war it would employ its small but well-trained forces promptly and offensively. General Wavell resolved to launch limited ground attacks to clear the enemy from the frontier posts and to dominate the country as far west as possible. Air action aimed at delaying for as long as possible Italian preparation for the invasion of Egypt. Thus low-flying attacks began against Italian bases both in Libya and East Africa punctually on 11th June and similar attacks continued throughout the month.⁴ The general result was to force the Italians into a defensive attitude and they made little attempt to exploit their theoretical superiority of numbers. The R.A.F. static-defence fighters had so little to do that they were soon thrown into the forward fighting. After the fall of France, however, the R.A.F. had to watch its resources very carefully, for, with the loss of the direct air reinforcement route over France and via Malta, short-range aircraft could arrive only by convoy around the Cape, until the projected trans-African route from Takoradi came into operation. Nevertheless, throughout July and August a consistent level of pressure against Italian forces was maintained in all areas. From Aden Squadron Leader Bowman⁵

Dodecanese:

Bombers	-	-	-	-	36
Fighters	-	-	-	-	12
Miscellaneous	-	-	-	-	36
					425

330

East Africa:

Bombers	-	-	-	-	150
Fighters	-	-	-	-	63
					213

325

(of which 142
were in reserve)

⁴ G. Santoro, *L'Aeronautica Italiana nella IIa Guerra Mondiale*, states that 18 aircraft were destroyed on Libyan airfields that day.

Dawn air attack against Tobruk on 12 Jun damaged the cruiser *San Giorgio* which remained an unmoving but by no means mute participant in future campaigns in the desert.

⁵ W Cdr A. McD. Bowman, DFC, 32138 RAF; comd 39 Sqn RAF 1939-41. Regular air force offr; of Deloraine and Launceston, Tas; b. Kinvarra Park, Tas, 18 Aug 1911. Killed in action 30 Nov 1941.

of No. 39 Squadron R.A.F. led many successful raids against Diredawa and other targets in Italian East Africa, while in the Western Desert, Australians on Blenheim squadrons, soon joined by the Wellingtons of No. 70, attacked enemy lines of communication between Derna and the Egyptian frontier, airfields at El Adem, Gazalá and El Gubbi, encampments at Bir el Gubi, and dumps at Bardia. The fighter squadrons brought forward to Sidi Barrani and Gerawla made offensive sweeps, protected returning bombers and escorted Lysanders on their tactical reconnaissances. Clashes with Italian aircraft were fewer than might have been expected but Fry, Flying Officer Strahan⁶ and Pilot Officer Duff⁷ of No. 112 and Squadron Leader Hickey⁸ of No. 80 on varying occasions all saw action against vastly superior enemy patrols. Over the Mediterranean a few individuals with the two Sunderland squadrons (Nos. 228 and 230) flew constantly to ensure no unheralded move by the Italian Fleet; and on 19th September Flight Lieutenant Whiteley⁹ arrived at Luqa (Malta) in charge of four Glenn Martin aircraft to watch ports in southern Italy. Early in November these aircraft, now known as No. 431 Flight, reported the presence in Taranto of an Italian battle fleet, and on the basis of their reconnaissance was planned the highly-successful torpedo strike by Fleet Air Arm units on 11th November.

There was cause for satisfaction that this moderate harassing offensive pinned the Italian air units to rear landing grounds from which they could mount only occasional raids. The air operations could not, however, as neither could naval sweeps nor the aggressive frontier ground patrols, redress the whole strategical situation consequent on the elimination of France and the freedom of Italy to concentrate all her force against Egypt. On 12th September Marshal Graziani set off eastward with elements of six Italian divisions. As General O'Connor's¹ rearguards, obeying orders to conserve strength for future more important battles, fell back on Matruh before this cautious promenade in strength, the Blenheim squadrons attacked the enemy columns, but after the halt at Sidi Barrani, they and the Wellingtons concentrated once more on targets in Libya. By October, Italian inefficiency, the opening of the Takoradi route, and the forceful R.A.F. tactics had given hopes of an even greater air offensive if only more supplies of aircraft and crews could be obtained. Then on 28th October Italy invaded Greece. Longmore on his own initiative immediately sent one squadron to Greece and within a month three and a half further squadrons were sent, and after 6th November

⁶ W Cdr P. E. C. Strahan, 36754 RAF, 253251. 112 Sqn RAF; Staff Offr Training HQ Western Area 1942-45; comd ADHQ Higgins, 1945. Regular air force offr; of Geelong, Vic; b. Moonee Ponds, Vic, 18 Nov 1915.

⁷ Sqn Ldr B. B. E. Duff, 40684 RAF; 112 Sqn RAF. Regular air force offr; b. Randwick, NSW, 2 Nov 1915.

⁸ Sqn Ldr W. J. Hickey, DFC, 32035 RAF; comd 80 Sqn RAF 1940. Regular air force offr; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 9 May 1907. Died of wounds 21 Dec 1940.

⁹ Gp Capt E. A. Whiteley, DFC, 37588 RAF. 22 Sqn RAF; comd 431 Flight RAF 1940-41, 168 Wing RAF 1944. Regular air force offr; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 30 Mar 1914.

¹ Gen Sir Richard O'Connor, GCB, DSO, MC. Comd XIII Corps 1940-41, VIII Corps 1944; GOC-in-C NW Army, India, 1945-46. Regular soldier; of Oxford, Eng; b. Kashmir, India, 21 Aug 1889.

the Wellingtons, although based in Egypt, devoted their whole attention to Greece. The resultant deficiencies in No. 202 Group were made good by drawing flights from squadrons at Aden, by re-equipping squadrons with more modern aircraft now becoming available, and by calling into immediate readiness the Gladiator flights of No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F., which had arrived in Egypt late in August.

The original decision to send an army-cooperation squadron overseas with the Australian Imperial Force had been reversed on 28th November 1939 when the Federal Cabinet ruled that all R.A.A.F. resources must initially be employed in ensuring a sound basis for Empire Air Scheme schools in Australia. When on 28th February 1940 it was decided that "for national and training reasons" the 6th Division should have an Australian squadron, the Air Ministry, in London, was asked whether all the necessary aircraft and equipment could be supplied from R.A.F. sources, as only personnel were available in Australia. This proposal was enthusiastically accepted and arrangements made for all equipment not already available in the Middle East to be sent in a convoy during June so that the squadron could form early in August. The entry of Italy into the war threatened to dislocate these arrangements as the Admiralty decided not to send liners through the Red Sea, but these difficulties were eventually overcome. The officers and men of No. 3 Squadron, nearly all of them regulars, under the command of Squadron Leader McLachlan², sailed from Sydney in the *Orontes* on 15th July, trans-shipped to the *Dilwarra* at Bombay and arrived at Port Tewfik on 23rd August slightly ahead of their aircraft, which had also been delayed.

The squadron was placed immediately under the command of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East, and although it had been intended to attach it to I Australian Corps under the general operational control of General Wavell, the commander-in-chief of the land forces, such allocation of aircraft to specific army formations conflicted with the principle of tactical flexibility of air power and was resisted by the air force.³ In any case ideas about army cooperation were undergoing revision, for the Lysander, the standard aircraft designed to meet army needs in tactical, artillery and photographic reconnaissance, had proved itself unequal to the demands of modern warfare having neither the speed, armour, nor armament necessary to withstand fighter attack. Army needs, consequent on European campaigns, had meanwhile broadened to include not only reconnaissance, but protection against enemy air attacks, and

² Air Cmdre I. D. McLachlan, DFC, 55. Comd 3 Sqn 1940-41, RAF Stn Benina 1941, RAAF Stns Canberra and Laverton 1942, RAAF Wing New Guinea 1943, 81 Wing 1945. Regular air force off; of Melbourne; b. South Yarra, Vic, 23 Jul 1911.

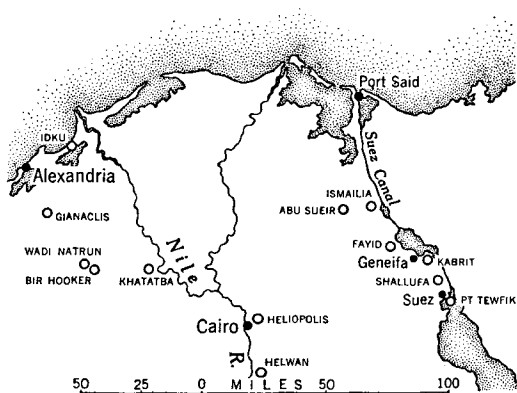
³ There seems to have been some misconception and lack of liaison in Australia. Air Cmdre McNamara in London was somewhat disconcerted on 9 Aug 1940 when he sighted a signal from Australian Army HQ to the Military Liaison Offr:

"Question arises whether No. 3 (A.C.) Squadron RAAF Middle East should be placed under GOC Australian Corps alternatives being GOC-in-Chief or AOC Middle East. Desire squadron be available cooperation AIF should it be employed operations. Consult War Office and advise."

McNamara immediately apprised Air Board of this unilateral approach and received instructions to intercede and to press on Air Ministry, Air Board's strong "opinion that No. 3 Squadron must come under command of AOC-in-C RAF Middle East who will make available for operations to Army as required. This principle acknowledged in combined operations manual and Army Field Service Regulations."

attacks on the enemy's army. Experience had shown that Hurricane aircraft, though not designed for the purpose, were capable of making just as effective reconnaissance flights as Lysanders, and also could meet some of the new needs.

It was therefore proposed to re-equip army-cooperation squadrons with fighter-type aircraft as soon as possible. Unfortunately current needs in England made it necessary to retain the Lysander in use and it was on borrowed machines of this type that the Australians began training at Ismailia on 1st September. Their own aircraft arrived early in September without propellers or air filters, but this discouragement was forgotten on 16th September when the squadron was ordered to Helwan to be reconstituted on a three-flight basis, two of Gladiator single-seater fighters and one of Lysanders. Four Gauntlet aircraft were also allocated which were to be detached with crews and a maintenance party to train in dive-bombing tactics with No. 208 Squadron R.A.F. No. 3 was thus to become a close-support rather than an army-cooperation squadron of the standard type, for, although the Lysander flight at Helwan went through the normal course of reconnaissance, the Gladiators concentrated on formation flying, aerobatics and combat tactics, while at Qasaba, the Gauntlet pilots sought to master the technique of dive bombing.



Airfields in the Nile Delta.

Early in November No. 3 moved up to Gerawla to commence operations, headquarters and the Gladiators arriving on 2nd November and the Gauntlets on the following day. The Lysander flight remained at Helwan, and both here and at Ikingi Maryut, where it was transferred on the 21st, acted primarily as a reinforcement pool, for not even in mid-December, when the operational flights could muster only one serviceable aircraft, was it deemed practicable to commit them to battle. The first ten days at Gerawla were spent peacefully in siting tents, digging shelters, and organising maintenance and supply systems. Tactical reconnaissances of enemy positions between Sofafi and Nibeiwa began on 13th November, and during the fourth of these on the 19th, No. 3 recorded its first combat. Flight Lieutenant Pelly,⁴ escorted by Squadron Leader

⁴ Gp Capt B. R. Pelly, OBE, 260226. 3 Sqn; comd 451 Sqn 1941, RAAF School Army Co-op 1942, RAAF Stn Canberra and 73 Wing 1943, 71 Wing 1943-44; Dir Tactical and Opnl Reqmnts RAAF HQ 1945. MLA (NSW) since 1950. Grazier; of Bowral, NSW; b. Buckley, Flintshire, Eng, 31 May 1907.

Heath,⁵ Flying Officers Rawlinson⁶ and Boyd,⁷ was reconnoitring seven miles east of Rabia when, about 2 p.m., eighteen CR-42 aircraft appeared. The enemy fighters broke formation, nine attacking Pelly and the others his escort, their primary object seeming to be to isolate each aircraft in turn and destroy it by sheer weight of numbers. This they almost succeeded in doing to Pelly, who had to withstand nine distinct attacks, but, although the engagement lasted twenty-five minutes, and Heath was shot down and killed, the Gladiators had much the better of the fight. Pelly reported one enemy aircraft destroyed and another damaged; Boyd claimed to have seen four of the attackers spin out of control; and Rawlinson also shot down one. Army units found three crashed enemy aircraft and as the battle began beyond the enemy lines it is possible that all six were actually destroyed.⁸ The rest of the month passed quietly, the main activity being an exercise with Western Desert Force in which mock dive-bombing attacks were made. From 28th November one Gladiator was maintained daily at standby notice and two at five-minute readiness to act as a fighter patrol when required, but they were never ordered into the air. Only one other operation came before the opening of the British offensive, when two Gladiators formed part of the escort for an aircraft from No. 208 Squadron R.A.F. which photographed Italian positions.

For five months no large-scale fighting had taken place in the Western Desert. The British rearguard had fallen back before the Italian advance to Sidi Barrani, but, as week after week passed and the Italians showed no signs of resuming their advance but remained behind a somewhat inadequate defensive screen, Wavell examined the possibility of himself attacking. The British supply position which earlier had caused concern was now much easier. Wavell also had in mind that a severe check to the Italians in the Western Desert might be of material and moral assistance to the Greeks and he therefore authorised a limited attack, originally intended to cover only five days' operations, to take place at the end of November.

Two features in particular of Wavell's plan made air support indispensable. Firstly, although there were thought to be six or seven Italian divisions in Egypt, Wavell, owing to lack of adequate transport, could employ only two divisions during an initial assault. Secondly, he had to move these divisions forward seventy miles over the desert before the engagement (which he planned to open on 9th December) and this entailed secret advances during the previous two nights, with the force spending one day in the open desert. Although every effort at concealment and

⁵ Sqn Ldr P. R. Heath, 87; 3 Sqn. Regular air force offr; of Muswellbrook, NSW; b. 27 Jan 1914. Killed in action 19 Nov 1940.

⁶ Gp Capt A. C. Rawlinson, DFC, 386. Comd 3 Sqn 1941, 79 Sqn 1943, 78 Wing 1945. Regular air force offr; of Ivanhoe, Vic; b. Fremantle, WA, 31 Jul 1918.

⁷ Sqn Ldr A. H. Boyd, 561. 3, 76, 84 and 75 Sqns; comd 101 Fighter Control Unit 1944; 67 Sqn. Regular air force offr; of Delungra, NSW; b. Quirindi, NSW, 17 Mar 1916.

⁸ 202 Gp credited the sqn with 6 enemy aircraft, but as in practically all instances of air fighting it is extremely difficult to reconcile claims with official enemy records of missing aircraft.

dispersal was to be made, the need for adequate air cover in case of discovery was paramount. The dispatch of four squadrons to Greece had earlier prejudiced the plan for an offensive in the Western Desert, but by denuding less-active theatres in Middle East Command and by the arrival of one Hurricane and two complete Wellington squadrons from the United Kingdom, the equivalent of eleven squadrons was finally gathered in Egypt. This small force of three fighter, two army-cooperation, three medium-bomber and three heavy-bomber squadrons had to oppose in its own element (it was estimated) at least 250 enemy bombers and 250 fighters; and whereas the Italians could hope for speedy reinforcement, No. 202 Group, which controlled all R.A.F. operations west of the Delta, except those of the army-cooperation squadrons,⁹ had to rely only on its own immediate reserves. The preceding five months, however, had already shown that the numerically inferior R.A.F. by determined aggression could pin down and harass the Italian Air Force. Furthermore, as initially it was not thought that the operation would last more than a week, the R.A.F. hoped to maintain a maximum effort throughout the battle.

Air preparations began early in December with Wellington raids from Malta and Egypt on airfields near Tripoli and Benghazi, followed by light-bomber raids on enemy advanced landing grounds. As 9th December drew near Hurricane fighters strafed lines of communication immediately to the rear of the Italian positions near Sidi Barrani, and the whole chain of enemy defences was reconnoitred by Blenheims, Lysanders and Hurricanes. Western Desert Force completed the first stage of its approach march during the night of 7th December and lay dispersed and camouflaged a mere thirty miles from the Italian encampments. With the resources available it was impossible to maintain a constant air cover and accordingly as enemy fighters usually patrolled the front area between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. and again between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. when their working parties and front-line troops were most active, it was decided to protect the Western Desert Force by two offensive patrols of maximum strength at these times. All available aircraft from the three regular fighter squadrons and from No. 3 were employed on 8th December, the Gladiators flying in sections stepped up at intervals of 2,000 feet, with the Hurricane sections above. By this means action could be taken immediately against any enemy encountered from 1,000 to 20,000 feet. This protection proved adequate for no Italian aircraft ventured near the area. That night the undiscovered army resumed its advance, while heavy bombers struck at Benina airfield, and British naval units aided by Blenheim aircraft bombarded Sidi Barrani and El Maktila.

At dawn on 9th December, the 7th Armoured Division drove a wedge into the Italian line north of Sofafi while the 4th Indian Division swung northwards overrunning the enemy central encampments. By the following afternoon armoured units were astride the coast road to the west,

⁹ These were controlled directly by O'Connor through a senior air liaison officer at Western Desert HQ.

Sidi Barrani was isolated, and an attack carried the village by nightfall. The 11th December saw all Italian forces in full flight.

These operations had the greatest possible air support, some 400 bombing sorties being flown against Bardia, forward landing grounds and lines of communication. Until 11th December the fighter squadrons and one flight of No. 3 flew maximum strength offensive patrols three times daily, while smaller patrols were mounted as required. The Italian Air Force, despite its superior numbers,¹ proved almost completely ineffective and made no attempt at strategic bombing or to attack R.A.F. landing grounds. The Italians flew both bombers and fighters almost exclusively over the battlefield with the result that not only were the bombers severely mauled by Hurricanes, but the fighters were rarely in a position to oppose R.A.F. bombing attacks which were progressively destroying the bases, organisation and maintenance facilities on which enemy flying depended.

No. 3's Gladiator flights were retained under the control of No. 202 Group until the morning of 9th December. After the first patrol that morning one of the flights flew to Landing Ground Emergency 74 for army-cooperation duties proper but the other flight remained at Gerawla engaged in the fighter sweeps until 13th December when the existing favourable air position warranted its transfer also to LGE-74.

Fifty-one Gladiator sorties, all over the Sofafi-Sidi Barrani area, were flown from Gerawla but no enemy aircraft was encountered. The other flight almost immediately after reaching LGE-74, had flown two patrols over troops south of Sidi Barrani on 9th December, while the Gauntlets also began operations that day with five dive-bombing attacks on enemy vehicles on the escarpment north-west of Sofafi. The following day was eventful, four Italian aircraft being claimed as destroyed without loss over the battlefield. During an early-morning patrol Flight Lieutenant Gaden² shot down an RO-37 while four Gladiators sent to investigate an army report of enemy aircraft over Tummar found twelve CR-42 fighters engaged in strafing troops. The enemy aircraft scattered immediately and making use of their superior speed tried to escape, but three were destroyed by McLachlan, and Flight Lieutenants Steege³ and Gatward.⁴

With the Italian army in full retreat, there were opportunities hoped for but not expected when the original five days' limited advance was ordered. O'Connor decided to advance as fast and as far as possible.

On 11th December No. 3 was ordered to bomb the enemy forces retiring along the Sofafi escarpment and to cover our own units as they advanced. Three times on 11th and 12th December the Gauntlets bombed

¹ Longmore's dispatch quotes the contemporary estimate of 250 bombers and 250 fighters in Libya. Subsequent analysis reveals that only 140 bombers and 190 fighters were available, some based as far distant as Castel Benito near Tripoli.

² F-Lt C. B. Gaden, 289; 3 Sqn. Regular air force offr; of Windsor, Vic; b. Windsor, 12 May 1916. Killed in action 13 Dec 1940.

³ Gp Capt G. H. Steege, DSO, DFC, 213. 11 and 3 Sqn; comd 450 Sqn 1941-42, 73 and 81 Wings 1943-44; SASO HQ Eastern Area 1945; comd 77 Sqn Korea 1951. Regular air force offr; of North Sydney; b. Chatswood, NSW, 31 Oct 1917.

⁴ F-Lt A. A. Gatward, 272; 3 Sqn. Regular air force offr; of Mittagong, NSW; b. Sydney, 21 Apr 1917. Killed in action 19 Feb 1941.

the Sofafi force which had been sealed off from the battle by the thrust of the 7th Armoured Division. The Gauntlets were then withdrawn as the efforts needed to service these obsolete aircraft were not justified by the results they achieved. The Gladiators on the other hand continued to operate regularly over the forward army units as they approached the frontier. Most patrols were uneventful but shortly after noon on the 12th, five Gladiators intercepted a formation of seventeen CR-42's about six miles north-west of Sofafi. Six or seven of the enemy remained to fight while the others climbed, circled once and flew away. After a short engagement the Australians again had a bloodless victory, three CR-42's being destroyed. The Gladiators, though invariably outnumbered, had performed with considerable success since the opening of the battle, but the next day was one of disaster. Six Gladiators on an early-morning patrol discovered five SM-79 bombers attacking our troops near Salum. One Savoia was shot down, a second probably destroyed and the rest dispersed, but before the Gladiators could re-form, the enemy fighter escort of eight CR-42's were upon them. A confused fight followed in which two Italians were shot down, but the Australians suffered heavy losses. Gaden crashed and was killed; Flying Officers Arthur⁵ and Winten⁶ were obliged to bale out; Boyd and Gatward were forced down although the damage to Boyd's aircraft was quickly repaired and he returned to base with Gatward as passenger. This engagement thus cost the squadron one pilot, four aircraft destroyed and two damaged, and as one of the Gladiators transferring from Gerawla that day also crashed on landing, the position became critical. On the following day a single Australian Gladiator flew two sorties; the squadron temporarily ceased operations on 15th December. By this time the remnants of the Italian army which had invaded Egypt had withdrawn into the Bardia fortress, and soon the 7th Armoured Division had cut the road leading west to Tobruk.

Although, in mid-December, there was comparatively little fighting, the provision of adequate air protection was becoming extremely difficult. The Australians had been ordered forward to Bir Malla on 13th December, for the express purpose of covering army units leading the advance, but this task was obviously now beyond its powers. By 14th December O'Connor, commanding in the Western Desert, was requesting better fighter protection, but little could be done until the 17th when, with four repaired machines and another four drawn from the almost-exhausted stocks of Gladiators held in the Middle East, No. 3 began limited operations once more. Thirty-nine sorties, all on offensive patrols over troops manoeuvring between Fort Capuzzo and Bardia, were flown between this date and 23rd December, and this modest scale of effort, due largely to intervening bad weather, allowed serviceability to be built up for the forthcoming assault on Bardia. As the 6th Australian Division

⁵ Gp Capt W. S. Arthur, DSO, DFC, 565. 3 Sqn; comd 75 Sqn 1943, 2 OTU 1944, 81 Wing 1944-45, 78 Wing 1945. Student; of Yelarbon, Qld; b. Sydney, 7 Dec 1919.

⁶ Sqn Ldr L. D'A. Winten, 270526. 3 and 75 Sqns. Commercial pilot; of Charleville, Qld; b. Brisbane, Qld, 13 May 1913.

relieved the 4th Indian Division⁷ after the Battle of Sidi Barrani, it had been decided as a matter of policy to maintain No. 3 Squadron at full strength in preference to other Gladiator squadrons, although its employment was not to be tied to purely Australian needs.

Slowly at first, and with great difficulty, Western Desert Force built up its resources for a continuation of its advance. The railway ran no farther than Matruh, and what transport there was had then to use a single road across the desert. The capture of Salum harbour eased the situation, and by the end of December supplies were mounting and the chosen assault units were moving into position. Until 22nd December air attack had chiefly been directed against stores and dumps in Bardia,⁸ but after that date the R.A.F. bombers concentrated on enemy landing grounds at Tobruk, Derna and Benina, where unusually large reinforcements of aircraft were reported. As a result Italian air activity increased very little; bombers were still directed mainly against troops though with little effect, while Italian fighters, which had every chance to take advantage of the existing lack of British fighters, contented themselves with escorting bombers and maintaining standing patrols. This resulted in few interceptions and lowered still further the already poor serviceability rate. This lack of aggression permitted No. 208 Army-Cooperation Squadron to fly photographic and artillery reconnaissances over Bardia with confidence. Even Lysanders escorted by Gladiators of No. 3 were employed on these duties, both squadrons having moved forward on 23rd December to a landing ground six miles south-west of Salum. In all, before the land attack on Bardia commenced on 3rd January 1941, the Australians flew sixty-nine escort sorties for the Lysanders and nineteen on offensive patrols over the frontier area "with the pious hope" that they might be "in the right place at the right time"⁹ to engage the CR-42's which occasionally strafed our armoured car units engaged in reconnaissance. The only combat recorded during this preparatory period occurred on 26th December when eight Gladiators waiting to escort a Lysander to Bardia sighted two flights of five Savoia 79 bombers each closely escorted by six CR-42's with a further eighteen CR-42's as top cover, over the Gulf of Salum. As the Lysander was some time overdue, the Gladiators intercepted the enemy formation, two engaging the bombers and the remainder attacking the top fighters. The bombers promptly headed westwards, but two CR-42's were observed to fall in the sea, and five (one of which may have been destroyed) were damaged. The Australians sustained only minor damage to three Gladiators.

⁷ 4 Indian Div had been promised to reinforce Gen Platt in the Sudan after the 5-day offensive. This transfer had to be made even though the aim of COMPASS (the code name of the operation) had meanwhile increased.

⁸ This air assault together with naval bombardment was valuable for its material results, but it was also thought that under the shock of the previous rout the Bardia garrison might decide not to defend the town and retire instead to Tobruk. British intelligence greatly underestimated Italian strength at Bardia, and by 19 Dec it was obvious that the Italians intended to stand and fight at Bardia.

⁹ Gp Capt L. O. Brown, "Report on Army Cooperation in Western Desert and Libya", Sec 30.

As at Sidi Barrani, land operations during the assault on Bardia went practically according to plan.¹ At dawn on 3rd January the perimeter defences were breached, Australian infantry with support from tanks fanned out within the fortress and by late afternoon of the 4th the battle was virtually over, although resistance in some sectors was not overcome until the following day. The support given by the R.A.F. was provided generally not at Bardia itself but farther west. Bombers attacked every airfield east of Derna to reduce the likelihood of Italian air intervention, while fighters strafed the Tobruk-Bardia road, gave protective cover for the 7th Armoured Division, and flew offensive patrols to prevent enemy aircraft reaching the battle area. These measures proved completely successful, enemy air opposition being almost negligible until 5th January when the battle was over. No. 3 was retained to provide cover for the attacking troops, but, although almost continuously in the air, seventy-seven sorties being flown in the three days, its aircraft were not once challenged by enemy fighters. On two occasions Italian aircraft were seen in the distance but no interception could be made.

Even before Bardia fell Wavell had decided to attack Tobruk, so the 7th Armoured Division was once more sent racing westwards. Mr Churchill had shown intense enthusiasm at the initial success at Sidi Barrani and on 26th December the Commanders-in-Chief ruled that operations in Libya were to have priority over all others, at least as far as the capture of Tobruk, whose port facilities were essential to ensure logistic support for consolidating the territory already won. By 6th January the fortress of Tobruk was isolated and the following day the 19th Australian Brigade reached the perimeter defences on the east side of the port. A fortnight was to pass before an attack could be launched against Tobruk, for again it was necessary to build up supplies for both army and R.A.F. Increased use was made of Salum, but inadequate numbers of vehicles had still to bring munitions, food and general supplies up to the front line. Some air squadrons were now as much as 150 miles behind the army, and during the necessary reorganisation could operate only infrequently. However, one important result of the initial drive of the 7th Armoured Division was to force the Italians to abandon in haste all airfields east of the Derna-Martuba group, and, while waiting for their own supplies, British squadrons which had moved forward to these landing grounds made some use of enemy stores. Bombing attacks were soon resumed on Tobruk, Derna and Benghazi and small as the R.A.F. effort was it exceeded by a considerable margin that of the Italians who made only sporadic bombing attacks with single aircraft on Salum, Bardia and forward troops. Enemy fighter activity was practically non-existent, and the *Regia Aeronautica* was almost a spent force.² Since the campaign opened on 8th December it had lost 154 aircraft in battle, while on every landing ground now

¹ The ground operations, only briefly referred to in this chapter, are described in detail in G. Long, *To Benghazi* (in the army series of this history).

² According to Marshal Graziani the Italians on 5 Jan 1941 had only 119 aircraft available, half of which were fighters.

taken over by the advancing army and air force, aircraft in all states of airworthiness were found abandoned in large numbers.

For No. 3 the period following the fall of Bardia was one of reorganisation and movement. By 8th January the Gladiator flights had become established on a landing field four miles north of Gambut, while the Lysander flight, in accordance with a decision taken after the battle of Sidi Barrani, transferred from Ikingi Maryut to Gerawla where it re-equipped with Gladiators. From there it moved with squadron headquarters, workshops and equipment sections first to Salum and finally, on the 11th, to Gambut. Thus for the first time the squadron was a compact body, equipped with one type of aircraft and at full strength. The only detached Australians were now the gunners, wireless operators and photographers rendered superfluous by the progressive conversion of flights to single-seater aircraft. At the request of Headquarters R.A.F. in Middle East, these men, together with ground tradesmen associated with them, had been attached to R.A.F. squadrons which were under strength, in particular the two army-cooperation squadrons—No. 208, which was closely associated with No. 3, and No. 6 at Ramleh (Palestine) which sent one flight in rotation to operate with No. 208.

Operationally this period was rather disappointing. Until 11th January much time was spent in settling in at Gambut, and thereafter the weather remained consistently bad for a week. Only sixty-six sorties were flown, mostly over troops moving into assault positions before Tobruk, and on one occasion to protect the 11th Hussars which were performing a special reconnaissance between Mechili and Bir Hacheim. Apart from their effect on air activity the prevalent dust storms were also partly responsible for the death of one and capture of another member of the squadron. On 14th January Corporal Jarvis,³ a wireless operator then attached to No. 208 Squadron, set out with Leading Aircraftman Parr⁴ to check wireless equipment in use with artillery units near Tobruk. Even under normal circumstances accurate navigation in the featureless desert was difficult, but during a dust storm Jarvis and Parr drove their tender almost on to the guns of the Tobruk defences, Jarvis being killed and Parr captured, although Parr was released a few days later when British forces entered the town.⁵

The land battle for Tobruk which opened on 21st January differed little in essentials from that at Bardia. Once more objectives were carried as planned and on the morning of the 22nd the port was captured. Air operations, however, were modified to give greater direct assistance. Heavy bombing attacks again preceded the assault but Blenheims continued to bomb military objectives within the defence perimeter throughout the 21st instead of attacking the Italian air bases. Two Hurricane

³ Cpl V. J. Jarvis, 300047; 3 Sqn. Radio mechanic; of Griffith, NSW; b. Perth, WA, 8 Jul 1912. Killed in action 14 Jan 1941.

⁴ F-Lt J. G. Parr, 255713; 205847. 3 Sqn; atchd Dir of Communication Developmt RAF. Electrical engineer; of Canterbury, Vic; b. Wyalong, NSW, 8 Aug 1908.

⁵ Parr was the only British prisoner in Tobruk. On the morning of 22 Jan he took charge of the gendarmerie barracks where he was being held and when the troops entered the town he was virtually in control of the local police.

squadrons, assisted by No. 3's Gladiators, maintained fighter patrols over and to the west of the battlefield. These measures proved adequate, for very few enemy aircraft appeared and only one combat was reported. The Australians were not engaged and flew twenty uneventful sorties.

Events moved rapidly after the fall of Tobruk. What remained of the Italian army was now divided into two forces—one across the coast road east of Derna, and the other at Mechili. Further orders had now been received from the Chiefs of Staff that the capture of Benghazi was of the greatest importance. This decision was made possible because the Greeks had temporarily turned down an offer of British army units which could only have been provided at the expense of the Libyan offensive. Accordingly Western Desert Force, its supply difficulties considerably eased by the capture of a good harbour, and using many captured vehicles and much captured petrol, pushed on rapidly, making contact with both enemy forces by 23rd January. It was very difficult to provide air support for these operations, for bomber squadrons were not at this date fully mobile, and even fighter squadrons had difficulty in keeping up with the army's advance. No. 3 was ordered on 21st January to move to Tmimi as soon as possible, but although an advance party left Gambut that evening, the squadron as a whole did not reach Tmimi until 24th January by which time the Gladiators were needed at Martuba. On this occasion the movement was effected in less than twenty-four hours. The advance was now approaching the main Italian base airfields, and although all R.A.F. fighter squadrons were showing the effects of sustained operations under desert conditions, they met surprisingly little enemy opposition.⁶ No. 3 flew only forty-four patrols up to 28th January, cover being provided as required either over the 19th Australian Brigade near Derna or the armoured division in the Mechili sector. One air engagement resulted on 25th January, when five Gladiators patrolling at 2,000 feet, eight miles south-east of Mechili, were attacked by an equal number of G-50 fighters which dived from 10,000 feet. The advantage in height proved decisive. Four Australians escaped in damaged aircraft but Flying Officer Campbell⁷ was shot down. On 29th January No. 3 began re-arming with Hurricane aircraft and were called on very infrequently for operations during the final stages of the conquest of Cyrenaica. The Italians had withdrawn from Mechili on the night 26th-27th January thereby uncovering not only the flank of the Derna positions but also the direct route south of the Jebel Achdar to the Gulf of Sirte. Derna was occupied by 30th January and during the next few days aircraft reported a general withdrawal westwards. The Australians flew one reconnaissance to locate an armoured brigade and later to escort a Lysander covering the area Giovanni Berta-Zt Tert-Chaulan. The complete disappearance of enemy air opposition suggested that even the Benghazi airfields were being

⁶ The numbers of Italian aircraft serviceable in Libya when Tobruk fell are now estimated at only 45 bombers and 35 fighters.

⁷ F-O J. C. Campbell, 634; 3 Sqn. Journalist; of Charleville, Qld; b. Charters Towers, Qld, 22 Nov 1918. Killed in action 25 Jan 1941.

evacuated, and events moved quickly to a climax. While bombers attacked railway terminals at Barce and Benghazi, and fighters strafed road convoys, the 6th Australian Division pushed along the coast road while the 7th Armoured Division, carrying only two days' supplies, disappeared into the desert heading from Mechili towards the coast south of Benghazi. On the evening of 5th February it emerged near Beda Fomm a few hours ahead of the retreating Italian army, the remnants of which surrendered on 7th February after a long fight. Benghazi having been occupied by the 6th Australian Division the previous day the conquest of Cyrenaica was complete.

In its own element the handful of R.A.F. squadrons working under No. 202 Group had achieved a degree of superiority over the Italian Air Force comparable to that attained by Western Desert Force (now named XIII Corps) over the Italian *Tenth Army*. Unquestionably the task was made easier by Italian inefficiency and the speed with which the army overran enemy airfields, but the results achieved especially by the policy of attacking enemy air bases and of maintaining offensive tactics only in the air were exceptional, gradually eliminating the Italian Air Force as a factor in the land battle, until at Beda Fomm, despite the inability of the R.A.F. to be present, enemy aircraft made no attempt to intervene. To No. 3 as to every other squadron taking part belongs a share of the credit in these achievements. With No. 208 it formed part of a small advance-guard pushing steadily westwards and meeting at first hand all the problems of mobility and supply associated with the advance. At first a close-support unit it changed gradually into a fighter squadron, but remained at the call of Western Desert Force throughout and recorded 546 sorties in all. Its Gladiator aircraft, though old and lacking the speed and climbing ability of its normal opponent, the Italian CR-42, were manoeuvrable, and in the hands of determined pilots were able to engage on approximately equal terms. During the five conclusive engagements it fought during the campaign in Cyrenaica, No. 3 claimed the destruction of twelve enemy aircraft for the loss of five Gladiators and two pilots killed. Such results, valuable in themselves, exemplified how the constant offensive pressure exerted by the R.A.F., drove the Italians to adopt purely defensive patrols, wasted away their striking power, and finally prevented them from putting their aircraft into the air at all. No. 3, like No. 10 in England, had an advantage over other squadrons at this time in that it was an almost undiluted formation of pilots with considerable flying experience. They and the ground crews also profited from the "frontier mind" and ability to adapt themselves instinctively to new situations which compensated for the lack of precise previous knowledge of Libyan conditions or the technical aspects of desert warfare.

Beyond Beda Fomm the coast road ran south to Agedabia then west past the marshes of Agheila. It was unencumbered now save for a few Italian units retreating westward at full speed. Although the road to Tripoli was open, it could not be taken immediately, for recent happenings

in the Balkans had convinced the British Government that it must send all available forces to Greece. Germany's cynical indifference to her ally's early setbacks in the Graeco-Italian war had given way early in 1941 to a more positive policy of seeking hegemony in the Balkans. In January Wavell had already been instructed to offer Greece the assistance of a number of specialised army units; now orders came to send to Greece the largest possible land and air forces. Accordingly the force in Cyrenaica was to be reduced to one armoured brigade and one infantry division, both very short of equipment and only partly trained, while only four squadrons of aircraft were retained in Cyrenaica.

On 10th February No. 3 had moved forward to Benina to assume responsibility for the air defence of Benghazi, while No. 73 Squadron R.A.F. took up similar duties at Tobruk. From the outset the task was difficult for the existing anti-aircraft defences were totally inadequate, and could not be reinforced as most of the few available guns were earmarked for Greece. At this time German aircraft from Sicily and Tripolitania⁸ began to raid Benghazi and to sow mines in the harbour. Interception was not easy, for early-warning facilities had yet to be organised, and, as raids were frequently mounted before dawn or just after dusk, day fighters were severely handicapped. Thus, although the Australians were airborne ninety-nine times during the first fortnight, at Benina only one success was gained; when on the 15th Flying Officer Saunders⁹ chased a Junkers 88 several miles out to sea and finally destroyed it, the German crew being rescued by a mine-sweeper. Despite the temporary attachment of a flight of No. 73 Squadron R.A.F. to assist the Australians, by the third week in February the navy declined to send further supply ships to Benghazi until the air defences had improved. All supplies for forward army units now had to come overland from Tobruk, and ultimately lack of transport made it necessary progressively to reduce the strength of the force in western Cyrenaica.

Enemy air attacks were soon extended to Tobruk and to British troops forward in the Agedabia area, and by 17th February No. 3 was being called on for some assistance. During the following three days twenty-five sorties were flown in six patrols over the forward area and on two occasions enemy aircraft were encountered. The first engagement was on 18th February when three Hurricanes attacked a force of approximately twelve Junkers 87 near Marsa Brega. The Stukas¹ dived quickly from 1,000 feet to fifty feet and scattered but not before one had been shot down and eight damaged. The following morning three Hurricanes found nine Ju-87's again bombing British troops and in an immediate attack

⁸ The fall of Agheila compelled the Germans to switch part of the forces then attacking Malta, to bolster up the Italians in North Africa. From this time onward the German air commitment in Libya became prominent although in the ensuing 6 months it did not exceed 150-200 aircraft, mainly dive bombers and fighters. One wing of dive bombers was withdrawn on 26 Mar from El Machina to Rumania for the campaign in Greece.

⁹ F-Lt J. H. W. Saunders, 471; 3 Sqn. Regular air force off; of Cottesloe, WA; b. Richmond, Surrey, Eng, 8 Apr 1920. Killed in action 22 Oct 1941.

¹ The Ju-87 dive bomber has become so firmly fixed in popular literature as the Stuka, that it is so called hereunder. The Stuka (from *Sturzkampflieger*) was properly a dive attack-bomber and applied to many aircraft besides the Ju-87.

Flight Lieutenant Perrin² shot one down. Perrin and Gatward were then attacked by several Messerschmitt 110's which appeared without warning, Gatward being shot down and killed. At this point Perrin, finding himself alone, attacked and set on fire the nearest enemy machine, but while attacking a second Messerschmitt, his own aircraft was hit in the petrol tank. He continued attacking until his ammunition was expended, and then, too low to bale out, he crash-landed in flames. As he ran from the aircraft one of the enemy continued to fire at him but, escaping serious wounds, he was later picked up by a British patrol. The third pilot had lost contact after the original attack on the Stukas. Unable to find his comrades, he had landed at Agedabia.

On 25th February control of the four squadrons west of the Egyptian frontier passed to Headquarters R.A.F. Cyrenaica. Enemy air activity, predominantly German, continued to increase and Australian pilots spent more and more of their effort on meeting army needs in the forward sectors. Continued air attacks on Benghazi made defence of the airfield at Benina as important as defence of the harbour, for three types of British aircraft were now regularly employing Benina as an advanced base. These were:

- (1) Reinforcement aircraft flown from the United Kingdom.
- (2) Blenheims of No. 55 Squadron R.A.F. engaged in strategic reconnaissance of Tripolitania.
- (3) Wellingtons from Egypt detailed to bomb Tripolitanian harbours and airfields.

Base facilities for the latter two types of aircraft steadily increased with the knowledge that enemy army reinforcements, including Germans, were arriving in strength at Tripoli.³ To provide night-flying facilities, refuel and service the aircraft, and care for the crews, R.A.F. Station Benina had been created on 13th February when McLachlan was promoted wing commander as its first commanding officer, Squadron Leader Jeffrey⁴ assuming command of No. 3. Few additional personnel arrived, however, and station headquarters was simply an extension of the squadron, Australian maintenance crews meeting the new requirements in addition to their normal duties throughout this period. Of scarcely less concern was the shortage of pilots, for, with six or nine aircraft detached daily to Agedabia, and constant "standby" and "readiness" states at Benina a strength of seventeen pilots, including McLachlan was barely adequate. The Air Board was requested on 7th March by Headquarters R.A.F. Middle East to maintain the squadron at the established figure (twenty-

² W Cdr J. R. Perrin, DFC, 380. 3 Sqn; comd 5 and 24 Sqs 1942, 76 Sqn 1943; Dep Dir Ops RAAF HQ 1943-44; SASO RAAF Overseas HQ 1944-46. Regular air force offr; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 9 Oct 1916.

³ The Italian General Staff dispatched the *Ariete Armd* and the *Trento Motorised Divs* while Hitler ordered that the 5 *Light Div* to be followed by 15 *Panzer Div* to be known as the *Africa Corps* should also go to Tripolitania to stiffen Italian resistance. Meanwhile, largely as a result of the attacks made by *Fliegerkorps X* in Sicily against Malta, neither British air nor naval measures could prevent enemy movements from Italian ports to Tripoli. Of 220,000 tons of cargo destined for N Africa during Feb and Mar 200,000 tons arrived safely.

⁴ Gp Capt P. Jeffrey, DSO, DFC, 145. Comd 3 Sqn 1940-41; W Ldr 234 Wing RAF 1941; comd RAAF Stn Bankstown, 75 and 76 Sqs 1942, 2 OTU 1942-43, 1 Wing 1943-44, 2 OTU 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Sydney; b. Tenterfield, NSW, 6 July 1913.

one) plus five, with a reserve of ten pilots, but to meet immediate needs, the same expedient adopted by No. 10 the previous June—acceptance of non-Australian pilots on attachment—was inevitable. Three pilots arrived from No. 73 on 22nd February, three more on 5th March and two South African pilots on 26th March. Thereafter Australian pilots trained under the Empire Training Scheme were posted to No. 3 but all these expedients were strongly denounced by Air Board which desired to retain its character as a complete squadron of the permanent R.A.A.F. Yet another administrative difficulty arose because three officers and thirty-four airmen, nominally members of No. 3, were still attached to R.A.F. squadrons and this led to the suggestion that an Australian liaison officer be appointed to Headquarters R.A.F. Middle East.

Fighter operations were notable rather for unremitting effort than spectacular achievements. Between 25th February and the end of March the Australians flew 322 sorties, 189 from Benina and 133 from Agedabia, only intercepting enemy aircraft once. This was on 28th February, when, at 9.15 a.m. Squadron Leader Campbell⁵ shot down a Ju-88 three miles south of Benghazi. Owing to poor anti-aircraft defences it was impracticable to keep aircraft permanently at Agedabia and the Germans quickly learnt to operate before the Hurricanes reached the forward area each morning or after they had left for Benina each evening. Moreover at Benghazi daylight raids by single enemy bombers using the seaward approach, and heavier night raids, were almost impossible to prevent without an adequate warning system. The value of the squadron's work at this period is thus difficult to assess, but by its mere presence when the Germans were anxious to avoid combat it did limit enemy daylight operations. It is probable that the sight of friendly aircraft over their heads helped to maintain the spirits of the forward troops, who were well aware of their own weakness and the growing strength of the enemy.

Towards the middle of March, despite R.A.F. bombing attacks on Tripoli and the airfields fringing the Gulf of Sirte, there was a steady movement of enemy forces towards Agheila. The air forces available in Cyrenaica could do little to frustrate the impending attack as Greece and East Africa had absorbed much of their strength and reinforcements were arriving tardily.⁶ On 22nd March all R.A.F. squadrons were warned to be ready to move at short notice and to prepare demolition plans. They would be required to operate throughout a withdrawal under the following general plan⁷:

- (1) Army cooperation squadron (No. 6 R.A.F.) to maintain tactical reconnaissance.
- (2) Bomber squadron (No. 55) to maintain strategical reconnaissance and carry out bombing attacks in direct and close support of the army.

⁵ Sqn Ldr D. Campbell, 134; 3 Sqn. Regular air force offr; of Auburn, NSW; b. Leeds, Eng, 30 Sep 1915. Killed in action 5 Apr 1941.

⁶ Between 1 Jan and 31 Mar, 166 aircraft arrived in the Middle East. The loss from all causes was 184. (Longmore's dispatch, *Air Operations in the Middle East from January 1st 1941*, para 19.)

⁷ Operational Instruction No. 4 issued by AOC Cyrenaica.

- (3) Fighter squadrons (No. 73 and No. 3 R.A.A.F.) to protect Tobruk port and the forward troops, especially armoured units.

Three enemy divisions advanced from Agheila on 31st March driving back the screen maintained by the 2nd Armoured Division. Wellingtons bombed Tripoli and Sirte air bases; Blenheims bombed and machine-gunned the advancing enemy columns, while No. 3, assisted after the first day by a flight of No. 73, strove with some success to protect the retiring British forces from enemy aircraft, which, now that the battle was joined, accepted more risks than formerly. At 11.40 a.m. on the 31st patrolling Hurricanes sighted two Me-110's about to bomb troops south of Agedabia and Campbell destroyed one while the other fled. Only five minutes later two Italian formations each of five Fiat BR-20 bombers were dispersed before they could complete their attacks. But the efforts of a handful of aircraft could not restore balance to the land battle, and, by the evening of 2nd April, the 2nd Armoured Division had withdrawn north-east of Agedabia and a further withdrawal was contemplated. Benina was now in danger and Got es Sultan, thirty miles to the east, had been prepared to receive No. 3, but as forward reconnaissance and attacks on Tripoli depended on use of Benina, the Australians were required to stay until the last minute. At last, at 9 o'clock in the morning of 3rd April, Benina was evacuated. Anything of value that could not be taken was destroyed and all aircraft, even those from other units under repair, were flown off. Operations were not disrupted as nine Hurricanes took off from Benina, patrolled between Agedabia and Antelat, and then landed at Sceleidima, whence a second similar patrol was made. This time the Australians landed at Got es Sultan and during the afternoon operated for the third time. During the second of these patrols, seven Hurricanes of No. 3, with four of No. 73, dived unseen on a number of Me-110's and Ju-87's, probably eight of each, which were positioning themselves to dive-bomb a target fifteen miles south of Sceleidima. In this surprise attack five enemy aircraft were destroyed, four probably destroyed and two damaged. Any elation at this victory was soon dissipated when at 10 o'clock the same night, the squadron was ordered back to Maraua well east of Barce. The 3rd April had been a calamitous day for the 2nd Armoured Division which, reduced by shortage of petrol and mechanical breakdowns more than by enemy action, could no longer hold its positions, and a general withdrawal to the Derna-Mechili line was ordered. During the next few days events went from bad to worse. Faulty communications and petrol difficulties led to the division and destruction of much of the British armour. Some of the surviving units of the 2nd Armoured Division reached Tobruk into which the 9th Australian Division had been withdrawn, while others, after a stubborn rearguard action, were driven over the border into Egypt. By the 11th the investment of Tobruk was complete and the enemy was beginning to consolidate his positions in Cyrenaica.

The small R.A.F. force available did its best to assist the army, but was hampered by the need to be constantly on the move. No. 3 Squadron left Got es Sultan at 11 p.m. on 3rd April and losing two vehicles during the night in accidents on the choked roads, reached Maraua at 11 o'clock the following morning. Twenty-four hours later they were on the road again bound for Martuba, which was reached at 6 p.m. on the 5th, two cooking trailers having been abandoned on the way. Four hours later they were ordered back to Gazala, but even there no respite was found, for instructions awaited them to withdraw after one day's operations to Sidi Mahmud, five miles south of Tobruk. Accordingly, late on the 6th the road convoy was again moving eastwards, and as the solid ground of the Jebel Achdar had now been left behind, the discomfort of a severe dust storm added to the normal difficulty of night travel. At 2 a.m. on the 7th, in the belief that Sidi Mahmud could not be far off, No. 3 halted for the night, only to find at dawn that the convoy had stopped alongside the landing ground itself. Nor was the end of this ordeal yet in sight, for the same evening saw the squadron again on the road, now heading for LGE-79 about forty miles east of Salum and to the south of Buq Buq. After four days here, it was necessary, on 12th April, when German troops had reached the Egyptian frontier, to retire still farther to Mersa Matruh, and on the following day the final stage was accomplished when No. 3 moved to Sidi Haneish leaving a small refuelling party at Sidi Barrani which was to act as an advanced base. In ten days the Australian squadron had thus retreated more than 500 miles and operated from nine different airfields, and it is against the background of such conditions that the work of the units in Cyrenaica must be judged.

Flying operations followed the pattern contained in the General Order of 22nd March. Bombers attacked whatever strategic and tactical targets remained within range as they fell back. No. 6 Squadron R.A.F. struggled to satisfy the tactical reconnaissance requirements of the 2nd Armoured Division while to No. 3 fell the task of providing air cover for the retreating army. Adequate cover was obviously impossible but much useful work was done in protecting units especially exposed to enemy attack. Thus on 4th April fourteen Hurricanes patrolled between Msus and Sceleidima where 2nd Armoured Division was attempting to re-form. On the following day, operating from Maraua, No. 3 was primarily concerned with covering the withdrawal of 9th Australian Division through the congested defile of the Barce Pass. This duty was uneventful but late the same afternoon eight Hurricanes came upon nine Ju-87's harassing troops of the 2nd Armoured Division near Charruba. The Stukas attempted to escape by diving steeply almost to ground level but one failed to level out and crashed, while another four were shot down for the loss of one Australian, Flying Officer Edwards.⁸ An hour later Perrin led nine Hurricanes to the same area and intercepted another twelve Ju-87's which were taken completely by surprise. They made no attempt at evasive

⁸ F-Lt A. M. Edwards, 250711; 3 Sqn. Traveller; of Malvern, Vic; b. Armadale, Vic, 13 Apr 1914. Edwards was picked up by HQ 2 Armd Div but subsequently became a prisoner.

action and in a battle lasting only a few minutes nine more Stukas were believed to have been destroyed⁹ and the Hurricanes flew on to their new base at Martuba. The strain of continuous operations and the difficulty of servicing aircraft while daily withdrawing, began to tell on the serviceability rate of No 3, which was to have rested on 6th April. The confused situation around Mechili, however, called for continuous operations, so that by the 7th, the Australians had recorded another twenty-four sorties, one patrol of three destroying¹ two Ju-52 transport aircraft found unloading supplies into lorries near Mechili shortly after noon on that day.

A reorganisation of fighter duties late on 7th April reversed the roles of No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. and No. 73 Squadron R.A.F., both of which were now incorporated into No. 258 Wing. The latter squadron, except for its detachment with the Australians, had remained static at Sidi Mahmud charged with the defence of Tobruk. It now remained forward while No. 3 fell back into Egypt to protect Salum and reinforce No. 73 as required. Until 13th April No. 3 did very little flying as support at Tobruk was requested only twice, and the five-day lull was used to restore both men and machines to their normal state of efficiency. On 12th April Headquarters R.A.F. Cyrenaica was absorbed into No. 204 Group R.A.F. but the change was of little importance to the Australians who continued to operate from Sidi Haneish and Sidi Barrani for a week only until 20th April. During this week sixty-three sorties were flown, many of them by single aircraft ranging as far afield as Tobruk. Offensive patrols and attacks on enemy transport were also flown as required. Near Tobruk, on 14th April, Arthur and Lieutenant Tennant² (South African Air Force) after a sharp fight with three Me-110's sent two enemy machines diving steeply apparently out of control.³ The following day Jeffrey took off at noon to attack two Italian bombers reported over Sidi Azeiz, but failing to find them, turned on to the Bardia-Capuzzo road to strafe enemy vehicles. Suddenly he saw four Ju-52 aircraft flying south. A search having revealed no escort he turned quickly to attack but found the transport aircraft had meanwhile landed in considerable confusion, one alighting down-wind being rammed by a second approaching cross-wind. Only one was still airborne and this Jeffrey shot down and then strafed and set on fire the three on the ground.

On 20th April the Australians were ordered to hand over all aircraft to No. 274 Squadron R.A.F. and proceed to Aboukir on leave before re-arming with Tomahawk aircraft. During this first tour of No. 3 Squadron in the desert, originally as an army-cooperation and then as a fighter squadron, it had flown 1,262 sorties, claimed the destruction of forty-seven enemy aircraft, probably destroyed ten more and damaged thirteen

⁹ All RAF sources agree in allowing 3 Sqn 10 victories and 73 Sqn detachment 4 victories on 5 Apr but German figures show only 3 Stukas lost and 1 damaged.

¹ According to German figures—"damaged". This action was watched by the gunners of 2/3 Aust A-Tk Regt forming the rearguard at Mechili.

² Lt A. A. Tennant, 47504 SAAF. 3 Sqn, 1 Sqn SAAF. Draftsman; of Ermelo, Transvaal, S Af; b. Ermelo, 22 Nov 1918. Killed in action 2 Aug 1941.

³ German figures admit loss of 1 Me-110 in this locality on 14 Apr.

others at a cost of twelve aircraft and six pilots. Ably as it acquitted itself during the advance and at Benina, nevertheless at no other time did it quite achieve the height reached during the withdrawal. On 3rd April there were seventeen serviceable Hurricanes and three awaiting repairs at Benina. In the following five days while the squadron fell back 400 miles four of these had been lost and three damaged. Nevertheless, although a satisfactory technique for operating aircraft on the move had yet to be devised, the squadron achieved 135 sorties during that period. The seasoning process was complete.