

CHAPTER 9

SECOND LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

RAPID German advances in Russia during the first months of their initial campaign in 1941 presaged a new threat to the Middle East from the north, for if the enemy reached the Caucasus, an attack could be made early in 1942 either through Turkey or through Iran and Iraq. While air, naval and amphibious forces based in the United Kingdom attempted to preoccupy as large an enemy force as possible in western Europe, General Auchinleck¹ considered that the primary and urgent task of Middle East Command was to eliminate the Axis armies already threatening Egypt from the west before the new danger materialised. Thus during the late summer, while Cyprus, Palestine, Syria and Iran² were all placed in a state of defence, administrative arrangements were begun for an offensive later in 1941 designed firstly to clear the enemy out of Cyrenaica and if possible out of Tripolitania as well, thus securing the entire left flank of the Middle East. Supply difficulties, the absorption and training of reinforcements, and reorganisation of formations on a more mobile basis, all had to be resolved within the Eighth Army (the army in the Western Desert), while the main external prerequisite was adequate support from an air force which was itself undergoing considerable reorganisation.

Hitherto improvisation and unorthodox methods had stretched the capacity of the R.A.F. in the Middle East sufficiently to meet, with varying degrees of success, all its commitments³ in six campaigns undertaken in three continents, but the limit had now been reached and a thorough overhaul and re-adaptation of existing machinery was imperative. This reorganisation, though modified for the immediate problems of the impending land offensive, was to continue during 1942 until R.A.F. in the Middle East was transformed into a powerful modern air force, amply equipped and adequately organised to meet all requirements in war. The reforms immediately required were increased maintenance facilities and greater aircraft supplies via the Takoradi route so that the front line could be maintained even in heavy campaigns; and the creation of subordinate commands to facilitate close control of squadrons in particular areas. Also required were functional divisions for strategic bombers and naval-cooperation aircraft, the formation of self-contained mobile wings containing two or three squadrons, the development and provision of direct air support for operations on land, and thorough operational training facilities so that air effort could be adapted to the particular needs of the

¹ Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, GCB, GCIE, CSI, DSO, OBE. C-in-C India 1941, 1943-46; C-in-C ME 1941-42. Regular soldier; b. 21 Jun 1884. (He had succeeded General Wavell on 5 Jul.)

² British and Russian forces entered Iran on 25 Aug 1941.

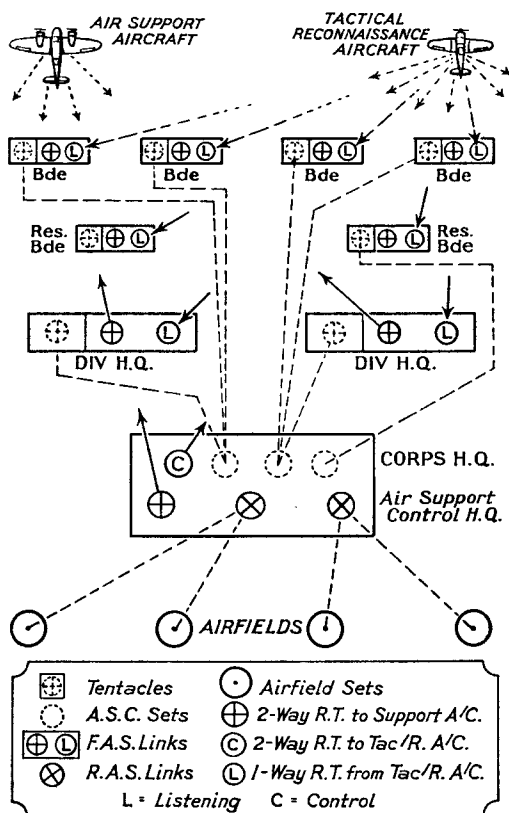
³ Providing aircraft for separate commitments frequently became a question of choosing between priorities. Thus immediately prior to BATTLEAXE the air force had to choose between supporting the forthcoming army advance by attacking enemy communications, and protecting a petrol ship going to Tobruk where at that time only 4 days' supply of petrol remained.

Middle East campaigns. The partial realisation of these aims may be seen in the operations of No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. detailed below, but finality was reached only during the spring and summer of 1942.

One of these problems—the development and provision of adequate air support for land operations—deserves some description here because it forms a hidden background to the work of Australians not only in fighter and army-cooperation but also in light-bomber squadrons. Late in September 1941 direct air support was defined as “air action having an immediate effect on the action of our ground forces in battle” and presupposed air superiority to limit enemy interference. At that stage it was not anticipated that the material results of our support would be great, but emphasis was placed on the moral effect of such action. There were two aspects, defensive and offensive. In defence the aim was to impede or halt the enemy offensive in general and to counter dive-bombing in particular. The most suitable targets for the general aim were likely to be outside the range of ground observation; defence against dive bombers on the other hand could be achieved only by local air superiority, which, in its turn, was best gained by a system of offensive fighter sweeps which would have secondary value as reconnaissances. In offence, close

air support could be given by both fighters and bombers. Fighters must first attain air superiority but in the meantime bomber attacks could be made either at medium altitude, in a shallow dive, low level or ground level (50 feet) according to the nature of the target and its defences.

To meet, reject or modify requests for air support, air support controls were formed at this time and attached to corps headquarters. Accordingly



Air support control communications, late 1941.

No. 1 (Australian) Air Support Control commanded by Major Molloy⁴ came into existence in October 1941 and, until recalled to Australia early in 1942, worked intimately with No. 451 Squadron and No. 200 Air Intelligence Liaison Section. The army element of each control comprised two officers and a wireless-telegraphy organisation:

- (a) Seven forward links (tentacles) for communicating with Control headquarters. These were allotted by army commanders to units in the field.
- (b) Three wireless-telegraphy sets at Control headquarters.

Similarly the air element consisted of representatives of units likely to furnish air support and operators for:

- (a) Eight wireless-telegraphy sets, known as Field Air Support Links (F.A.S.L.) for controlling support aircraft and receiving news from reconnaissance aircraft.
- (b) Two sets known as Rear Air Support Links to communicate directly with the airfields concerned.
- (c) Four sets for use at the operational airfields.

After consultation with army commanders reconnaissances were flown over areas in which air support might be required. On receipt of a request either from an aircraft or a "tentacle" the air support control had to decide where support could be given. If so tentacles were informed of the appointed time and composition of the force so that army plans could be made accordingly.⁵

The land offensive was finally timed to commence on 18th November, but as early as 14th October the R.A.F. began, albeit on a modest scale, operations directly connected with the forthcoming Operation CRUSADER. At first nine fighter, one army-cooperation, six light-bomber and five medium-bomber squadrons were controlled by Air Headquarters Western Desert,⁶ but during the preparatory period, principally by transferring units from the more remote areas of the Middle East, a further six fighter, five and a half light-bomber, and two army-cooperation squadrons were concentrated on forward Egyptian airfields. At this time also No. 1 Air Ambulance Unit R.A.A.F. was brought down from Gaza and on 21st October placed under the operational control of the Deputy Director of Medical Services, Eighth Army. Thus except for medium bombers, by the end of the preliminary period the strength of Air Headquarters, Western Desert, had almost doubled and immediate local superiority in numbers seemed likely, although the enemy had incomparably larger air

⁴ Col A. D. Molloy, VX18. 6 Aust Div Sigs; CO 1 Aust Air Support Control Unit 1941-42; Chief Signals Offr 1 Aust Corps 1943-44, First Army 1944-45. Regular soldier; b. 12 Dec 1909.

⁵ During the CRUSADER offensive there was one major modification. All requests were referred to AOC Western Desert. The ASC at Corps HQ merely relayed requests without sifting and informed the units likely to be involved.

⁶ Nos 33, 112, 229, 238 and 250 RAF, 1 and 2 SAAF, 3 RAAF and a naval sqn (fighters); 11, 45, 55 and 113 RAF, 12 and 21 SAAF (light bombers); 37, 38, 70, 108 and 148 RAF (Wellingtons); and 451 RAAF (army cooperation). The Wellington bombers of 257 Wing (which became 205 Gp on 23 Oct) were not strictly speaking a part of WDAF. Normally they came directly under HQ RAF ME and were allotted to WDAF for operational control when the situation demanded their employment in a tactical role.

forces elsewhere in the Mediterranean which could if required be transferred to Libya.⁷

The main aims of the R.A.F. between 14th October and 12th November (D minus 6) was to weaken the enemy air strength by attacks on Axis shipping, supply organisations and lines of communication; neutralising enemy airfields especially those used by German fighters and dive bombers; and winning air superiority over the triangle formed by Bardia, Tobruk and Maddalena, in which area German fighters were most likely to be encountered. The duties of the R.A.F. formations followed naturally. No. 205 Group (Wellington medium bombers) concentrated on bombing Benghazi and other ports. No. 3 South African Wing of light bombers attacked supplies and dumps in rear areas and Gazala and Tmimi landing grounds, while No. 270 Wing of light bombers staged daylight attacks on the remaining airfields. The fighters were now in three wings and of these No. 258 Wing (No. 3 R.A.A.F., No. 2 S.A.A.F., No. 112 and No. 250 Squadrons R.A.F.) maintained offensive action over Cyrenaica and escorted the light bombers and reconnaissance aircraft over enemy territory, while No. 269 Wing was responsible for interception of enemy aircraft over Egypt, and No. 262 Wing remained in reserve to protect the Delta area, provide reinforcements for the forward wings, and to control squadrons newly arrived in the Western Desert. The reconnaissance squadrons, of which only No. 451 Squadron R.A.A.F. was available before 30th October, had to locate all enemy formations, establish the disposition of armour, defensive lines, gun-pits, dumps and minefields; check on traffic on desert roads and determine the flow of supplies through enemy ports. Pinpoint and overlap photographs were required to a depth of forty miles behind the enemy front. Aircraft from Malta commenced a coordinated attack on ports in Sicily and southern Italy, shipping at sea, and Tripolitanian ports and maintenance bases.

To achieve these objectives bombers in Egypt during this period flew 630 sorties—393 against ports, 139 against airfields, 88 against enemy positions and 10 against ships at sea, while Malta-based bombers flew a further 500 sorties—321 against ports, 84 against airfields, 70 against shipping and 25 against enemy positions. While these bombing activities proceeded according to plan weaknesses soon appeared in R.A.F. fighter operations, because suitable wing and section leaders were lacking. This was mainly due to the loss of truly offensive initiative during the preceding lull in desert warfare, and the increasing number of pilots reaching Middle East squadrons with only brief or no operational training.⁸ The squadrons

⁷ Considerable political pressure from the Dominions was at this time devoted to the problem of ensuring that land forces had adequate air support, but it was impossible to give any definite estimate of the total enemy air opposition likely to be encountered; for while Italian squadrons formed two-thirds of the Axis air forces in Libya, the *Luftwaffe* morale was extremely high, and the recent appearance of the Me-109F gave the enemy an aircraft superior in performance to existing RAF types in the ME.

⁸ The heavy losses in pilots incurred in the Greece and Crete operations had inevitably led to the increase in the Middle East of pilots with little operational training and even less operational experience. Previously the dearth of operational aircraft had militated against the setting up of OTU's which were only at this time coming into being in the Middle East. The urgent need for forming new squadrons or keeping old ones up to strength meant that many pilots, especially Australians posted direct from home or Rhodesian flying schools, were fed in to learn their trade "on the job". This situation combined with a prolonged period of defensive operations

who had fought in Syria were less affected than the others, but it became necessary not only to procure experienced pilots from England to stiffen squadrons, but also to withdraw units in turn for training in offensive tactical methods. Experiments with fighter formations of varying sizes during this preparatory phase also led to the decision to form operational flying wings of two squadrons thus creating two operational wings within each administrative wing. All fighter squadrons were also made fully mobile, No. 3 on 3rd November being divided into three groups—No. 1 servicing party, No. 2 servicing party and rear party (headquarters, workshops, stores and transport). While No. 1 party was on the move to a forward airfield, the aircraft were maintained by No. 2 party which quickly followed the flying complement when it moved, relieving No. 1 party so that it could again advance. This arrangement ensured that the squadron could operate continuously when the land battle became fluid. Again, to ensure maximum operational capacity, squadron strength was established at eighteen Tomahawks plus seven in sealed reserve not to be employed without permission of the air officer commanding.

The period before 12th November 1941 was somewhat uneventful for No. 3 despite their forward location. Until 30th October their sorties comprised 34 as escort for reconnaissance aircraft, 10 as escort for bombers, 30 on shipping escort, 4 on interception duties, 9 on independent offensive patrol and 30 on offensive wing sweeps, and at no time were the Tomahawks engaged in combat. During early November operations consisted almost entirely of patrol and interception duties over Eighth Army units moving into position for the offensive, and again all eighty-one were uneventful. The squadron remained based at Sidi Haneish (LG-102) although most of the 198 sorties were made from Sidi Barrani (LG-110). No. 2 Operational Wing comprising No. 3 R.A.A.F. and No. 112 Squadrons, formed on 3rd November but did not operate as such during the preliminary phase. The elevation of Wing Commander Jeffrey to lead this wing necessitated the recall of Squadron Leader Rawlinson from No. 71 Operational Training Unit to command No. 3 Squadron.

No. 451 Squadron based at Sidi Barrani (LG-75) had begun its programme of reconnaissance specifically connected with the Eighth Army's requirements on 11th October, and between that date and 14th November⁹ flew 48 tactical-reconnaissance, 30 photographic-reconnaissance and 4 artillery-reconnaissance sorties with very commendable results, although two aircraft failed to return on 12th November. The squadron was still dependent on a majority of English and South African pilots but more R.A.A.F. "freshmen" pilots were arriving. On 16th October a new com-

and aggravated by the continued use of out-of-date defensive tactics due to army and navy pressure had tended to weaken the offensive spirit of the fighter pilots.

However, although Australians were particularly handicapped through lack of OTU experience they were by no means a weak link. Many were lost, and Sqn Ldr Caldwell would have been an exception in any company, but the text will provide frequent examples of other Australians who were by no means lacking in dash and offensive spirit.

⁹ The slightly differing dates employed here result from a functional separation of reconnaissance activity from the main RAF pattern of operations.

manding officer, Squadron Leader Williams,¹ took over from Squadron Leader Pope.

Although definite air superiority could not be claimed by 12th November, much had been accomplished, for the Axis supply position had deteriorated, enemy dispositions had been determined, and no real opposition had been met by British fighter sweeps. Accordingly with only six more days before the offensive began, Air Headquarters Western Desert began to move its units forward. Bomber squadrons were unaffected but Nos. 258 and 262 Fighter Wings advanced to Sidi Barrani on 12th November and again to Maddalena (LG's 122, 123, 124, 125) on 18th November without ceasing operations, one wing headquarters controlling all squadrons while the other was moving, and the squadron mobility scheme working well in practice. On 14th November arrangements for army cooperation were finalised when No. 208 Squadron was attached to the headquarters of XXX Corps and No. 451 to the headquarters of XIII Corps. Operations concurrently underwent a change of direction, bombing activity switching from rear areas to targets close behind the battlefield with the object of limiting the supplies immediately available to the enemy during the initial shock of the offensive.² Fighter operations were deliberately curtailed to deceive the enemy, only seventy-one offensive sorties being flown and the remaining 203 flights being devoted to cover troop movements. A special operation was staged, however, on 17th November designed to cause the maximum damage to German fighters immediately before the battle began, as it was anticipated that German dive bombers and Italian aircraft would present few difficulties in the absence of the Messerschmitt 109F. Blenheims, escorted by No. 2 Operational Wing, led a naval fighter squadron in an attack on Bir el Baheira landing ground to achieve this aim. The purpose of the bombing was three-fold for in addition to any direct damage, it indicated the exact position of the target to the strafing Hurricanes which followed at low level, and distracted the attention of the anti-aircraft crews from the new danger. This attack went well but unfortunately could not be repeated for shortly afterwards enemy fighters were withdrawn to Gazala out of R.A.F. fighter range, and timely withdrawal continued to keep them out of range. As a result the R.A.F. had to revert to the policy of fighter sweeps to destroy the Messerschmitts in the air.

In this week before the opening of the second British Libyan offensive, the Australian squadrons were relatively inactive. Including the operation against Bir el Baheira, No. 3 Squadron flew only thirty-six sorties without once meeting air opposition. No. 451 flew only three reconnaissance sorties during the last three days while No. 1 Air Ambulance Unit, now able to operate three DH-86 aircraft and one Lodestar attached from the South African Air Force, stood by for orders.

¹ W Cdr R. D. Williams, 39835 RAF, 28 Sqn RAF; comd 451 Sqn 1941-42, 74 OTU RAF 1942. Regular air force offr; of Bangor, Caernarvonshire, Wales; b. Upper Bangor, 7 Mar 1913.

² In the week prior to 18 Nov bombers flew 132 sorties against ports and bases, 127 against airfields and 30 against enemy positions and lines of communication.

The essence of the Eighth Army's plan was the destruction of German armoured vehicles. To achieve this the best British tanks were concentrated in XXX Corps, which was to open the offensive by striking towards Tobruk and seizing the ridges of Belhamed, Sidi Rezegh and Schifet el Adem, which dominate for some miles the Tobruk by-pass and the Trigh Capuzzo. In the expectation that the German armoured divisions could not ignore this threat, they would be drawn and engaged on ground of our own choosing. At an appropriate moment the Tobruk garrison was to break out and take the enemy in the rear. Meanwhile XIII Corps was to contain and isolate enemy positions on the frontier and then advance to assist XXX Corps, while light mobile forces from Giarabub and Siwa oases were to harass lines of communication behind the battle area and interfere with any enemy withdrawal westwards.

Fortune favoured the Eighth Army at the outset, for a very heavy rainstorm swept Cyrenaica during the night of 17th-18th November. This left enemy airfields water-logged and a proportion of the German tanks and motorised units immobile, while XXX Corps, operating inland and on the eastern fringe of the drenched area, could still carry out the original plan. Armoured cars crossed the Trigh el Abd and advanced to Gabr Saleh with no air and little ground opposition. At dawn XIII Corps units had likewise pushed through the frontier defences and solid progress on both sectors continued throughout 18th and 19th November. Advanced elements of the 7th Armoured Brigade had then reached the Sidi Rezegh area, while, on the eastern flank of XXX Corps, the 4th Armoured Brigade had made contact with the German *15th Panzer Division*. On the frontier XIII Corps was astride Debeua Ridge and the New Zealand Division had advanced along the Trigh el Abd to support the flank of the XXX Corps. The Royal Air Force gave full support during these two days, taking advantage of the absence of enemy air opposition to bomb the advanced landing grounds, while long-range fighters visited the rear airfields strafing any targets they could find. Short-range fighters policed the whole battlefield, No. 2 Operational Wing covering the XXX Corps' advance on 18th November without meeting the enemy. Two wing sweeps followed on the 19th as it was expected that enemy aircraft would resume operations if their airfields dried out. The sweeps themselves were not opposed but Flight Lieutenant Fischer, forced to return early with engine trouble, was intercepted in the frontier area by four Messerschmitts. He turned to join battle and destroyed one enemy machine before he himself was shot down. The enemy pilots continued to attack his aircraft on the ground but Fischer escaped with shrapnel wounds only. This action was fought near LG-132 to which No. 451 had just moved, and the Messerschmitts now proceeded to attack the dispersed Hurricanes, damaging three of them.³ This squadron had flown five tactical reconnaissance sorties over the Omars, Capuzzo and Gambut areas during these two days, reporting enemy movements

³ To enable operations to continue unchecked a flight of 237 Sqn which had been in reserve, was attached to 451.

westward along the Trigh Capuzzo; one aircraft had given timely warning to 4th Indian Division of the presence of enemy tanks. On 18th November, a Hurricane was shot down over Sidi Omar but the pilot, Lieutenant Andrew,⁴ returned next day on foot. No. 451 also made three flights from Tobruk over the Acroma-El Adem area to estimate possible dangers from that region which might interfere with the garrison's proposed break-out towards Bu Amud.

Serious enemy reaction became evident on 20th November when the two German armoured divisions came fully into contact with armoured brigades of XXX Corps west of Sidi Omar. The outlook for the offensive now appeared favourable for not only had the enemy armour thus been brought to battle, but XIII Corps was in a position to strike northwards behind Salum and Bardia, while the Tobruk garrison had also completed its preparations, and accordingly both these forces were ordered to advance on the 21st. General Rommel's reaction was prompt and vigorous, both the *15th* and *21st Panzer Divisions* disengaging and racing north to Sidi Rezegh where they found only the 7th Support Group and the 7th Armoured Brigade. The Germans attacked immediately to profit from their immediate superiority in numbers and armament, before other British armour could arrive. Shortly before dusk the 22nd Armoured Brigade reached Sidi Rezegh, and the British units, although reduced in strength, held on to their positions until the following evening when they were forced to retire to the south. The tank battle continued throughout 23rd November, and again the heavier German tanks were successful in weakening British units, so that any immediate prospects of a link-up between XXX Corps and the Tobruk garrison seemed remote. However, although plans had miscarried at Sidi Rezegh, XIII Corps had driven north behind the frontier positions, isolating Salum and Bardia, and the R.A.F. had redoubled its efforts to give decisive help in the ground struggle. On 20th November No. 3 flew twenty-two sorties as escort to bombers attacking targets on the battlefield and also joined with No. 112 Squadron in a successful sweep over the 7th Armoured Division, during which each squadron claimed two Me-110 aircraft destroyed. Operating alone on the following day No. 112 scored a further success when Sergeant Leu,⁵ Sergeant Carson⁶ and Flying Officer Jeffries between them destroyed two CR-42's near El Adem. These fighter sweeps became more vital as enemy air activity increased, because although it had been hoped to benefit from newly-installed radar facilities at Tobruk and Sidi Barrani, in practice these failed to give adequate early warning of enemy aircraft.

It so happened that the Axis fighters also adopted a system of fighter sweeps at this juncture, with the object of clearing the air for their dive

⁴ Maj W. G. Andrew, 103150 SAAF. 451 Sqn, 40 Sqn SAAF; comd 225 Sqn RAF. Student; of Bloemfontein, S Af; b. Graaf Reinett, Cape Province, S Af, 26 Feb 1920.

⁵ F-Lt R. M. Leu, DFM, 404178; 112 Sqn RAF. Jackaroo; of Beaudesert, Qld; b. Nelson, BC, Canada, 1 Feb 1915.

⁶ F-Lt K. F. Carson, 404233; 112 Sqn RAF. Bank clerk; of Brisbane; b. Childers, Qld, 30 Jun 1920.

bombers, and, although No. 3 flew two uneventful sweeps on 21st November, the following day it engaged in an air battle which did much to determine the subsequent course of events. During the morning of the 22nd the Australians were escorting Blenheim bombers near Bir el Gubi when at least fifteen Messerschmitts attacked as the bombers were making their run. The ensuing fight resolved itself into a contest between the superior speed of the Messerschmitt and the manoeuvrability of the Tomahawk and went slightly in favour of the former, two Germans and three Australians being shot down. The same afternoon unencumbered with bombers, Nos. 3 and 112 met twenty Messerschmitts to the south-east of El Adem and a straightforward air battle for fighter superiority developed. The Germans again had the advantage of speed, climb and ceiling, so after some preliminary and wary manoeuvring, both formations fell into defensive circles, with the Germans above the Tomahawks. The circles flew round and round, individuals pulling out as opportunity offered to attack any of the opposing circle momentarily unprotected, but in effect a deadlock ensued as neither side could break the other. The evening closed in until it was hardly possible to see the enemy, and finally the Germans, who were farthest from their bases, flew off westwards, and the Tomahawks landed at adjacent landing grounds returning to their own base the next morning.

In spite of inferior machines, No. 2 Operational Wing had held its own, and the German Air Force never challenged our fighter force in straightforward combat again during the campaign, but resorted instead to raider tactics with small numbers of aircraft. Far reaching as were the effects of this engagement in determining air superiority, however, the Australian losses were heavy. The wing destroyed three Messerschmitts and damaged several more, but from No. 3 alone six pilots were shot down although Wing Commander Jeffrey and Sergeant Simes⁷ subsequently rejoined their unit, which, having lost nine aircraft in these two engagements, was unable to operate further until 24th November. No. 112, of whose nine pilots engaged six were Australian, lost only one aircraft, but here again the pilots found it necessary to spend the night on advanced landing grounds. Only Pilot Officer Bartle,⁸ who was credited with one Messerschmitt, flew directly to his base. Sergeant Burney,⁹ the airman temporarily missing, force-landed near enemy armoured vehicles but escaped in the dusk and reached the 4th Indian Division after walking thirty miles across the desert.

During these four days of the battle for Sidi Rezegh, No. 451 had continued its unspectacular task of fulfilling the reconnaissance requirements of XIII Corps around Halfaya-Salum-Capuzzo, extending later to Gambut as the New Zealand Division pushed west along the Trigh

⁷ Sgt R. H. Simes, DFM, 402259; 3 Sqn. Grocer; of Tenterfield, NSW; b. Tenterfield, 28 Oct 1919. Killed in action 9 Jan 1942.

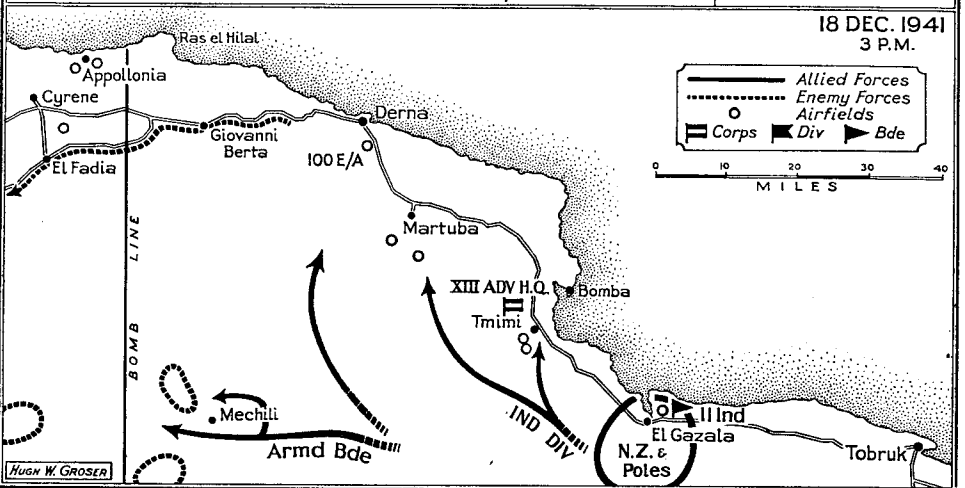
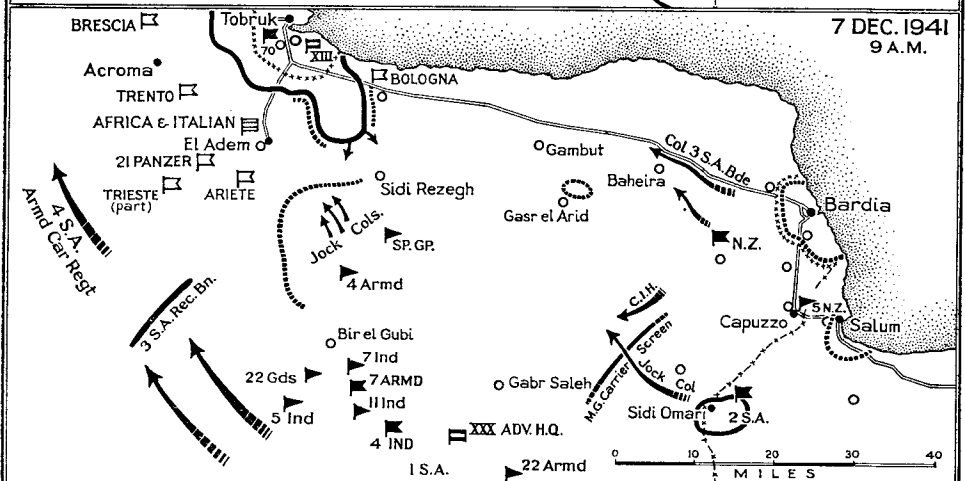
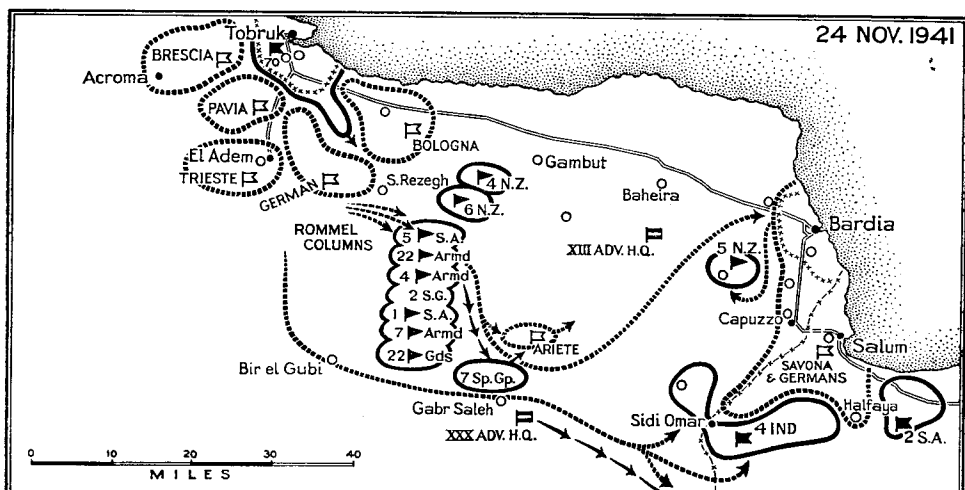
⁸ Sqn Ldr J. P. Bartle, DFC, 406171. 112 Sqn RAF; comd 1 Air Ambulance Unit 1942, 450 Sqn 1943. Stock and station agent; of Mt Hawthorn, WA; b. Coolgardie, WA, 6 Jun 1917.

⁹ P-O H. G. Burney, 402343; 112 Sqn RAF. Share broker's clerk; of Croydon, NSW; b. Croydon, 6 Dec 1915. Killed in action 30 May 1942.

Capuzzo.¹ On 23rd November, when the headquarters of XIII Corps moved forward to Bir el Hariga, the advanced party of No. 451 set out for Gasr el Arid. Unfortunately the enemy was still active between Marsa el Cheteita and Gambut, and the army liaison officer with all his codes was captured, though the main party delayed by a puncture had meanwhile fallen in with New Zealand troops and was safely diverted to Sidi Azeiz. The loss of these army-cooperation codes was more than ordinarily serious, for later, advanced corps headquarters became separated from No. 451 and communication was possible only by radio, although a new emergency code was prepared which sufficed for immediate needs. During this time the aircrews at Sidi Omar were ignorant of what had happened and when four Hurricanes flew to Gasr el Arid at first light on 24th November they found it unoccupied but were met by hostile fire in the vicinity. Later that morning Williams again flew to Gasr el Arid, and, finding the position unchanged, landed in the desert near the headquarters of XIII Corps to discover the reason. He was then able to lead his squadron to Sidi Azeiz and operations were resumed from there.

By the evening of the 23rd the plan for CRUSADER had gone awry and all hope of a quick success against the German armoured divisions had gone. The tank strength of XXX Corps was considerably reduced, while the enemy quickly salvaging and repairing his own armoured vehicles, and employing many transports captured around Sidi Rezegh, was undoubtedly stronger. Rommel, with his characteristic preference for bold and even reckless action, decided on a counter-stroke, and on the 24th gathered the bulk of his tanks and sent them swiftly down the Trigh el Abd towards Bir Sheferzen to destroy Eighth Army dumps and cut lines of communication leading north to the Trigh Capuzzo. Advanced and rear headquarters of XXX Corps were overrun and at 4 p.m. that day the German thrust crossed the wire barrier south of Bir Sheferzen and swung north-east to attack British supply columns. In a few hours the whole battle area was thrown into confusion, and air support was urgently demanded to check the enemy. As Rommel was employing a large percentage of captured British vehicles and both enemy and Eighth Army columns were moving eastwards at full speed it was singularly difficult either on the ground or in the air to determine which were hostile; and bombing that day did not appreciably interfere with enemy movement. Early in the afternoon No. 2 Operational Wing escorted Maryland bombers attacking El Adem where the raid had originated, but during the actual stampede No. 3 was called on only to intercept six enemy aircraft reported to be approaching LG-122 at Maddalena to which by nightfall all forward R.A.F. squadrons had been recalled, the latecomers landing on a flare-path improvised with hurricane lamps. In all some 175 aircraft congregated at Maddalena and the German column swept by on its drive into Egypt only ten miles to the northwards thus missing an incomparable opportunity of wrecking R.A.F. fighter strength.

¹ During 1942 this division was restyled 2nd Div NZEF.



Phases of the Second Libyan Campaign.

On the morning of 25th November the German columns took advantage of the confusion created during the previous afternoon by dividing into compact groups both east and west of the frontier wire and damaging whatever lay in their path. Enemy tanks passed within five miles of No. 451 at LG-132 (Sidi Omar) and the main squadron party retired to an airfield twenty-two miles east of Maddalena although the advanced flying party remained located at Sidi Azeiz. Meanwhile, both on land and in the air, counter-measures were in operation. Mobile columns harassed the flanks of the enemy columns which were also attacked by all available bombers and fighters. No. 3 was called on twice early on the 25th to perform tactical reconnaissances of enemy movements and then with No. 112 the Australians strafed at low level the main German concentration south of Sidi Omar. This attack appeared very successful in damaging enemy vehicles, but in the face of ground fire was relatively costly. One pilot crash-landed and escaped with the personnel of No. 451 evacuating Sidi Omar airfield, a second crashed and was killed, while Flying Officer Jewell was forced down between two columns of enemy transport vehicles. He hid in a hole but was later captured by a small detachment of Germans who asked the way to Sidi Omar. Jewell misdirected them and two hours later on the approach of a car containing New Zealand troops he seized his opportunity and leapt from the German car which went off at high speed.

The same afternoon Jeffrey led Nos. 3 and 112 in an offensive sweep near Sidi Rezegh where New Zealand brigades from XIII Corps were approaching Belhamed in an attempt to aid XXX Corps (then regrouping) and cause dislocation of Rommel's plans. In the air the Germans reacted violently to this new threat and when, at 3.15 p.m., No. 2 Operational Wing arrived, they found Ju-87's, with fighter escort, bombing from 6,000 feet, Me-110's, also escorted, bombing from 1,300 feet and a similar formation at 10,000 feet, with a top cover of German and Italian fighters. The whole enemy force amounted to about seventy aircraft. While No. 3 dived to attack the Me-110's, which had begun to scatter, No. 112 engaged the enemy fighters and, amid scenes of wild enthusiasm on the ground, ten enemy aircraft were destroyed, three probably destroyed and eight damaged.² No. 3 naturally had greater opportunity of personal success in attacking the bombers, and their claim amounted to seven destroyed, one probable and eight damaged, for the loss of one Tomahawk, thus brilliantly avenging their numerical reverse on 22nd November.

One enemy column began to thrust northwards towards XIII Corps during the afternoon of 25th November, and Hurricanes of No. 451, reporting the column's movement, were engaged on nine sorties that day. Despite heavy air attacks it pressed on and leaguered that night within five miles of Bir el Hariga where the headquarters of XIII Corps was established. The next day it advanced to within a mile of Bir el Hariga but then withdrew to the south-east to lie between Sidi Azeiz and Capuzzo.

² This battle was witnessed not only by the New Zealand troops but by advanced posts of the Tobruk garrison.

At Sidi Azeiz the advanced party of No. 451 was taken into the armed camp established by the 5th New Zealand Brigade, the pilots sleeping beside their machines. The expected attack came early on the morning of the 27th and part of the Australian maintenance party was overrun and captured,³ but the four Hurricanes took off in the dark without any kind of flare path in an attempt to observe and report progress to the New Zealand troops.

Despite this further enemy thrust, General Auchinleck determined to continue with his plans, and, in an Order of the Day, instructed all units to attack and pursue the enemy raiding parties, which indeed had already passed the peak of their tactical initiative, the bulk of German tanks passing into Bardia on 26th November. Meanwhile the 4th and 6th New Zealand Brigades, encouraged by the air victory of the 25th, had, after bitter fighting, captured Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh on successive days and made contact with the Tobruk garrison which had itself advanced to Ed Duda. Once more German communications were endangered, and so, on the 27th, both sides converged on Sidi Rezegh, the British to strengthen the link made with Tobruk and contain German armour to the eastwards—where without supplies it must eventually become inactive—and the Germans to drive a wedge once more between Tobruk and the Eighth Army. Throughout these two days the R.A.F. maintained a heavy assault on German forces, but No. 3's share was relatively small, although on a wing sweep during the morning of the 26th one Messerschmitt 109 was shot down by Sergeant Cameron.

During 28th November a narrow corridor was opened between Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk along which after nightfall passed the headquarters of XIII Corps. But even while the valley between Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh ridges was being cleared of the enemy, the 7th British Armoured Division, which attempted to oppose the advance of two similar German divisions, suffered heavy losses. Beginning on the 29th the infantry at Sidi Rezegh accordingly had to face heavy German attacks against which they had no counter. The New Zealanders held tenaciously to their positions all that day, but Sidi Rezegh fell on the 30th and Belhamed on 1st December, the Tobruk garrison again being isolated.

This second Battle of Sidi Rezegh entailed ceaseless operations for No. 451, first in giving continuous accurate reports of enemy progress towards the ridges, and then, when it passed with XIII Corps into Tobruk, in covering the battleground itself. Twenty-six sorties were flown in these four days, the squadron receiving special commendation for its tireless and effective reconnaissance. The combatant squadrons essayed to offset the power of the German armour by pressure from the air. On 28th November No. 3 escorted Blenheims to bomb a German column driving west from Gasr el Arid and the next day the Tomahawks swept the Sidi Rezegh area, though without result. No. 2 Operational Wing scored

³ Two offrs, 10 airmen and 4 attached army rankers were captured and taken to Bardia. Maj A. D. Molloy and Capt A. P. Fleming of 1 (Aust) Air Support Control were also captured but effected a daring escape after being held for several days.

one of its spectacular successes on the 30th, however, when the morning offensive sweep discovered fifteen Ju-87's escorted by a force of twenty-five Italian and German fighters approaching to attack the New Zealanders at Sidi Rezegh. The enemy jettisoned their bombs as the Australians dived to attack while No. 112 stayed up as top cover. In a brisk running fight No. 3 claimed eight enemy machines destroyed and twelve damaged, while No. 112 also destroyed three Italian fighters, Leu, one of the most pugnacious of the many Australians on that squadron, shooting down a G-50. Two Tomahawks of No. 3 returned safely but badly damaged, and Cameron was shot down after a hectic dog-fight. He managed to crash-land unhurt and was seen by Jeffrey who landed and, abandoning his parachute, stowed Cameron (easily the biggest man on the squadron) into the cockpit with him and returned to base. The total of enemy aircraft claimed by No. 3 since it first began operations had now reached 106 but the heavy fighting during November had cost 16 Tomahawks and 10 pilots. Thus after four interception sorties on 1st December, during one of which Sergeant Wilson shot down a Ju-88, the squadron stood down until replacement pilots and machines could be obtained.

Despite the failure for the second time to secure the Sidi Rezegh positions, General Auchinleck still considered that the offensive might yet succeed, so by regrouping and assimilating some fresh troops arriving from Egypt he prepared to attack El Adem, whose possession would confer the same advantages as Sidi Rezegh. Rommel, however, apparently divined this move and withdrew all units except garrison troops previously maintained east of Belhamed and laid both his armoured divisions in front of El Adem and Sidi Rezegh. Nevertheless XIII Corps was ordered on 7th December to attack from Tobruk and by the end of the next day had cleared all enemy forces from the south-east, and that same day the Germans began a general withdrawal towards Gazala. Throughout this week of tension leading to the final relief of Tobruk the Hurricanes of No. 451 were busy reporting the movement of enemy troops, in particular the German preparations for an attack on Ed Duda on 4th December. These flights greatly aided XIII Corps in deploying its forces within the Tobruk perimeter, which had grown to forty-four miles, and the Hurricanes also cooperated with artillery batteries in this sector.

No. 3 did not operate during this week, but the temporary alignment of Nos. 112 and 250 Squadrons as an operational wing brought together most of the R.A.A.F. pilots outside No. 3. Two notable air victories were won by this wing, the first on 4th December when at least six enemy aircraft from a large formation of Ju-87's and fighters were destroyed between El Adem and Sidi Rezegh, and the other the next day, again near El Adem. On this latter occasion Caldwell was leading No. 250 with No. 112 as top cover when forty Ju-87's and some fifteen fighters were met fifteen miles south of El Adem.⁴ As on previous occasions No. 112 engaged enemy fighters while No. 250 dived to destroy the vulnerable

⁴ According to 250 Sqn. 112 Sqn reported 30 bombers and 30 fighters.



(General Press, London)

On 5th February 1942, at R.A.F. Station Skellingthorpe, a tractor takes bomb trolleys to a Hampden of No. 50 Squadron R.A.F., a unit in which many Australian aircrew served.



(General Press, London)

A heavily-laden Hampden of No. 50 Squadron R.A.F. prepares to move down the runway to take part in a raid on Hamburg, 5th February 1942.



(R.A.A.F.)

A Hampden of No. 455 Squadron standing in front of a Wellington bomber early in 1942. Portion of a Whitley bomber may be seen behind the Wellington's starboard wing. These three types formed the backbone of Bomber Command during 1939-42.



(R.A.A.F.)

At Leuchars (Coastal Command) airfield in Scotland a crew of No. 455 Squadron leaves their Hampden torpedo bomber after completing a test flight. Left to right: Sgt J. Mellor (R.A.F.); F-Sgt E. M. H. Knyvett; F-O W. Austin (captain); F-Sgt C. F. Marshall.

Stukas. Australian claims were very high, Flight Lieutenant Caldwell himself shooting down 5 Ju-87's, Sergeant Cable⁵ 2, Sergeant Whittle 2 and one probable, and Pilot Officer Twemlow⁶ 1 and 2 probables out of the total squadron score of 11 destroyed and 3 probably destroyed. One Australian and 3 other pilots failed to return from No. 250 but a further 9 casualties were inflicted on the enemy by No. 112. Leu shot down a Macchi 200 and Bartle a Ju-87 and a G-50, the last-named being chased at low level through a curtain of enemy ground fire before it was destroyed. Although poorly defended, the Stukas put up a considerable return fire during the battle; and Caldwell's phenomenal success was largely due to the cold determination with which he always pressed in close, and his intelligent gunnery sense. Extracts from his combat report reveal these characteristics:

I was leading the formation of two squadrons, 112 acting as top cover to 250 Squadron to patrol a line approximately 10 miles west of El Gubi and had just reached this position at 1140 hours when I received R/T warning that a large enemy formation was approaching from the north-west at our own height. Both squadrons climbed immediately and within a minute the enemy formation consisting of Ju-87's with fighter escort was sighted on our starboard side 250 sqn went into line astern behind me and as 112 sqn engaged the escorting enemy fighters, we attacked the Ju-87's from the rear quarter At . . . 300 yards I opened fire with all my guns at the leader of one of the rear sections of three, allowing too little deflection, and hit No. 2 and No. 3 one of which burst into flames immediately, the other going down smoking and went into flames after losing about 1000 feet. I then attacked the leader of the rear section . . . from below and behind, opening fire with all guns at very close range. The enemy aircraft turned over and dived steeply down with the root of the starboard wing in flames . . . [at another Stuka I] opened fire again at close range, the enemy caught fire . . . and crashed in flames near some dispersed mechanised transport . . . I was able to pull up under the belly of the one at the rear holding the burst until very close range. The enemy aircraft dived gently straight ahead streaming smoke, caught fire and then dived into the ground

The Axis withdrawal, begun on 9th December and continuing through the next few days until positions extending from Gazala to the Trigh el Abd were reached, was in no sense a disorganised retreat, and was effectively covered by armoured rearguards. XIII Corps was ordered to pursue the enemy while XXX Corps turned back to reduce the enemy garrisons in Bardia and Salum. This reorganisation and increasing supply difficulties delayed any serious pressure against the Gazala positions until 12th December when, while infantry maintained a steady frontal offensive, the 4th Armoured Brigade began to mass round the enemy's southern flank. Before this threat was fully effective, Rommel on the 16th appreciated the inherent danger and withdrew all his forces, falling back rapidly to the coast road south of Benghazi. The struggle for eastern Cyrenaica was now over but pursuit was not easy as British transport resources were already fully strained. For a week after the abandoning of Gazala there

⁵ F-Lt W. O. Cable, DFC, 404495; 450 Sqn, 250 Sqn RAF, 452 and 457 Sqn. Constructional engineer; of Earlwood, NSW; b. Sydney, 16 Feb 1915.

⁶ F-Lt F. M. Twemlow, DFC, 402684; 250 Sqn RAF. Bank clerk; of Strathfield, NSW; b. Randwick, NSW, 21 Mar 1918.

was no serious engagement. As the battle moved westwards the British air units made every effort to keep pace with the advance, fighter wings moving to El Adem as early as 12th December. Bomber support, however, fell away in intensity with increasing distances from base, the necessity to withdraw squadrons for refit and rest, diversion to other tasks and the consistently intractable problem in a fluid campaign to distinguish friend from foe with sufficient accuracy to allow large-scale bombing in forward areas. Frequently the light bombers stood by for long periods waiting for orders which did not arrive, and this inaction proved disappointing to the seventy Australians scattered among four Blenheim squadrons of No. 270 Wing. Total bomber sorties between 9th and 16th December were only 151 although the following week they rose to 278, while fighter effort remained as high as before but changes in emphasis occurred to meet existing conditions. During the first week of the German withdrawal 579 offensive sorties were flown, but enemy attacks against our forward units had decreased so markedly by the 16th that only 265 sorties of this nature were made in the second week. On the other hand the number of strafing sorties increased from forty in the first week to 205 in the second, and bomber-escort flights from fifty to 198. Local-defence sorties fell from 224 to 167, further evidence of declining enemy efforts.

Before it was withdrawn on 16th December to re-equip with Kittyhawk fighters, its sixth aircraft type in fifteen months, No. 3 flew 108 sorties on sweeps and patrols over XIII Corps with the object of grinding down the enemy fighter force. Four combats resulted, the first early on 9th December when the Australians were surprised by six Me-109's south of El Adem and in a confused dog-fight three Tomahawks and one Messerschmitt were shot down, although Cameron, who had been forced to land west of El Adem, turned up safely three days later. During the afternoon of the 12th, No. 3 swept the forward area between Gazala and Bir Hacheim destroying one Me-110 and probably destroying one Ju-88 for the loss of one Tomahawk which collided with another aircraft of the formation.

The next day fighters were especially active to prevent interference with the flanking movement of the 4th Armoured Brigade and No. 2 Operational Wing intercepted an enemy formation over Tmimi. No. 3 speedily shot down three fighters and also a lone Ju-88 discovered on the return flight, but No. 112 fared badly, suffering damage to several aircraft and the loss of one Australian. On the morning of the 14th No. 3 again had somewhat the worse of an indecisive engagement with Stukas and eight Me-109's, losing two Tomahawks while only one Ju-87 was claimed.

Although this squadron ceased operating on 16th December Australians on other squadrons continued to fight with varying success. Already on the 9th Flying Officer Waddy⁷ of No. 250 had shared in the destruction

⁷ Gp Capt J. L. Waddy, DFC, 402685. 250 and 260 Sqns RAF, 4 Sqn SAAF, 92 Sqn RAF; comd 80 Sqn 1944-45; CAF Mbr Air Bd since 1950. Clerk; of Rose Bay, NSW; b. Sydney, 10 Dec 1914.

of an Me-109 and while the same squadron was escorting Blenheims back from an attack on Derna, Pilot Officer Nitschke,⁸ Twemlow and Whittle were hotly engaged in a determined battle with six Me-109's and twelve Macchi 202's, repulsing the enemy aircraft of which two were seen to crash.⁹ On the 20th while Blenheims were bombing the Benghazi-Tocra road, No. 250 again beat off twelve Messerschmitts, Caldwell and Waddy each claiming one destroyed and Sergeant Coward a probable, while Nitschke failed to return. On the same day Burney of No. 112 shot down a Ju-88, though the squadron lost two Australians on another sortie that afternoon. Both Nos. 112 and 250 participated on 22nd December in a strafing attack on Magrun airfield, severely damaging Ju-52 transport aircraft on the ground while Twemlow shot down a Stuka which he found preparing to land. Over Agedabia on the last day of this period Pilot Officer Sands¹ of No. 112 claimed an Me-109.

As the enemy fell back from El Adem, No. 451 continued to furnish intelligence of the changing situation, beginning on 10th December to photograph the gun positions and other prepared defences of the Gazala line where Rommel was expected to make a stand. Extensive reconnaissance was required in support of the 4th Armoured Brigade, and in four days ending on the 15th, twenty-four tactical reconnaissance sorties were flown from Tobruk and Acroma, ranging the desert as far west as Mechili. On the latter date No. 451 was informed that it would shortly transfer to operate with XXX Corps, but further sorties were flown until the squadron went to an airfield in the Maddalena group on 18th December. The squadron's departure was the occasion of a special message of congratulation from XIII Corps; between 18th November and 18th December No. 451 had flown 128 tactical and photographic sorties and four on artillery cooperation, a role which brought it little limelight but which was of considerable importance to the ground offensive.

As the pursuit of the main enemy forces passed Benghazi it became urgently necessary to reduce the Axis garrisons athwart the coast road at Bardia, Salum and Halfaya, and as their airfield was remote from these positions, No. 451 returned on 24th December to their old advanced base at Sidi Azeiz. A few flights were made to locate small ships and submarines thought to be running supplies to the hard-pressed garrisons, but the squadron's main task was tactical reconnaissance and artillery cooperation. There was no air opposition and anti-aircraft fire was negligible so the Hurricanes were able to remain over the targets at low altitude for long periods. Despite difficulty in air-to-ground radio communications, artillery cooperation produced very satisfactory results. Gun pits were regularly and successfully engaged, hits on Bardia pier were registered on the 28th and two days later a dump was destroyed and a

⁸ P-O R. H. Nitschke, 407180; 250 Sqn RAF. Jackaroo; of St Peters, SA; b. Adelaide, 18 Jul 1915. Killed in action 20 Dec 1941.

⁹ The credit for this does not seem to have been allocated.

¹ Sqn Ldr K. R. Sands, DFC, 406265. 112 Sqn RAF; comd 450 Sqn 1943-44. Clerk; of West Perth, WA; b. Perth, 15 Jul 1917.

ship sunk by controlled artillery fire. In all, nineteen sorties of this type were flown before the fall of Bardia on 2nd January 1942. Some 385 bomber sorties were flown against the fortress during this period, the opportunity being taken to give "freshmen" crews valuable experience against an ill-defended target, and the results of these attacks were carefully noted by No. 451 which devoted twenty flights to tactical and two to photographic reconnaissance.

The capture of Bardia meant the release of the squadron personnel captured at Sidi Azeiz on 27th November, although the three officers had been evacuated to Italy in a submarine. The released men had been treated well, but, mainly because of a general shortage of supplies, had had little food and were very weak. Salum and Halfaya continued to resist, so pilots of No. 451 resumed daily reconnaissance of the two areas and began artillery cooperation again on 5th January. Salum fell by the morning of the 12th without bombardment from the air, but 281 bomber sorties were made against Halfaya before it capitulated on the 17th. During these latter two sieges No. 451 made 68 flights: 29 tactical, 9 photographic and 30 artillery sorties. The squadron was now withdrawn from the Western Desert and proceeded later in the month to Rayak in Syria for non-operational duties.

After leaving Gazala on 16th December Rommel retreated swiftly to Agedabia, keeping ahead of the pursuing XIII Corps until the 23rd. The R.A.F. made great efforts to keep up with the advance, one maintenance party arriving at Mechili airfield as the last Germans were leaving, stores and petrol arriving the next day, so that within twenty-four hours four squadrons were based there. Two days before Benghazi fell, Msus was cleared of obstructions and No. 258 Wing of fighters brought forward immediately.

Despite these efforts, however, there was an inevitable decline in effectiveness of air support, for continuous operations had so reduced serviceability that four squadrons could now only provide one sweep in wing strength instead of two as formerly. Bombers were diverted to targets in Greece and Crete as well as eastern Cyrenaica, while the old difficulty of establishing a bomb line still remained. No. 3 which had been collecting and servicing its Kittyhawks, did not reach Msus until 27th December. Now commanded by Squadron Leader Chapman,² it resumed operations the following morning when, with the few serviceable Tomahawks of Nos. 112 and 250, it made a reconnaissance sweep between Agheila and Marsa Brega, reporting enemy armoured units south-east of Agedabia and west and north of Ridotta el Gtafia. Later that day the same squadrons covered a British column moving towards Agedabia, and on 29th December the 22nd Armoured Brigade probed the enemy positions although it was forced to retire the next day when engaged by superior forces. During these two days No. 3 flew four assignments each of

² Gp. Capt D. R. Chapman, 80. Dep Dir Training RAAF HQ 1939-40; comd 23 Sqn 1940-41, 3 Sqn 1941-42, 451 Sqn 1942-43, 4 SFTS 1944-45, 84 Wing 1945. Regular air force offr; of Renmark, SA; b. Tenterfield, NSW, 8 Sep 1912.

twelve sorties, mingling troop protection with bomber escort and reconnaissance, but no enemy aircraft were seen. Twice on 31st December the Agedabia-Gtafia-Haseiat area was patrolled, and, though during the afternoon a half-hearted attack was made by Messerschmitts on the accompanying South African squadrons, the Australians were not engaged.

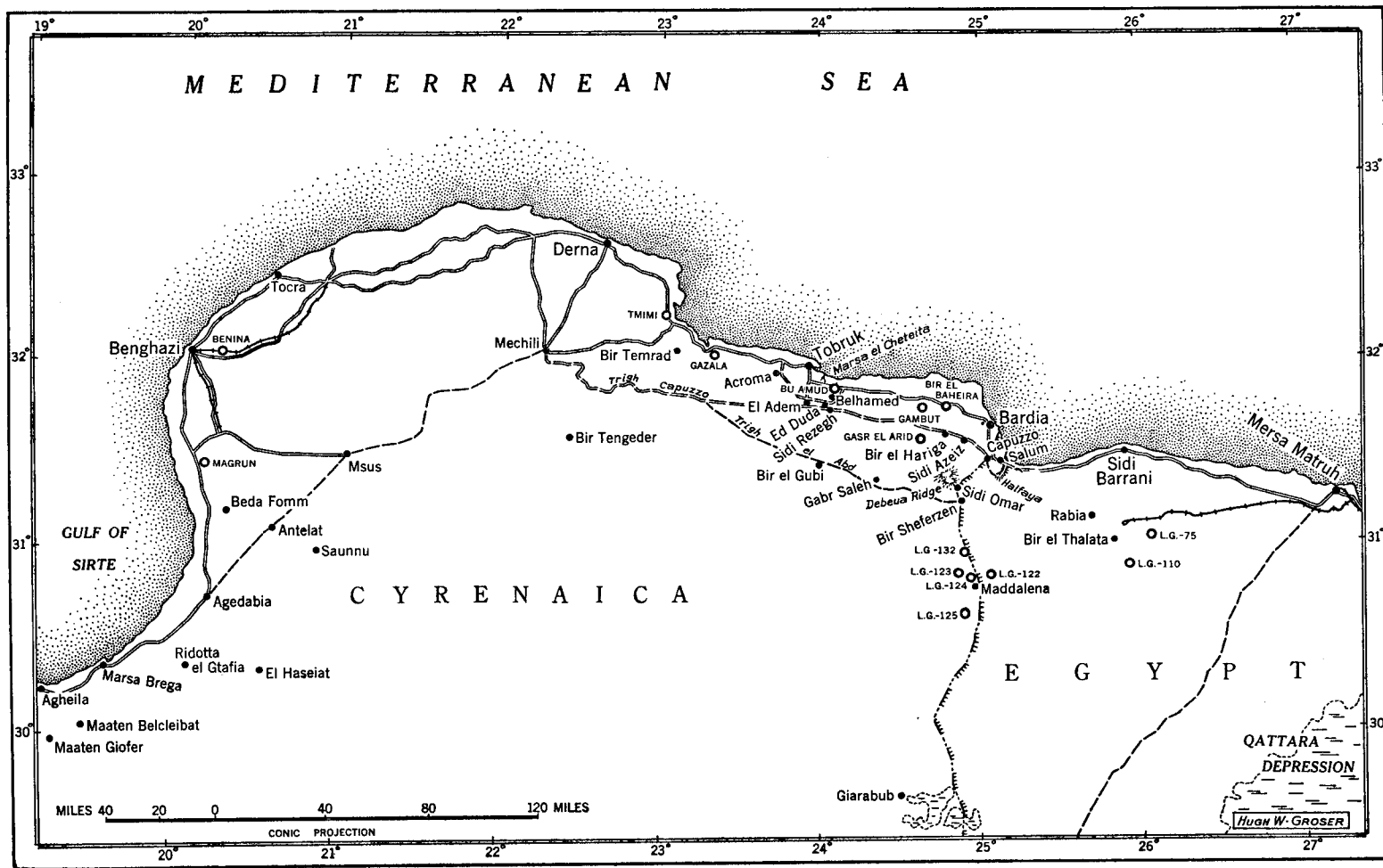
Being the only fighter squadron at full strength No. 3 at this period was detailed for all sweeps, the complement being found from the other four squadrons of No. 258 Wing, and two similar sweeps over Agedabia followed on 1st January. The morning sweep passed without incident, but in the afternoon the pilots were at last able to try their Kittyhawks in combat. A deadlock had ensued on the ground since 30th December, but now sixteen Ju-87's with six attendant Me-109's were seen about to bomb British troops fifteen miles east of Agedabia. The enemy fighters made little attempt to intercept and climbed above cloud, while the Stukas, after jettisoning their bombs, crowded into a defensive circle at 200 feet. This manoeuvre probably saved them from worse losses, but, as it was, Fischer, Flying Officers Spence³ and Barr⁴ each claimed one Ju-87 destroyed and others were damaged before they broke away. The most successful pilot, however, was Sergeant Cameron who reported on return:

As most of the formation appeared to be about to attack the bombers, I endeavoured to lead Blue section into the Messerschmitts and followed these with several Kittyhawks after me. When I emerged from the cloud, they were circling above and as I appeared to be alone, I decided to break off and jump them from above. I came back through the clouds, warned the Kittyhawks . . . then went away and climbed to 12,000 feet. When I came back I could see nothing above or below cloud so went to Agedabia to intercept them on their way home. Here the cloud base was irregular at about 3,000 feet, and after I had done a couple of circuits, three Me-109's turned up and prepared to land on Agedabia West. I let them get settled down and then dived on one, but had to alter my attack and dive on another one head-on. I had a long burst at it and saw it flick upside down as it went under me. This was at 1,000 feet. The others by this time had their wheels down so I stalked the rear one who was only about 500 feet. After only a short burst he dropped his nose and crashed. I then attacked the other from astern, saw him waver as I fired, but immediately had to climb to avoid some Stukas that were now coming in. Icing conditions were severe in the cloud, my ring sight being thickly crusted and the motor showing signs of ice in the carburettor. I attacked a line of 5 or 6 Stukas just about to land and saw the rear one slide away as I shot at it then went for the leader. He kept ahead on a straight glide into the desert while the main group turned left and landed. I flew in and out of cloud for some time, but as two of my guns were stopped and the reflector sight useless, I thought it unwise to remain longer.

Cameron's personal score was one Ju-87 and one Me-109 destroyed and one probable, the total squadron tally gave great satisfaction, and the Kittyhawk had fully justified itself. The next six days were uneventful, however; although sixty-eight sorties were flown on similar sweeps, no further enemy opposition was met.

³ W Cdr L. T. Spence, DFC, 270839. 3 Sqn; comd 452 Sqn 1944, 8 OTU 1945, 77 Sqn Korea 1950. Bank clerk; of Longreach, Qld; b. Bundaberg, Qld, 4 Apr 1917. Killed in action, Korea, 9 Sep 1950.

⁴ W Cdr A. W. Barr, MC, DFC, 250774. Comd 3 Sqn 1942, 2 OTU 1945. Accountant; of Windsor, Vic; b. Wellington, NZ, 10 Dec 1915.



On 6th January 1942 before any heavy frontal assault could be made on the enemy positions around Agedabia, Rommel commenced a withdrawal. Aided by sandstorms, protective minefields and stubborn rear-guard sections, the Axis forces retired in perfect order and, by the 12th, were holding strong positions extending from Maaten Giofer, ten miles south of Agheila, eastwards to Maaten Belcleibat and north to the coast. The Royal Air Force had been able to fly only a restricted number of bomber sorties, and little real damage resulted. Bad weather prevented fighters from operating during four days of this withdrawal, but whenever possible they were dispatched to patrol enemy sectors. While other squadrons were re-arming, No. 3 again took the principal part in offensive operations, meeting with one resounding victory on 8th January and then a series of minor defeats. The Kittyhawks on that day found thirty-five Italian aircraft and eight Me-109's about to strafe units of XIII Corps advancing south-east of Agedabia, and in a series of dog-fights claimed seven aircraft destroyed, and four probably destroyed, for the loss of one Kittyhawk. The next afternoon, while escorting Blenheims to bomb Marsa Brega, a swift dive attack by a lone Me-109 shot down one Kittyhawk and damaged another; on the 11th again in company with Blenheims, the Australians beat off a determined enemy attack but themselves lost three aircraft. Barr returned three days later and reported that after shooting down an Me-109 and a G-50 he went down low to pick up a Kittyhawk pilot who had crash landed, when he himself was shot down. The other missing pilots were Cameron and Flying Officer Jones⁵ who were both captured by the enemy and taken to Tripoli. Twice before Cameron had managed to rejoin the squadron after being shot down, but although he and Jones escaped from Tripoli on 17th January and began to walk eastwards they were eventually betrayed by Arabs on the 22nd, recaptured, and finally imprisoned in Italy. Much later, in September 1943, Jones escaped from a train in northern Italy, made his own way into Switzerland and finally, in July 1944, crossed into France to join the French Forces of the Interior. About the same date, when, after the capitulation of Italy, prisoners of war were being transferred to Germany, Cameron also jumped from a prisoners' train, but was again apprehended after one day in hiding.

The Kittyhawks next operated on the afternoon of 13th January after the Australians had moved forward to Antelat, and though a sweep over Agheila itself provoked no reaction, when nearing home one section which was investigating a crashed aircraft was caught unawares by four Me-109's. Flying Officer Schaeffer's⁶ Kittyhawk was holed and he landed out of petrol near Msus, but was able to repair the damage and fly to Antelat the following day. The 14th and 15th January passed without incident although the sweeps were maintained, and then No. 3 ceased operations for a week, partly because of bad weather, and partly to restore serviceability,

⁵ Sqn Ldr R. S. Jones, 290726; 3 Sqn. Livestock salesman; of Peppermint Grove, WA; b. Henley Beach, SA, 18 Aug 1916.

⁶ Sqn Ldr H. H. Schaeffer, 260835. 3, 77 and 86 Sqns. Company secretary; of Grafton, NSW; b. Grafton, 21 Sep 1916.

while other squadrons which had already rested and re-equipped took over its responsibilities. With the ground situation remaining static until the 21st, nothing of note occurred during the operations of Australians on R.A.F. squadrons, although Caldwell whose hard, eager efficiency had quickly revealed itself, was transferred to command No. 112 Squadron on 13th January.

Many of the original aims of the second Libyan offensive had now been realised, with the enemy driven from Cyrenaica, Tobruk relieved, greater freedom for convoys in the eastern Mediterranean, the immediate threat to Egypt removed, and British prestige heightened in the Middle East. But unless the gains made could be consolidated it was unlikely that these advantages would be enjoyed for long. Unless Agheila, one of the strongest defensive positions in Libya, were taken, a swing of the pendulum of desert warfare could sweep the Eighth Army helplessly back into Egypt, and to take Agheila the British had first to win a race with the enemy for supplies and reinforcements. By mid-January it was clear that there was little prospect of a British attack on Agheila for some weeks, because supply difficulties and the increasing diversion of forces to the Far East made the strengthening of the forward area a slow process. The logistical problem of the enemy, however, had been greatly eased by the arrival in Sicily of the German *Second Air Fleet* under Field Marshal Kesselring. This new force by systematically raiding Malta, made it impossible for naval and air units based there to interfere as effectively as before with Axis supply convoys crossing the central Mediterranean.⁷

The brief lull at Agheila allowed great consolidation of Axis forces and on 21st January Rommel sent out three reconnaissance columns towards Agedabia to test the strength of the Eighth Army. These columns with a spearhead of only thirty-three tanks were nevertheless too strong to be repulsed and XIII Corps fell back on the 22nd to the line Agedabia-El Haseiat. This time it was the British airfields which were waterlogged and Axis aircraft operating from the lighter soil of Tripolitania were unopposed on the first day of the enemy advance. On the 22nd, however, light bombers began to strike at Axis camps, strong-points and lines of communication while Wellingtons attempted to destroy the main enemy petrol dump. Fighters covered the withdrawal of XIII Corps and during a noon sweep No. 3 shot down three and damaged seven of a large formation of dive bombers harassing the 1st Armoured Division. The same afternoon, while No. 250 was escorting bombers to attack motorised traffic on the coast road, Twemlow badly damaged an Me-109 which tried to interfere. All these efforts were unavailing, however, and the German raiding columns, quickly reinforced, occupied Agedabia that evening. Advanced elements threatened Antelat, the foremost R.A.F. fighter base, from which all aircraft were hurriedly evacuated to Msus, the last machine leaving under artillery fire.

⁷ The events of a year previously had practically duplicated themselves, only this time it was the Far East and not Malta which required diversion of men and equipment, and *Luftflotte 2*, not *Fliegerkorps X*, which depressed Malta and thus eased enemy logistic problems.

Throughout the next two days the enemy advanced rapidly, and the fighter squadrons were busy flying offensive sweeps to cover the withdrawal of XIII Corps. On 24th January the enemy halted temporarily on a line running from Beda Fomm through Antelat to Saunnu, but before a counter-attack could be launched Rommel thrust forward again the next day and captured Msus, from which the R.A.F. had again withdrawn to Mechili. There was now a grave danger of losing all western Cyrenaica, and, while ground forces were regrouping, British bombers redoubled their attacks designed to disorganise enemy movement around Agedabia, and fighters combined ground strafing and reconnaissance with their normal sweeps. During 25th and 26th January Australian Kittyhawks flew twenty-one sorties ranging over a wide area to attack any targets of opportunity. On the first day four troop carriers and a petrol tanker were set on fire ten miles north of Agedabia, and on the second six transports and an armoured car were damaged between Saunnu and Msus, and one Me-110 was shot down. Sergeant Leu of No. 112 destroyed one of several Me-109's which attempted to intercept Blenheims bombing the Agedabia-Antelat road on the 25th; and the next day, when this squadron was strafing the Antelat-Msus road, Burney made a particularly determined effort, hitting ten vehicles in eight runs over the target.⁸

Masking his true intention by means of a strong thrust towards Mechili, Rommel, on 27th January, sent fast columns northwards to Benghazi, which was quickly isolated, and fell the following day. Bad weather hampered bombing missions during these two days, but fighters continued their ground strafing; in twenty sorties No. 3 claimed eighteen targets damaged between Msus and Antelat. The Australians were out twice on 29th January covering the retreat of the 4th Indian Division from Tobra to Derna. No opposition was met, because Rommel, sensing that he had caught his opponents off balance, was engaged in a daring, albeit successful, gamble, and was pushing ahead using only lorried infantry with very light armoured support. His air units and most of his tanks had been left at Benina and all supplies immediately available were devoted to these swift spearheads intended to roll the Eighth Army back to Gazala before it could recover poise. The German vanguard reached Tmimi by 10th February, and, having then lost most of its momentum due to increasing severity of air attacks on its supply columns, began to construct a series of strong-points between Tmimi and Bir Temrad, awaiting the arrival of reinforcements. Meanwhile XIII Corps had retired to prepared positions between Gazala and Bir Tengeder, and R.A.F. fighters had again been forced back; the Mechili airfields being abandoned on 3rd February when most squadrons went to El Adem, and No. 3 moved direct to Gambut.

Though the Royal Air Force was virtually unopposed in the air during the first week in February, and although it did limit the German thrust, familiar weaknesses in ground-to-air cooperation reappeared under the

⁸ 112 Sqn Operations Record Book.

stress of retreat. Communications were faulty, it was almost impossible to fix a bomb line and once again lack of identification marks on army vehicles resulted in some opportunities to attack being lost. Between 2nd and 10th February No. 3 flew seventy-seven sorties on sweeps, ground strafing, bomber escort and local defence, only once meeting the enemy, and then at a disadvantage. On 8th February, while waiting over El Adem to rendezvous with Blenheims detailed to attack Derna, four of the Kittyhawks were forced to return to base with engine trouble. The rest of the formation was subject to a surprise dive attack by three Me-109's and one Kittyhawk was shot down and another so badly damaged that it barely reached Gambut. The enemy flew off before they could be engaged and in the confusion five more Kittyhawks lost contact with the bombing formation and returned to base. Thus only Flying Officer Gibbes flew on with No. 112 and the Blenheims to Derna, and a heavy rear-guard action was fought by this inadequate fighter cover against renewed enemy attacks. No. 112 Squadron lost three pilots, but Burney shot down one Messerschmitt and shared in the destruction of another.

With the stabilisation of the position on land, and with each army again trying to win a logistical race so that it could decisively attack the other, air activity began to assume new forms. During the war of movement British fighters and light bombers had concentrated on the abundant tactical targets afforded on crowded roads and hastily-erected leaguers, but these opportunities disappeared as the enemy achieved effective dispersal of his forces. Fighters were thus diverted to defensive activity over the Gazala line, over their own bases and Tobruk, while the light bombers returned to the familiar task of attacking German airfields. The Wellingtons of No. 205 Group concentrated their attention on Benghazi which now replaced Tripoli as the main Axis supply port. The enemy, too, began to employ the Me-109F chiefly as a fighter-bomber, making nuisance raids from a high altitude and using its superior speed to avoid combat. These nuisance raids were responsible for the large number of standing patrols which the R.A.F. were forced to mount at this time, 598 out of 945 sorties flown by fighters based in Egypt and Cyrenaica between 11th and 24th February being devoted to local defence. The enemy also sent heavily-escorted formations of bombers to raid Tobruk in an attempt to delay the consolidation of the Gazala line. For the first time, however, the R.A.F. began to get appreciable help from radio-direction-finding facilities, and an adequate controlled-interception system came into being covering the area between Gazala and Bardia.

The most successful of these early interceptions took place on 14th February, when, at 11.45 a.m., eight Australian Kittyhawks and ten Kittyhawks of No. 112 led by Bartle were scrambled from El Adem to meet an approaching enemy formation. After flying north to Tobruk the Kittyhawks turned west over the perimeter defences and climbed steadily until, over Acroma, No. 3 was flying at 8,000 feet with No. 112 slightly ahead and above, just below the cloud base and an ideal height for Kittyhawks. Bartle sighted a group of ten to twelve Macchi 200's below

and to the left of the Australians and warned No. 3 Squadron which, however, had already seen a formation of enemy bombers with a close-cover escort, flying at less than 2,000 feet. No. 112 intercepted the original group of Italian fighters as it attempted to escape into cloud cover, and with each pilot selecting an individual target, every one of the Macchis was claimed as destroyed. Before No. 3 could engage the bombing force, six Me-109's, which had been lurking in the clouds, dived down, but were seen in time for the Australians to wheel round against this new threat. In ensuing dog-fights four Me-109's were claimed destroyed and another one damaged. Both squadrons of Kittyhawks then attacked the bomber force and its close escort. By the end of an exhilarating fight which extended almost down to ground level, the remnants of the enemy formation had fled. Of the estimated total of 32 enemy aircraft involved in these three clashes, 20 were claimed as destroyed, 2 probably destroyed and 10 damaged. Neither of the Kittyhawk squadrons lost an aircraft in this text-book example of perfect interception, both top- and extra-top cover being eliminated before the bombers were attacked. For No. 3 Squadron the victory was especially gratifying, because it was achieved by pilots most of whom were relative newcomers, as the heavy fighting of the last few months had seen the loss or withdrawal of nearly all the experienced pilots. On both squadrons every Australian pilot had some share in this phenomenal success.⁹

Interceptions did not always result in such victories and only the following day, two Kittyhawks, ordered to intercept bombers approaching the aerodrome, were pounced on by three Me-109's and shot down. Sergeant Reid,¹ one of the few relative veterans, never attained height and was killed instantly, but Pilot Officer Briggs,² although wounded, managed to bale out from 300 feet. Again on 16th February five aircraft from No. 3 were sent to ward off enemy aircraft nearing El Adem. Six Me-109's were chased but they escaped by using their superior speed. During the return, the Kittyhawks were warned of more Messerschmitts trailing them from behind. They turned back, made a head-on attack and

* The claims were:

3 Sqn RAAF	Destroyed	Damaged
402375 Sgt W. H. A. Mailey	2 Me-109	1 Mc-200
408060 Sgt B. M. Thompson	$\frac{1}{2}$ Mc-200	
824 F-O H. G. Pace	$\frac{1}{2}$ Mc-200	
406101 Sgt C. H. White	1 Me-109	2 Ju-87
F-O Giddy	2 Mc-200	1 Mc-200
402137 Sgt F. B. Reid	1 $\frac{1}{2}$ Mc-200	1 Mc-200
270839 F-O L. T. Spence	1 Me-109	1 Me-109
F-O Gray		
	<u>8$\frac{1}{2}$</u>	<u>6</u>

112 Sqn

406171 F-O J. P. Bartle	1 (prob) Mc-200	1 } out of Sqn tally of 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ claimed destroyed; 2 prob- ably destroyed; 4 damaged.
404178 Sgt R. M. Leu	2 Mc-200	
402343 Sgt H. G. Burney	1 Mc-200	

¹ Sgt F. B. Reid, 402137; 3 Sqn. Clerk; of Artarmon, NSW; b. Wellington, NSW, 30 Sep 1915. Killed in action 15 Feb 1942.

² Sqn Ldr T. J. L. Briggs, 270699; 3 Sqn. Audit clerk; of Brisbane; b. Warwick, Qld, 1 Jan 1920.

damaged one Messerschmitt, but Flying Officer Threlkeld³ was shot down and killed. Rain, low clouds and dust storms then hampered operations and the remaining local-defence patrols before 24th February passed uneventfully.

Bomber-escort duties claimed a limited share of R.A.F. effort, as on 15th February when an Axis column moved against Bir Tengeder, the extreme left wing of the Gazala line. Nos. 3 and 73 Squadrons escorted twelve Blenheims which sought out and attacked this enemy force with considerable effect, all the bombs bursting among vehicles, four of which received direct hits. Again on the 23rd No. 3 joined No. 450 in escorting six Bostons attacking enemy transport parked between Tmimi and Martuba. Very few sweeps were attempted, but, on the 21st, Caldwell led No. 112 into battle with seven Me-109's over Gazala, himself destroying one and Carson another.

No. 250 Squadron with its many Australian fighter pilots had been withdrawn to the Canal Zone at the beginning of the month, but Australian interest in the desert campaign quickened with the long-delayed arrival on operations of No. 450 Squadron R.A.A.F. From 11th November to 7th December this unit had acted as an advanced repair depot at Burg el Arab, and had then gone to Abu Sueir to train and equip with Kittyhawk fighters. Deficiencies of equipment delayed this training, but it finally reached Gambut by 16th February 1942, maintaining a detachment at El Adem as from 20th February and participating in several attempted interception patrols. On one of these, shortly after noon on the 22nd, Sergeant Shaw⁴ sighted a Ju-88 reconnaissance aircraft at 20,000 feet and shot it down south-east of Gazala. The next day, while providing medium cover over No. 3 and Boston bombers, No. 450 was attacked by Me-109's. Sergeant Young⁵ destroyed one, but a Kittyhawk was lost and another crashed on return to El Adem.

Throughout General Auchinleck's advance and the subsequent withdrawal to Gazala the fighter squadrons were the dominating factor in air warfare. More and more Australians were at the same time appearing on bomber and naval-cooperation squadrons, mostly as individuals but in isolated instances as complete crews. Fifty men served with No. 270 Wing of light bombers⁶ and fifteen with No. 3 S.A.A.F. Wing during CRUSADER. They gave direct air support for army operations until the fall of Halfaya when four squadrons were withdrawn to India to strengthen it against Japan. Thus, at the same time that No. 451 left the front line, Australian representation in offensive aspects of army-support operations also fell away markedly. The remaining squadrons were relatively weak after their intensive operations during November and December, and,

³ F-O T. L. Threlkeld, 761; 3 Sqn. Rent collector; of Parramatta, NSW; b. Mudgee, NSW, 16 Apr 1918. Killed in action 16 Feb 1942.

⁴ P-O R. Shaw, 402139. 242 and 247 Sqns RAF, 450 Sqn. Display designer; of Bellevue Hill, NSW; b. Tempe, NSW, 28 Jan 1920. Killed in action 29 May 1942.

⁵ P-O I. C. Young, 400402; 450 Sqn. Clerk; of Oakleigh, Vic; b. Oakleigh, 6 Dec 1920. Killed in action 12 Jun 1942.

⁶ 8, 11, 45, 55 and 84 Sqns RAF and the Lorraine (Free French) Sqn.

although employed against Rommel's columns when they drove forward again from Agheila, met with little success. Much effective work had been done by the complete force during the early weeks of the campaign, and Australians, although lacking operational training, were fed directly into squadrons where they quickly adapted themselves to the needs of daylight bombing.

On No. 11 Squadron R.A.F., Squadron Leader Murray⁷ had been appointed to command a flight, while Flight Lieutenant Rechner⁸ had moved up as a deputy flight commander by the end of the year, and the general level of Australian airmanship was high. Similarly, by November at least eighty Australians were operating with the Wellington medium-bomber squadrons of No. 205 Group. Their activities conformed to a fairly regular pattern of attack against the main enemy ports in Libya, together with periodic attachments to Malta for raids against Sicily and southern Italy. On occasion enemy airfields or military bases were also attacked but the dominant theme of the whole period was the "mail run" to Benghazi harbour. Many minor successes were achieved but in view of the smallness of the forces available, these raids were valuable in delaying the building up of enemy strength, chiefly through their effect on Italian workers who insisted on getting well outside this area each night.⁹ No. 201 Naval Cooperation Group was also vitally concerned with the attrition of enemy supplies, and to its heterogeneous collection of reconnaissance and strike aircraft it added, early in 1942, one of the Wellington squadrons (No. 38) to act as an emergency torpedo unit. From Egypt and Malta the aircraft of No. 201 Group kept ceaseless watch for Axis convoys throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Once located, enemy ships could be attacked either by submarines, by No. 201 Group, or by Blenheims of No. 2 Group, Bomber Command, attached to Malta. In the actual work of destruction Australians at this time played little part, but they were active on Nos. 39, 69 and 230 Squadrons in a scouting role. The formation of an *Article XV* R.A.A.F. squadron for No. 201 Naval Cooperation Group had been authorised during August 1941, but delays in the delivery of aircraft and then the outbreak of war in the Pacific prevented any congregation of Australians on the proposed unit.

⁷ Sqn Ldr E. W. Murray, DFC, AFC, 40738 RAF. 90, 107, 11 and 55 Sqs RAF; comd Western Desert Commn Flight 1943-45. Regular air force offr; of Blackall, Qld; b. Blackall, 20 Jan 1917.

⁸ W Cdr R. M. Rechner, DFC, 407081. 223 and 11 Sqs RAF. Sales manager; of Joslin, SA; b. Edithburgh, SA, 30 Jan 1913.

⁹ See Vice-Adm E. Weichold, "The War in the Mediterranean", Part I. Weichold was the German naval C-in-C, Mediterranean, 1942. After the fall of Tobruk in Jun 1942, that town became the main target for the Wellingtons. A copy of this paper is in the library of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.