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THE OFFICIAL STORY OF AIR OPERATIONS, FEB. 1942—JAN. 1943

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The Official Story of Air Operations
in the Middle East, from February 1942
to January 1943.

LONDON: HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

3—Hard-Fighting Weeks: the Pattern Forms

THE R. A. F. BEGAN the war in this desert around Mersa Matruh in the summer of 1940. That winter the squadrons swept with Wavell's Army as far as Agheila, annihilating a large Italian air force, and were then beaten back to their original positions. All the following summer they stayed there, while battles were fought in Greece and Crete, Syria, Iraq, and Persia. In November 1941 began the great desert drive which carried them once more to the gateway of Tripolitania at Agheila.

By early February 1942, the British forces had been driven back to a line running southwards from Gazala. The Kittyhawk fighters which had just come to the Desert Air Force made clear on February 14th the British intention to hold this line, by destroying at least twenty of a formation of some thirty-two dive-bombers and escorting fighters which were attempting to attack our troops at Acroma, and damaging the rest. Not a single Kittyhawk was lost and the only damage they received was a cannon-shell hole through the tail of one aircraft. The fight was carried down so low that some of the pilots could see our troops on the ground throwing their hats into the air. This victory was won by two of the most famous squadrons of the Desert, one of the Royal Australian Air Force, and one the "Shark" squadron of the R.A.F.—so called because they had painted the noses of their aircraft to resemble the jaws of sharks. Several of the pilots of this great squadron were men from the Dominions.

From that moment onwards the Desert Air Force, under the command of Air Vice-Marshal afterwards Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, K.C.B., D.S.O., M.C., D.F.C., A.F.C., could settle down to a static period of some three months on the airfields around Gambut.

There are several rivals to the claim of being the dustiest place in the Western Desert, but in any list Gambut ranks high. About 30 miles east along the coast road from Tobruk there is a battered roadhouse by the side of which a rough track turns off to the south and within a mile zigzags up the side of the escarpment. At the top it reaches a wide plateau of which the only

permanent features are a small stone blockhouse and a rough stone wall, built for heaven knows what purpose, beyond which lies a vast scraped landing ground littered around the edges with tents, trucks, gunpits and big piles of crashed German and Italian aircraft. The tracks that edge this landing ground have been cut up by traffic into a foot or more of fine dust which billows in a great cloud when even a solitary car passes that way; the wake of half a dozen aircraft taking off, as they do at short intervals, is a yellow blinding fog. That is Gambut.

The track meanders on farther to the south, and soon zigzags up a second escarpment on top of which it crosses the desert railway and the wide, bumpy Trigh Capuzzo. Beyond lies another vast landing ground, some more tents, guns, trucks, some more aircraft. That is Gasr el Arid.

On top of both these escarpments other tracks wander off in many directions, arriving now and then at other satellite landing grounds, each with its complement of tents, guns, trucks and aircraft, for a distance of 15 miles or more. Cap the whole thing with a burnished dome of sky, blow across it periodically a hot wind from the south laden with dust storms, mix the available water with equal parts of chlorine and mud, fill the tents with thousands of cheerful young men in khaki shirts and shorts (and with several million flies) and you have the home of the Desert Air Forces, both fighter and bomber, in the spring of 1942.

There was plenty of fighting to do even though this was a static period. The Luftwaffe was raiding in strength against Tobruk and the rail-heads at Capuzzo and Mischiefa, so that almost every day there was a combat.

Almost every day there were air attacks on the enemy on the ground. Almost every day there were losses, as when on April 11th seven Tomahawks flew straight at a formation of 30 enemy aircraft and lost five of their number, but not before destroying three of the enemy. Almost every day there were victories, though few as complete as that of May 12th when a formation

led by four Beaufighters and escorted by eight long-range Kittyhawks intercepted the enemy air-supply route between Crete and Derna. About 50 miles out to sea they sighted 20 Ju.52s escorted by Messerschmitts. The Junkers were evidently full of troops, for a multitude of tommy-guns were pushed through the windows to open fire as the Beaufighters led the first beam attack, the Kittyhawks taking care of the escort. The fight lasted for 19 minutes and ranged over a distance of 40 miles. The Kittyhawks, soon disposing of the Messerschmitts, came down to join in the attack on the troop-carriers. One after another the Junkers aircraft fell in flames into the sea and burnt out on top of the water, all save one which glided gently down and sank beneath the surface. Some of the troops jumped in panic without parachutes to an instant death before their aircraft touched down; some struggled out from the surface and fell into patches of burning oil.

When Derna was in sight the Beaufighter leader could see only two Junkers, straggling for the coast. Behind him a line of aircraft and patches of oil burning on the surface of the sea seemed to stretch almost to the horizon, looking at a quick glance, he said, like a convoy of ships in line astern. Only those aircraft which had actually been seen to strike the sea were claimed as victories, but even so the score was impressive. The Kittyhawks destroyed 10 Ju.52s and two Messerschmitts. The Beaufighters destroyed three Ju.52s and probably two more. Our loss was one Beaufighter in the first beam attack.

Not by day only, but by night there was fighting to do. On every moon enemy bombers attacked the landing grounds in the Gambut area, the port of Tobruk or the railhead at Capuzzo. The A.A. barrages were magnificent, particularly at Tobruk and Gambut where streams of red tracer shells climbed the laborious air to the persistent crash of the heavier guns; sometimes through all this fantastic pattern streaked the small white-tracer jet of the rear guns of one of the German bombers, the gunner not wanting courage as he tried with little success to destroy our fighters on the ground. A squadron of Hurricanes was trained to combat the night raiders over the desert, guided only by the direction of the flak and the keenness of the pilots' eyes under admittedly a very bright moon. This same squadron also became freelances of the night against enemy camps and transport.

They took off singly or in pairs and searched the wadis and roads for the enemy.

Every day without exception there was work for the reconnaissance squadrons, Marylands and Hurricanes, which penetrated the farther or the nearer enemy positions to report by photograph and by eye what moves were made. Equally there was the continual task of reconnaissance over the sea, the task that never ended, some of it carried out from the desert, some from Malta.

This constant offensive fighting and reconnaissance was particularly necessary in the first few weeks during which the squadrons were around Gambut, because of the poor state into which the aircraft had fallen. Aircraft and crews that should have filled the gaps created by three months of advance and retreat were being diverted to the even more clamant needs of the Far East. Many of the aircraft that remained were sadly in need of overhaul, of spare parts, of rest; only the pilots seemed not to tire.

In the early days of March the serviceability, which means the actual fighting strength at that moment of the squadrons, was so low that scarcely one complete fighter wing could be mustered in the desert. Serviceable aircraft had to fly all the harder to hide this weakness from the enemy. Then it rained so heavily that for a short time even the serviceable aircraft could get into the air only with difficulty. A German reconnaissance aircraft came over that morning, skirting the white puffs of the A.A. shells high above the escarpment. Soon there were reports from the forward positions that a force of 50 plus enemy fighters and bombers was heading towards Gambut. A ground controller tried a quick bluff. Into the radio telephone he gave a curt order to scramble three squadrons—to get them into the air, that is, to await radio orders. Two minutes later he ordered another two squadrons to scramble. In reality not a single fighter could get off the ground in time, but the whole enemy formation turned round and went home without even sighting the target. Thus we had proof that the Germans were listening to the radio control of our fighter squadrons.

Behind this screen of constant endeavour the Desert Air Force was not merely waiting for reinforcement in order to renew full-scale assault, but was perfecting new technique. All the faults of the winter fighting were carefully examined and the remedies sought. The system



The Luftwaffe scrambles as Bostons of the S.A.A.F. surprise a Martuba airfield. The light bombers maintained a constant offensive against these forward landing grounds.

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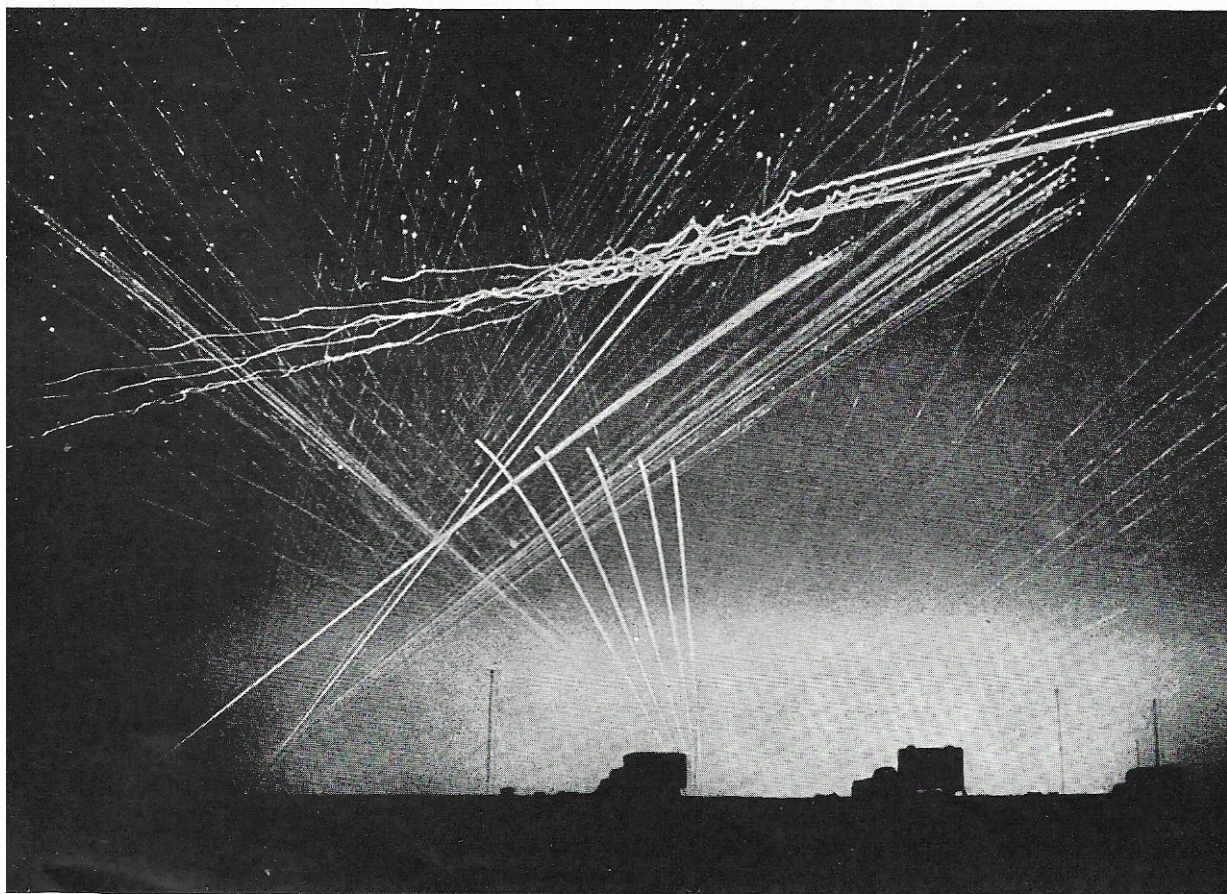
of liaison between Army and Air Force was reorganised and tightened, and the practice of keeping squadrons waiting for call from the Army was discontinued.

A fighter wing was set aside to specialise in the task of protecting the light bombers, fighter pilots and bomber crews holding frequent conference to evolve the best tactics. Those hard-fighting weeks of experiment with the Bostons and the Kittyhawks were later to change the whole shape of the desert war.

The other big development was that of the fighter-bomber. More has been argued on the subject of dive-bombing than on probably any other aspect of the air war. The German

Junkers 87, the Stuka with its demoralising dive, swept through Europe in support of the Wehrmacht. It was one of the first weapons of the Luftwaffe to be shipped to North Africa when British troops stood opposite Agheila for the first time. The troops who were subjected to it frankly detested it. Nevertheless, against targets of reasonable dispersal in the desert the Stuka was a failure. That is not to say that the Stukas did no damage; of course they did. But it was not commensurate with the losses they suffered. For the Stuka in flight is almost defenceless, needing the strongest fighter cover which even so never debarred the desert fighters from the satisfaction of a "Stuka party."

"The A.A. barrages were magnificent." The enemy attacks a fighter landing ground. Flares silhouette lorries, a caravan trailer, radio masts. Red tracer shells climb slowly up and flak peppers the night sky. The photographer is crouched in a sand-hole.





The bright desert moon, the direction of the flak and the pilots' own keen eyes guided the first Hurricane night fighters.

The Air Force of the desert never had a dive-bomber, nor wished for one. Instead it developed a fighter-bomber. During the winter a squadron of Hurricanes was fitted with some small bombs and the first experiments were made with considerable success. During this period at Gambut they were re-equipped with two larger bombs. Then the experiment was applied to the Kittyhawks, each of which was found to be able to carry a single bomb of heavier weight still. Not until the battles of the summer were the squadrons to discover how effective was this new

weapon—this fighter-bomber that could protect itself, could aim as accurately as any dive-bomber, could protect heavier bombers if necessary and could answer an army call for support more quickly than any bomber in the world. Many of the fighter-bomber pilots dropped their first bombs when they were actually called into urgent action.

When war broke out in the Middle East the only night bombers available were elderly Bombays, painfully slow aircraft with fixed undercarriages, which nevertheless managed to reach

Benghazi, beyond their maximum range, by refuelling themselves in flight from 40 four-gallon cans of petrol stowed inside the fuselage and tipped into the tanks through a funnel as a motor car is fuelled. They were soon replaced by the first Wellington bombers to reach Egypt, and by the spring of 1942 there was a respectable force of night bombers gathered on airfields around the Suez Canal zone, with advanced landing grounds for refuelling in the desert.

Sometimes they struck northwards over the Mediterranean at targets in Greece and Crete, but their chief task, then as always, so it seemed, was to batter Benghazi. They did this raid so often in a climate where bad weather rarely interferes with night flying that they nicknamed it the "mail run." Yet it was no easy flight. In distance it was roughly the equivalent of bombing Munich from Norfolk. The route was not splattered with guns and searchlights, true, but on the other hand a crew had to crash-land only 50 miles inland on the desert to be faced with the torments, often mortal, of thirst and heat. And the defences of Benghazi itself were fierce. More than all the dangers, though, the chief menace of the mail run was its inevitability, night after night, like a rheumatic twinge. One of the squadrons wrote a song about it, the *Mail-Run Song* which ran (slightly bowdlerised) to the tune of *Clementine* :—

Down the Flights each ruddy morning
Sitting waiting for a clue,
Same old notice on the Flight board,
Maximum effort—guess where to.

Chorus :
Seventy squadron, seventy squadron,
Though we say it with a sigh,
We must do the ruddy mail run
Every night until we die.

"Have you lost us, navigator?
Come up here and have a look.
Someone's shot our starboard wing off."
"We're all right then, that's Tobruk."
(a garrison naturally quick on the trigger
at that time, particularly at night)
Oh to be in Piccadilly
Selling matches by the score,
Then we should not have to do the
Blessed mail run any more.

Chorus :
Seventy squadron, seventy squadron, etc.



On the nights when they were not flying, the crews sat around in their messes with glasses of thin local beer and sang the mail-run song with an intensity of feeling that only desert life can lend to the voice. "We must do the ruddy mail run every night until we die." A good many of them did. But the hazards they took and the fatigue they endured had already, by that time, made Benghazi of considerably less value to the enemy as a supply base.

In the spring of 1942 the night-bomber force was made more mobile and moved up into the Western Desert from the base stations in the Canal zone. The advantages of placing the whole ground organisation of the bombers on wheels are apparent. The nearer to their targets the bombers can start, the less petrol they need and the more bombs they can carry. The difficulties of the undertaking were also apparent. After long experience the desert fighter and light-bomber force had been so organised that it could move forwards or backwards at a speed of 100 miles a day if necessary without the aircraft being grounded for a single minute. Now the same thing was achieved with the medium and heavy bombers in spite of far more complications.

Think of a man and his wife who decided to travel from London to Southend on August Bank Holiday in peace time and the transport difficulties they met; then think of a man and his wife with a family of 10 children attempting the same thing. That is a rough comparison of the relative difficulties of moving fighters and bombers about over the desert.

The crux of the whole bomber problem was to carry backwards and forwards over the roughest surface a great weight of bombs and petrol. For one medium bomber to make a raid on, say, Benghazi, there had to be something more than 4,000 lb. of bombs and 2½ tons of petrol available at its airfield. Each heavy bomber needed up to 9,000 lb. of bombs and about five tons of petrol. All that had to be carted on trucks, as well as the motor fuel, the tents, rations, water, men, kit—the thousand things essential in a bare desert.

It was done. The night-bomber force was placed on wheels without interfering with the nightly strength of bombing. The mail run to Benghazi was made on 23 nights in March, 24 in April, 21 nights in May, and throughout the period there were attacks on the northern targets in Greece and Crete and later on those of the

enemy airfields in the desert itself. But Benghazi, through which port the enemy was rapidly accumulating new strength, remained the chief target.

Night after night the Wellingtons throbbed through the searchlights and A.A. fire, the bomb-aimers crouched on their stomachs against the perspex of the nose, the pilots turning this way and that in evasive action, the gunners searching the bright moonlight of the sky for night fighters. From above, the harbour itself looks almost too small and insignificant for all that trouble. The moles and the inner harbour form a rough box-shape with the Cathedral mole sticking down in the centre. It is quite easy under an African moon to discern detail, even the little projections nicknamed George, Harry and Johnny, which once were ships with such names as Maria Eugenia and Gloriatella, and now, as wrecks filled with concrete, had become the main unloading piers. From above it is not possible to hear the A.A. barrage but only to see it—the flashes of the heavy guns like light winking from the facets of a turning jewel, the multi-coloured streams of tracer hose-piping upwards apparently without plan, the scarlet flaming-onions drifting upwards in little linked groups as slowly as a child's balloon. It all seems, without the noise, too remote and pretty for actuality.

The bombing itself seems just as unreal. The slight bump in the aircraft as the bombs leave is almost unnoticed. It is difficult to pick out the flash of their explosion among the thousands of flashes below. Then suddenly there is a small red glow on the base of one of the moles, a deepening glow, a shadow of black smoke, perhaps a vivid green flash. It means that some dump of warlike material, manufactured in Germany under the threat of bombs, carted with great labour across Europe's congested railway system, loaded under more bombing into a ship at Naples and borne across the sea through the threat of bomb and torpedo, has been unloaded at Benghazi in vain. All that effort has ended in a deep-red glow and a streak of smoke. There is the reality.

Night after night it happened, until at mid-summer the experts who study photographs could say of Benghazi that there was scarcely a building which had not suffered to some extent, that beside the wrecks in the harbour the outer mole had been broken in three places, that some half of the warehouses had been so damaged

PATTERN OF AIR POWER

that great piles of stores stood in the open, that the powerhouse was silent, the railway sidings littered with bent and twisted rails. But ships were still coming into the harbour, many of the supplies were still filtering through to the enemy armies of the desert, and the three wrecks—George, Harry and Johnny—were still there, still acting as unloading wharves. Their fate was reserved for later.

The attempts of the Luftwaffe to bomb our back areas in Egypt were intermittent, never very considerable and apparently based on no long-range plan. During the summer of 1941 there had been a number of night raids on supply and repair centres in Egypt which had had only one success of any importance, the destruction of an R.A.F. maintenance unit, although the poorer districts of Alexandria had been damaged from time to time and some civilians killed and injured.

There had been little raiding during the winter, but in the spring of 1942 it started again. Meanwhile an R.A.F. night-fighter squadron had been moved into the Nile Delta, the chief ambition of its crews being that the Germans should give them a chance to show the technique they had developed in the night skies of Britain. The squadron was commanded by Wing Commander G. H. Stainforth, A.F.C., famous in peace time for his Schneider Cup Victory. Wing Commander Stainforth, who was the oldest pilot flying on operations in the Middle East, was later killed in action in a night fighter.

On the night of March 2nd/3rd, about 35 German bombers attacked many parts of Egypt from Alexandria and Port Said down to the Suez area, doing some damage to one of our airfields which was heavily bombed and machine-gunned. It was a night of bright moonlight. A force of night fighters intercepted some of the raiders and shot down two Heinkels. This loss was insufficient to deter the enemy, and from time to time more bombing raids came over by night, directed principally at Alexandria. On the night of April 7/8th they were intercepted by night fighters and one pilot, Flight Lieutenant R. C. Fumerton, D.F.C., R.C.A.F., shot down two of them.

The big night was that of April 28/29th, when about 25 Ju.88s and He.111s attacked Alexandria. Three of our night fighters made interceptions. One of them again shot down two raiders in a single night, another probably destroyed a third, and another damaged a fourth. The A.A. gunners scored one destroyed. Twenty per cent. of the raiding force had been knocked out, and this ascendancy over the night raider was maintained from that time onwards, although there were still occasional raids, mostly on Alexandria.

Between March 2nd and the decisive battle which was to open in the Western Desert in November 1942, the night fighters shot down a total of 41 bombers over Egypt alone, and a number more over Malta. This was additional to the success of the Hurricanes which flew by night over the Western Desert.

4—To Keep the Squadrons Flying

BEHIND AN air force in battle there must be a large technical force on the ground. The bravest and finest pilot in the world is useless if his aircraft through some mechanical defect cannot leave the ground; or if, having been shot down in battle, there is none other into which he can step. The first problem in the Middle East, indeed, had been to provide the very elements of the force—aircraft, airmen, signals equipment, guns, split pins, nuts and bolts, all the three-

quarters of a million separate items which must exist in order to keep an air force flying in the air. Even in a highly industrialised country like Britain, with aircraft and engineering industries of long experience and great skill, the problem took a wearisome time to solve. Imagine then the magnitude of it in Egypt, where no such industries existed, where machinery was often obsolete and always inadequate, where power is expensive to produce, and to which the shipping