

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

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All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the trailing part of a word has been joined to the preceding line. Every effort has been made to preserve the Māori macron using unicode.

Some keywords in the header are a local Electronic Text Centre scheme to aid in establishing analytical groupings.

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Added name tags around various names of people, places, and

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Jamie Norrish

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Royal Air Force

By
Wing Commander H. L. THOMSON

Volume III
*Maintenance and Middle East
Test-rot Airs*

WAR HISTORY BRANCH
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE AFFAIRS
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND
1963

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

[TITLE PAGE]

*Official History of New Zealand
in the Second World War
1939–45*

The authors of the volumes in this series of histories prepared under the supervision of the **War History Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs have been given full access to official documents. They and the Editor-in-Chief are responsible for the statements made and the views expressed by them.**

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1959**

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

[FRONTISPIECE]



North Sea Fleet plane flying over Eritrea

Royal Air Force plane flies over Eritrea to attack Keren

**NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME
III)**

[TITLE PAGE]

**New Zealanders with the
Royal Air Force
Volume III
*Mediterranean and Middle East
South-east Asia***

Wing Commander H. L. THOMPSON

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW
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NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

PREFACE

Preface

THIS volume, the third and final of the series, attempts to record something of the work and achievements of New Zealand airmen who flew and fought with the **Royal Air Force** in the **Middle East** and in South-east **Asia** during the Second World War. Both these regions have long held particular interest for the people of New Zealand. Still to be fully understood and appreciated, however, is the contribution to victory made by the Allied air forces in these two theatres. How many, for example, realise that after its defeat in the Western Desert in 1942 the **Eighth Army** was saved and the victory at **Alamein** made possible largely as a result of the sustained and devoted efforts of the **Desert Air Force**, or that during the final advance into **Burma** over 300,000 troops were kept supplied with all their daily requirements solely by transport aircraft and 110,760 wounded flown out from front-line positions?

New Zealand airman played a not undistinguished part in these hard-fought campaigns. Theirs was essentially a contribution of individuals, for they were widely scattered among the many **RAF** formations, and even though a few units did develop a certain New Zealand flavour, this was largely fortuitous. Looking back, it seems rather a pity that not one single New Zealand squadron was formed to operate in the **Middle East** or over **Burma** and that only during the short Malayan campaign from December 1941 to February 1942 did a New Zealand fighter squadron see action as a token of the quite substantial contribution made by the Dominion to the **Royal Air Force**.

The highly individual nature of the New Zealand contribution has made the preparation of the present record anything but easy. It has been rendered even more difficult by the fact that the New Zealand

authorities kept no record of the activities of their airmen who served in these two theatres. Resort therefore had to be made once again to the squadron operation books and files at the **Air Ministry, London**, and it is upon these sources that the story which follows is largely based. Only those who have dealt with official records will appreciate what was involved in extracting, checking and following up the meagre and often incomplete details which those dusty archives provided. In this regard I must express my appreciation of the work done by Flight Lieutenant J. A. Whelan concerning **Middle East** air operations; by Flight Lieutenant H. R. Dean, DFC, in preparing a most helpful narrative on South-east **Asia**; by Squadron Leader A. G. Lester on early operations in that same theatre; and particularly to Sergeant S. W. R. Holmes for his loyal and unflagging assistance in many ways. My thanks are also due to the many officers of **Air Ministry, London**, who gave further valuable help, especially Mr J. C. Nerney and his staff of the Historical Branch. To the many airmen who responded so well to requests for information and provided both lively episode and personal detail—usually about others than themselves—I would add a special word of thanks.

I wish also to place on record my deep appreciation of the constant help, encouragement and support I received throughout my work from the late **Sir Howard Kippenberger**. To work under him was, indeed, a wonderful experience.

The completion of this record gives considerable personal satisfaction. One is very conscious of defects and omissions, but at least it provides as faithful and accurate a record as it has been possible to achieve. I deem it a privilege to have had the duty of compiling an account of the deeds of such a very gallant band of men. May those who follow prove worthy of them.

H. L. THOMPSON

'Lynn Side'
Auckland
June 1959

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NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 1 – PRELUDE TO WAR

CHAPTER 1

Prelude to War

FLYING high over the **Western Desert** towards **Cairo** one glances around and below at a remarkable panorama. The whole of the eastern **Mediterranean** with all its long coastline is spread out beneath like a map. To the west, in the fine clear air of this part of the world, one can see past **Tobruk** towards **Benghazi** and the Gulf of **Sirte**; to the east the coastline of Palestine with **Syria** and its mountains beyond. Behind lies unrolled the island-sprinkled **Aegean Sea**; in front Egypt is revealed at one glance from the coast to beyond **Cairo** and the length of the **Suez Canal** from **Port Said** to **Suez**.

It was over all this territory and indeed for many hundreds of miles beyond even so remarkable a vision—over **Greece**, **Malta**, **Tunisia** and finally over **Italy**—that the **Royal Air Force** flew and fought during the **Middle East** campaign of the Second World War. Its operations were as varied as the region over which they ranged; they included almost every aspect of air warfare and they were conducted with great flexibility by able and experienced leaders whose touch was sure. Co-operation with the Army and Navy was developed to a high degree and this was an important factor in the final success. But the **RAF's** supreme achievement, as events on land and sea clearly show, was the winning and holding of command of the air. When this was lacking our forces suffered defeat after defeat—even the Navy's victories at **Taranto** and **Matapan** were followed by the loss of **Crete** and the closing of the **Mediterranean**; but once ascendancy in the air was achieved the partnership flourished and then victory was assured.

Mastery of the **Mediterranean** had long been a cardinal point in British strategy, since it was through this sea that lay the shortest and surest passage to and from **India** and an Empire beyond. And along this route, for which **Gibraltar** and **Malta** provided convenient stepping stones, the most vulnerable point was the **Suez Canal**, which made the defence of Egypt of prime importance. There was another reason for

British interest in the security of the Middle East. Within its boundaries lay rich oilfields, and since in recent times movement by land, sea and air had come to depend more and more upon oil, access to oil was a military problem of the first gravity. Indeed it was one which might face **Britain** in a simple and very unpleasant form. Five-sixths of the world's supplies were produced beyond the **Atlantic**, where sea traffic was exposed to grave interruption in time of war; and nearly half the balance came from **Russia** and **Rumania** which were likely to be inaccessible. It was therefore essential that **Britain** should be able to draw freely on supplies of oil from **Persia** and **Iraq**. And if this was to be achieved, these regions, their ports and the sea routes must be held against any threat.

British sea power, the possession of Gibraltar, Malta and Alexandria as first-class naval bases, and **Italy** a well-disposed ally, had long guaranteed the security of the **Mediterranean**. During the First World War this had been invaluable to our cause. But when, in the late thirties, the war clouds gathered again, two novel and major considerations had arisen to threaten the security of British interests in that area. **Italy**, under Mussolini's aggressive leadership, had become a potential enemy and there was the advent of air power as a major factor in the control of narrow seas.

By 1939 Italian arms had reached a high peak. The fleet, if untried, was well equipped with fast ships of good quality, the army was numerous and had gained tropical experience in **Abyssinia** and North Africa whilst the *Regia Aeronautica* was perhaps the greatest national pride. Fortified by Douhet's teaching, Balbo's long-distance flights of large formations and a fine record in the races for the Schneider Trophy, the Italians had certainly made great efforts to create a modern air force. Backed by a substantial aircraft industry with well-equipped factories, it now had a total strength, including training, transport and reserves, of some 3000 machines. Its pilots had obtained valuable combat experience in the Spanish Civil War; the Abyssinian campaign had tested its organisation, if not its fighting quality, and the products of Italian engineering were viewed with respect in spite of an undue

fidelity to old types of aircraft by reason of their superior manoeuvrability—for Italian pilots tended to associate spectacular aerobatics with good airmanship.

With her new-found strength, particularly that in the air, **Italy** threatened the whole British position in the **Middle East**. A mass of fighters and bombers assembled in **Libya**, where they were capable of prompt reinforcement from the Italian mainland, could present a serious danger to **Egypt**. At the same time bombers based in **Sicily** and **Tripoli** might well close the **Mediterranean** sea route at its narrowest point where the Sicilian Channel is a mere eighty miles wide. So sure was the British Admiralty of **Italy's** ability to do this that it presently declared itself unable to pass even military convoys through the **Mediterranean** 'on account of the air danger' and the Fleet was withdrawn to **Alexandria** and **Gibraltar**. **Malta**, from being a busy staging post, then became a threatened fortress on an untravelled road. Its possibilities as an air base capable of striking at Italian lines of communication between **Tripoli** and the European mainland were overlooked and it was left to prepare as best it could against possible Italian bombing. For Britain was ill-prepared to meet the changed situation. The fact that airfields and air power were now the key to command of the **Mediterranean** had not yet been fully accepted and **Royal Air Force**, **Middle East**, had been starved of aircraft in order to build up air strength at home.

Yet, in 1939, there was still reason to hope that, with **France** as an ally, the Italian challenge might be met. The French Fleet could neutralise a large part of the Italian Navy, French tenure of Djibouti safeguarded the gates of the **Red Sea** while much of the Italian mainland lay within bombing range of French airfields in **Tunisia**. All the same, as the shadows deepened over **Europe** once more, both **Britain** and **France** deemed it highly desirable that the **Middle East** should remain at peace. Strict instructions were given that **Italy** must in no wise be provoked, and although there was some reorganisation of our military dispositions, it was clear enough that the intention was to avoid hostile action in the

hope that the Italians might show similar goodwill.

But the Italian dictator Mussolini was not disposed for peace. As a result of the alliance with **Hitler's Germany**, his dream of recreating the old Roman Empire in which the **Mediterranean** would once again become the 'Mare Nostrum' now seemed more likely of fulfilment. His protestations of devotion to the Axis cause became distinctly more audible and Italian preparations to share in the spoils which **Hitler** promised were conducted with all the secrecy of an operatic chorus with full orchestral accompaniment. The *piazzas* rang with shouts for Nice, **Corsica** and **Tunis**, interspersed, of course, with frequent references to 'Mare Nostrum'; Fascist publications were pleased to depict massed echelons of the *Regia Aeronautica* proceeding south-eastwards towards **Alexandria** ahead of the **Italian Fleet**. And when, in June 1940, Mussolini saw the French armies reeling to defeat before the German onslaught, **Britain** isolated, her army rescued but without arms and without a single ally outside her Commonwealth, it seemed that this was his opportunity. There could surely be little risk in entering a war that, to all appearances, was practically over.

Until the last moment **Britain** strove to avoid war with **Italy**. On 16 May 1940, in an effort to dissuade Mussolini from taking action, Winston Churchill made a direct appeal to the Italian Prime Minister. It is described by Count Ciano, Mussolini's Foreign Minister and son-in-law, as 'a message of goodwill dignified and noble.' But the Italian dictator was in no mood to listen and he returned what Churchill could only describe as a 'dusty answer'. Mussolini in fact wanted to declare war at once, but the Germans were less enthusiastic about their new ally and, at **Hitler's** request, the actual declaration against **Britain** was postponed until 10 June 1940.

Early that evening, speaking from the balcony of his office in **Rome**, Mussolini told the multitude gathered in the piazza below: 'The hour marked out by destiny is sounding in the sky of our country. This is the hour of irrevocable decisions We are going to war against the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the West who have hindered

the advance and often threatened the existence of the Italian people' But in spite of the long harangue which followed, Ciano notes in his diary that 'news of the war does not arouse very much enthusiasm.' And that same evening a broadcast from the capital of one of the 'reactionary democracies' prophesied that the summit of Mussolini's achievement would be 'to increase the number of ruins for which **Italy** has long been famous.' The speaker was Duff Cooper, who had resigned from the Chamberlain Government after the Munich Agreement and was now Minister of Information under Churchill.

Within a few days of **Italy's** entry into the war the **Mediterranean** situation was radically changed in her favour through the collapse of **France**. By a single stroke of the pen almost the whole of the French Navy was eliminated, leaving the British to do the best they could against heavy odds with such naval forces as were at **Alexandria** or might become available at **Gibraltar**—for between these two extremities, two thousand miles apart, they were now without a single friendly port except **Valetta**. At the same time the British lost the support of the French army and air force in North Africa, while along the south shore of the **Mediterranean** over a thousand miles of coast passed into a dubious neutrality under the vigilance of Italian and German armistice commissions. And in the **Red Sea** area, the French airfields at Djibouti were no longer available for British use.

Italy was thus in a position to launch a powerful offensive against her weaker British adversary. In **Libya** some 215,000 troops under Marshal Graziani stood on the frontier ready to advance into Egypt, while another army of over 200,000 men in Italian **East Africa** threatened Egypt from the south and also the territories of British Somaliland, **Sudan** and Kenya. Against these impressive enemy ground forces the British Army under General Wavell had only 50,000 soldiers on all fronts; no single unit or formation was fully equipped and there was 'a dangerous lack of anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns and other artillery'. The possibility of immediate reinforcement was remote for the route through the **Mediterranean** was now too precarious. It was even

uncertain whether the long sea route via the Cape might not also be rendered unsafe by the action of enemy air and naval forces from East Africa operating in the narrow waters of the Red Sea. ¹ The Italians

¹ This threat was taken so seriously that the Second Echelon of 2 NZEF, with an Australian brigade, was diverted to England.

also enjoyed a marked superiority in the air, for the RAF had only 300 operational aircraft whereas the *Regia Aeronautica* now possessed a front-line strength of some 1600 machines. A considerable part of this force was retained on the Italian mainland but strong contingents in Sardinia and Sicily cast a long shadow over the central Mediterranean; there were also substantial numbers of modern fighters and bombers deployed in Libya and East Africa, where their reinforcement was comparatively easy.

The Italian opportunity at the end of June 1940 was certainly immense. Both the Mediterranean and the Red Sea might be denied to British ships, and with Egypt almost completely isolated it should have been a relatively easy matter for Italy to secure control of the Nile Valley, using the vastly superior forces she had at both ends; for all Egypt lay within bombing range of her airfields and its anti-aircraft defence was weak. But as the summer weeks slipped by, the opportunity was missed. A few bombs fell on Alexandria, Omdurman, and even Haifa, but no air or ground offensive developed on a serious scale. The sky over Egypt and the Sudan was relatively untroubled by Italian aircraft; and there was no effective threat from bombers overhead to transports bringing Indian brigades up the Red Sea to Port Sudan or Australians and New Zealanders to Suez. The Italians also made no attempt to use torpedo aircraft against the vulnerable convoys. Indeed in the next five anxious months there were only two cases of damage to British ships by air attack in the Red Sea.

The Italian failure to take advantage of their opportunities was, in the opinion of General Wavell, 'due firstly to our Air Force who, in spite

of inferior numbers everywhere took and kept the initiative; and to the stout action of the small covering forces in Egypt, **Sudan** and **East Africa**; and finally to the enemy's lack of preparation or desire for hard fighting.' Certainly the consummate showmanship and cheerful buccaneering methods by which the **RAF** produced an illusion of air superiority were to astonish its opponents. They also underlined the lesson, taught in the skies over **Britain** this same summer, that numbers were not the only test in air warfare.

Royal Air Force, Middle East, whose ample boundaries embraced Egypt, the **Sudan**, Palestine, **Transjordan**, **Iraq**, **Aden**, Somaliland and **East Africa**, was under the command of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore,¹ a tough little Australian who had been with the **RAF**

¹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur M. Longmore, GCB, DSO, Order of Crown (Bel), Legion of Honour (Fr), Croix de Guerre (Fr), Order of St. Maurice and St. Lazarus (It), Croix de Guerre (It), Royal Order of George I Grand Cross with Swords (Gk), Greek War Cross; **RAF** (retd); born St. Leonards, **New South Wales**, 8 Oct 1885; joined RN 1904; RFC 1912; transferred RNAS 1914; **RAF** 1918; AOC-in-C, **RAF Training Command**, 1939–40; AOC-in-C, **RAF Middle East**, 1940–41; Inspector-General, **Royal Air Force**, 1941–42; **RAF** representative, Post-Hostilities Planning Committee, 1943–44.

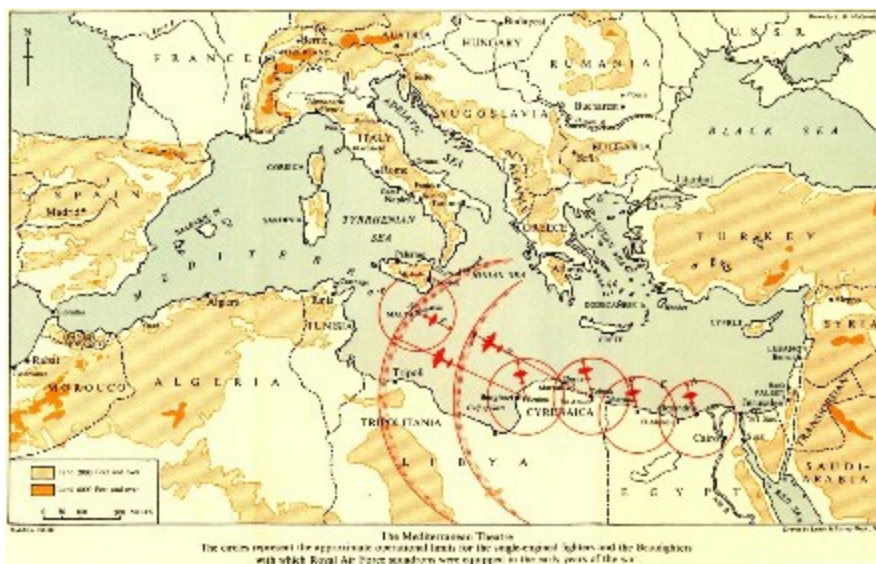
since the First World War. Longmore's resources were certainly not on the same generous scale as his responsibilities. Over the whole area he had only twenty-nine squadrons and, even for these, replacements and reinforcements from **Britain** would not be forthcoming very easily; nor was there a local aircraft industry to help in the work of repair. Some fourteen squadrons, or about half the whole force, were based in Egypt, with the remainder scattered through the other British territories in the **Middle East**—a deployment corresponding with their primary role, which had been defined as 'the defence of Egypt and the **Suez Canal** and the maintenance of communication through the Red Sea.' The squadrons in Egypt, where the heaviest fighting was expected, were

mainly those with the more up-to-date aircraft, the older types being relegated to supporting theatres. Few of the machines, however, were really modern. Nine of the fourteen bomber units were armed with the reasonably efficient but very short-range **Blenheim** I and two of the four naval co-operation units had **Sunderlands**. But even the best equipped of the tactical reconnaissance squadrons had only the virtually defenceless **Lysander**, while none of the five fighter squadrons had anything better than the obsolescent **Gladiator** biplane. In fact almost half the force was equipped with such outdated machines as **Bombays**, **Valentias**, **Wellesleys**, **Vincents** and **Battles**—veterans which did, however, render effective and indeed noble service.

The **RAF's** main disadvantage lay in numbers and in difficulty of reinforcement since, in terms of performance, the British and Italian aircraft were on the whole not unequal. The British **Gladiator**, for example, was about evenly matched with the best Italian fighter, the **Cr42**, while the **Blenheim** was rather faster than the main Italian bomber, the **S79**, although the latter had a longer endurance and carried a greater bomb load. Moreover, it was not without importance that there were British air and ground crews in the **Middle East** who were seasoned and well tried, for this area had been the home ground of the **RAF** since the First World War. All the same the training and experience that had been gained in peacetime were soon to be sorely tested.

* * * * *

In June 1940 there were some fifty New Zealanders with the **RAF** in the **Middle East**. The majority of them had enlisted under short-service commission schemes in the pre-war years and trained as pilots but there were several medical and engineering officers and others engaged on various ground or staff duties. Many had already seen service in different parts of the **Middle East** where, in the pre-war years, the **RAF** had provided an efficient and economical means of policing an Empire—for in those days an exhibition of low flying, a



The Mediterranean Theatre The circles represent the approximate operational limits for the single-engine fighters and the Beaufighters with which **Royal Air Force** squadrons were equipped in the early years of the war.

few bursts of machine-gun fire or a demonstration bomb were usually sufficient to restore order amongst truculent tribesmen. Several pilots had flown with No. 203 Wellesley Squadron at Summit in the **Sudan**, where their duties included the normal peacetime routine of punitive action against native tribes, urgent Government flights carrying Ministers and local officials, and the transport of medical supplies. Others had carried out similar duties in Palestine. During the disturbances in that country in the late thirties, Squadron Leader McGregor ¹ led No. 33 Gladiator Squadron and his fine leadership in operations against the rebel tribes won him admission to the Distinguished Service Order.

At **Aden** and in **Iraq** there was a steady sequence of New Zealand pilots, notably Squadron Leader Barnett, ² who was in charge of a squadron at the remote base of Shaibah, and Squadron Leader Russell ³ who commanded bombers at **Aden**. **Iraq** had been 'controlled' by the **RAF** since 1921 and an early incident in which one well-known New Zealander figured is described by Sir Arthur Longmore in his memoirs:

A tribe to the north, somewhere west of Mosul, had given some

trouble to the French during its wanderings on the Syrian side of the frontier, at this point merely a line drawn across the map with no special feature on the desert to identify it. One of our patrolling aircraft, flown by Squadron Leader Arthur Coningham ⁴ of 55 Squadron (later Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham) came down low over the tribe and was fired on. He returned to Mosul, picked up the political adviser, flew back to the tribe, landed near by and called for the Sheikh to give an explanation of his conduct.

It was explained that the machine was thought to be a French one and part of a flight which had recently bombed them. The Sheikh was told not

¹ Air Vice-Marshal H. D. McGregor, CBE, DSO, Legion of Merit (US); **RAF**; born Wairoa, 15 Feb 1910; joined **RAF** 1928; permanent commission 1932; commanded Nos. 33 and 213 Sqdns 1939–40; RAF Station, Ballyhalbert, 1941; RAF Station, Tangmere, 1942–43; Group Captain, Operations, **Mediterranean Air Command**, 1943–44; Allied Deputy Director of Operations, Intell. Plans, N. **Africa** and **Italy**, 1944; AOC **Levant**, 1945–46; Planning Staff, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, **Washington**, 1949–51.

² Air Vice-Marshal D. H. F. Barnett, CBE, DFC; **RAF**; born Dunedin, 11 Feb 1906; Cambridge University Air Squadron, 1926–29; permanent commission **RAF** 1929; commanded No. **40 Sqdn** 1940; RAF Station, Swanton Morley, 1942–43; Air Staff Strategic Bombing Duties, Bomber Command, 1944; SASO (Org) Bomber Command, 1945.

³ Air Vice-Marshal H. B. Russell, CB, DFC, AFC; **RAF** (retd); born Hastings, 6 May 1895; commissioned Royal Field Artillery, 1914; seconded RFC 1915 and **RAF** 1918; permanent commission **RAF** 1919; SASO, No. 21 Training Group, 1939–40; SASO, No. 2 RAF Component, **France**, 1940; served with Fighter Command, 1940–41; AOC No. 215 Group, **Middle East**, 1942–43; AOC No. 70 Group, **United Kingdom**, 1943–45; Air Officer i/c Administration, HQ FTC, 1946–49.

⁴ Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, KCB, KBE, DSO, MC, DFC, AFC, Legion of Honour (Fr), Distinguished Service Medal (US), Order of Leopold (Bel), Croix de Guerre with Palm (Bel); born **Brisbane**, 19 Jan 1895; 1 **NZEF** 1914–16; entered RFC 1916; permanent commission **RAF** 1919; AOC No. 4 Group, Bomber Command, 1939–41; AOC Western Desert, 1941–43; AOC 1st TAF, N. **Africa**, **Sicily**, **Italy**, 1943–44; AOC-in-C, 2nd TAF, invasion of NW Europe and **Germany**, 1944–45; lost when air liner crashed during **Atlantic** crossing, Jan 1948.

to make such a mistake again. He was so impressed by the action of this R.A.F. pilot in landing amongst them that he wrote a message on the cowling of the aircraft in Arabic, to the effect that its crew were not to be harmed and every assistance given to them. This inscription was later reproduced on a large scale in polished aluminium and riveted on in a conspicuous place. ¹

The main **RAF** base in **Iraq** was at **Habbaniya**, built in a bend of the Euphrates and a veritable oasis in the desert; it was the site of an important Flying Training School which, incidentally, was to win considerable renown in the campaign against the Iraqi rebels early in 1941. Here and elsewhere New Zealand pilots continued to share in the various tasks which fell to the **RAF** squadrons in the pre-war years. The flights across wide tracts of uncivilised and strange country, often under conditions of extreme heat and discomfort, demanded qualities of resource and endurance, but there is little doubt that for air and ground crews alike the arduous and adventurous operations of those days provided most valuable training and experience. For these men, at least, war in the desert would bring a life and circumstances that were not altogether new.

Before the end of 1940 pilots, observers, wireless operators and gunners of the Royal New Zealand Air Force, trained under the Empire Air Training Scheme, had begun to arrive in the **United Kingdom**. These men were placed by the **New Zealand Government** at the disposal of the **RAF** for operations and accordingly many were posted at once to the

Middle East. Later many men passed through operational training units in the **United Kingdom**, Kenya and South Africa, which supplemented the work of similar units already in Egypt and Palestine to produce a steady influx of trained aircrew from **Britain** and the Commonwealth.

Altogether nearly 1500 New Zealanders served with the RAF Middle East and **Mediterranean** commands. Almost all were aircrew, for at the request of the British Government New Zealand concentrated largely on aircrew training. A small contingent of ground crew, radar mechanics, fitter armourers and wireless mechanics did, however, find their way to the **Middle East** to do valuable work with various **RAF** squadrons and maintenance units. Unfortunately, however, no New Zealand squadrons were formed in the **Mediterranean** theatre, with the result that Dominion personnel became extremely scattered; indeed, such was the New Zealanders' reputation for ubiquity that it became something of a **Mediterranean** legend and it was almost impossible to find an **RAF** unit without at least one or two New Zealand airmen in it.

¹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, *From Sea to Sky*.

As one of their Australian comrades remarked, 'These ruddy "pig-islanders" get everywhere—it must be their earthquakes that spread them about.'

In the **Middle East**, as in the other theatres of **RAF** operations, New Zealanders were to make their mark as leaders, as commanders of various units and as specialists in many fields. The Dominion may well remember with pride the contribution of Air Marshal Coningham, who commanded the **Tactical Air Force** in the **Western Desert**, in North-west **Africa** and in the invasion of **Italy**; of Air Vice-Marshal Maynard,¹ who showed how **Malta** could be saved, and of Air Chief Marshal Park² in charge of air operations in defence of Egypt before **Alamein** and from **Malta** during the period when the *Luftwaffe* was finally beaten and the island turned to the offensive. The large majority, however, played their part in less prominent roles as fighter pilots or among the crews of

bomber and reconnaissance aircraft. These were the men who helped to create the legend of the **Desert Air Force** with its nomadic, individual way of life, its variegated and often highly unorthodox uniform and a tradition that was much envied by other parts of the **Royal Air Force**. Back and forth across the desert, through **Cyrenaica** to **Tripoli** and across the narrow seas to **Sicily** and **Italy**, they flew and fought their aircraft alongside their comrades of the Army; and with them they shared the dust and the heat, the flies and the sores, the mud and biting wind, the shortage of water and the interminable corned beef and chlorinated tea. For life with the **Air Force** in the **Middle East** was very different from that in the home commands. Here men were divorced from all the normal amenities of life with little but their work to occupy their minds. Their surroundings lacked any of the usual landmarks and often for miles in every direction there were no houses, trees, hills or roads. Their ration scale certainly allowed liberal quantities of bully beef and tea but rarely did it provide enough water; indeed the allowance was sometimes only half a gallon a day each for all purposes including cooking and washing, and even this meagre dole could not always be guaranteed. And as retreat and advance swayed the **RAF** backwards and forwards over the desert its men had to become more and more mobile, and this usually meant the

¹ Air Vice-Marshal F. H. M. Maynard, CB, AFC, Legion of Merit (US); **RAF** (retd); born **Waiuku**, 1 May 1893; served with RN Divisional Engineers 1914–15; transferred RNAS 1915; **RAF** 1918; permanent commission **RAF** 1919; AOC RAF Mediterranean, 1940–41; Air Officer i/c Administration, **Coastal Command**, 1941–44; AOC No. 19 Group, **Coastal Command**, 1944–45.

² Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith R. Park, GCB, KBE, MC and bar, DFC, Croix de Guerre (Fr), Legion of Merit (US); **RAF** (retd); born **Thames**, 15 Jun 1892; in First World War served Egypt, **Gallipoli** and **France** with NZ Fd Arty, 1914–15, and Royal Fd Arty, 1915–16; seconded RFC 1917; permanent commission **RAF** 1919; SASO, HQ Fighter Command, 1938–40; commanded No. 11

Fighter Group during Battle of Britain; AOC No. 23 Training Group, 1941; AOC RAF Egypt, 1942; AOC RAF Malta, 1942–43; AOC-in-C, Middle East, 1944–45; Allied Air C-in-C, SE Asia, 1945–46.

sacrifice of even the few personal belongings which had served to remind them that there was somewhere, at least, another kind of existence.

The desert was indeed a hard school of war, but for many of those who lived and fought in and over it there was a certain glamour in its vivid contrasts, its monotony and its infinite variety, its soft beauties and harsh rigours and, above all, its clean and invigorating spaciousness. Moreover, as those who took part in the desert campaigns know full well, it was the background on which was woven that pattern of teamwork between the armed services which contributed so much to ultimate victory.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 2 – EARLY OPERATIONS OVER MANY FRONTS

CHAPTER 2

Early Operations over Many Fronts

NO clash of opposing armies, no sudden invasion with hard-fought border battles followed the declaration of war in the **Middle East**. For the Italians, not altogether prepared for total war, were in no hurry to begin their much-heralded campaign; over a month passed in which their armies did little more than concentrate with extreme deliberation on the borders of Egypt, the **Sudan** and British Somaliland. Meanwhile British patrols fenced adroitly along the various frontiers.

But if events on the ground moved slowly, there was lively activity in the air from the outset—at least on the part of one participant. Within a few hours of Mussolini's bombastic broadcast, Blenheims from Egypt were over the Italian airfield at **El Adem** where their bombs, bursting among hangars and closely parked aircraft, caused consternation among its occupants, who seem to have overlooked even the most elementary precautions against unfriendly visitors. The **RAF** followed up with further raids on the enemy's forward airfields in **Cyrenaica** and on oil tanks and shipping at **Tobruk**. Simultaneously Wellesleys from the **Sudan** struck at the Italian aerodromes of **Asmara**, **Gura** and **Massawa** while Blenheims from **Aden** bombed **Assab** and **Diredawa**, causing considerable damage to aircraft, hangars and supplies. At **Massawa** about 800 tons of petrol went up in flames.

This was the start of a spirited and, for those days, quite remarkable offensive against enemy airfields, bases and ports, against troop concentrations in camps and convoys and any supply dumps within reach. For Longmore had decided that, in the circumstances, bold attack was the sole alternative to extinction and surprise the best method of attack. Yet it was only by appearing in unexpected strength and in unexpected places that he could hope to produce an illusion of air superiority since his forces were pitifully small; it was also doubtful whether he would receive either replacements or reinforcements for some time to come. Accordingly the **RAF's** watchword became 'We'll fox

them', as lumbering **Bombay** transports were turned into long-range bombers and outdated Lysanders were sent on impudent and dangerous spotting missions for the Army. A single Hurricane fighter which arrived in August was made to operate from several landing grounds in the desert on the same day, achieving an astonishing effect on the Italians, who had nothing to match its performance. This versatile machine was soon nicknamed 'Collie's Battleship', after Air Commodore R. Collishaw,¹ who was in charge of air operations over the **Western Desert**.

Collishaw, a cheerful Canadian who had emerged from the First World War with the second highest total of kills credited to any British fighter pilot, soon brought the business of outwitting the Italians to a fine art. With great skill he introduced a comprehensive system of deception, using dummy aircraft and operating small groups of fighters from widely spaced bases. At the same time, by frequent patrols and by continual attacks on their troops, bases and airfields, he kept the Italians in such a state of apprehension that they were led to fritter away their greater air strength upon innumerable defensive patrols. Similar tactics and adventurous operations on the other fronts produced the same reaction. Indeed, continual standing patrols soon became the normal routine of an Italian fighter pilot's day as air umbrellas were unfurled over bases, ports, lines of communication and over ground units unwilling to move without such protection.

This feeble reply to the initial British attacks undoubtedly laid the foundations of the eventual breakdown of the Italian fighter force. For as its defensive patrols increased, so engine hours mounted up and the serviceability rate fell. Then, the more aircraft to be serviced the less able was their maintenance organisation to deal with what was already on hand and the longer it took to get aircraft back to the front-line squadrons. The more aircraft being treated for one fault or another the more unwieldy the system became, so that later when advance and retreat swayed the army back and forth across the desert the *Regia Aeronautica* was unable to keep in step. Then still more aircraft were lost either by capture or by damage from **RAF** raids.

Yet in view of the superior numbers they possessed at the beginning, the enemy's timidity was astonishing. Although at times the Italians made things uncomfortable at our forward positions and airfields, their pilots showed no particular keenness to join issue with the Gladiators and in strategic operations farther afield they showed quite extraordinary lack of enterprise. A few sorties were made against **Alexandria** but these were promptly deterred by our fighters and naval guns. Throughout the whole of July the enemy's only real success was a raid on **Haifa** which set fire to three oil tanks. Strangest of all, the

¹ Air Vice-Marshal R. Collishaw, CB, DSO and bar, OBE, DSC, DFC, Croix de Guerre (Fr), Order of St. Anne (Rus), Order of St. Stanislaus (Rus), Order of St. Vladimir (Rus); **RAF** (retd); born Nanaimo, British Columbia, 22 Nov 1893; entered RNAS 1915; **RAF** 1918; commanded RAF Station, **Heliopolis**, 1936-38; AOC Egypt Group, 1939-41; AOC No. 204 Group, **Middle East**, 1941; AOC No. 14 Group, 1942-43.

Italian bombers almost entirely neglected our great repair depot at Aboukir and its subsidiary units, the destruction of which might well have crippled the Middle East Air Force. Instead, weak Italian air policy allowed the **RAF** to seize the initiative and by aggressive tactics establish a defensive mentality among its opponents.

This was undoubtedly the main achievement of Longmore's small force in the early months but it could also record more tangible results. In operations from Egypt, for example, the old Italian cruiser *San Giorgio* was hit and crippled as she lay in **Tobruk** harbour; early in August a large ammunition dump near **Bardia** was bombed and blown up in a spectacular explosion; that same month Gladiators supporting a naval bombardment of **Bardia** shot down eight Italian bombers without loss to themselves. The enemy's main supply port of **Benghazi** was also raided on several occasions.

Elsewhere the **RAF** also continued to hold the initiative. A slender force operating from **Aden** and Perim, supplemented by patrols from Port

Sudan, succeeded in keeping open the vital **Red Sea** route; between June and December 1940, when fifty-four convoys were escorted by air, only on two occasions were ships damaged, which spoke well for the unceasing vigilance of the **Blenheim** crews, especially as the temperature inside their aircraft sometimes rose to 130 degrees while they were patrolling down the **Red Sea**.

In the **Sudan** the three Wellesley squadrons continued to raid Italian airfields, ports, railways and supply dumps and give close support to the British forces operating in that area. 'Day after day,' writes one observer, 'the large ungainly machines, with their single engine and vast wing spread, took off to make their way over some of the most dangerous flying country in the world—country where for hours you could not make a landing and where the natives were unfriendly to the point of murder. They had been coming back often with their great wings slashed and torn by flying shrapnel; sometimes they just managed to struggle home with controls shot away and the undercarriage would collapse bringing the machines lurching down on the sand on one wing like some great stricken bird. But always they seemed to get back somehow.'

In **East Africa** units of the **South African Air Force**, together with RAF **Blenheim** squadrons, were active in reconnaissance, scouring the coastal waters of Italian Somaliland; they also operated successfully against Italian airfields, vehicle concentrations and wireless stations, notably in the area of Kismayu. Typical of the spirit these squadrons brought to the offensive was the action of a **Valentia** pilot who grew tired of communication flying, filled a forty gallon oil drum with gelignite and scrap iron, wedged it on the sill of his cabin door and heaved it overboard to effect impressive slaughter among the defenders of a fort.

Only at **Malta** did the Italians appear to have the advantage in the air, but even here the **RAF** was soon to render their attacks on the island less rewarding. How this was achieved is an epic story presently to be related.

Throughout these early months New Zealanders played their part in patrol and attack over widely separated regions of the **Middle East**. In Egypt Squadron Leader Shannon ¹ led a squadron of **Blenheim** fighters in defence of **Alexandria** and the Canal Zone, in protection of naval units and on escort to bomber aircraft; he had previously commanded this squadron when it was based in **Iraq**. Pilot Officers Ferguson, ² Nicolson ³ and Walker ⁴ captained **Blenheim** bombers of No. 55 Squadron on many notable missions, including the successful raid on the airfield at **El Adem**, the main Italian air base in **Cyrenaica**, on the very first day of hostilities. Other prominent **Blenheim** bomber captains were Pilot Officers Buchanan ⁵ and **Campbell**, ⁶ who flew with No. 211 Squadron in attacks on enemy airfields and shipping.

In mid-August when RAF **Blenheims** made a spectacular and highly successful raid on Italian flying-boats in Menelaio Bay, New Zealanders captained five of the attacking aircraft. Squadron Leader Shannon and Pilot Officer Blackmore ⁷ flew fighter **Blenheims** of No. 30 Squadron while Pilot Officers Walker, Ferguson and Nicolson captained bombers of No. 55 Squadron. The force flew overland to **Sidi Barrani**, where it turned out to sea and then continued to the target along the coast. Complete surprise was thus achieved and there was little opposition as No. 55 Squadron bombed from as low as 600 feet and machine-gunned targets on water and land; then as the bombers turned for home **Shannon** led his **Blenheims** down in low-flying attacks with front and rear machine guns. Altogether twelve enemy seaplanes were crippled or sunk; a fuel dump near the jetty was also set on fire and the flames spread to a nearby equipment store.

¹ Group Captain U. Y. Shannon, DFC; **RAF**; born **Wellington**, 6 Dec 1905; joined **RAF** Feb 1930; commanded No. **30 Sqdn** 1938–41; **RAF** Station, Gordan's Tree, **Middle East**, 1941; No. **10 Sqdn** 1944–45; **RAF** Station, Full Sutton, 1945.

² Flying Officer M. S. Ferguson; born **Devonport**, 10 Jan 1916; joined **RAF** Feb 1938; killed on air operations, 1 Apr 1941.

³ Flying Officer R. H. Nicolson, m.i.d.; born **Christchurch**, 24 Apr 1918; clerk; joined **RAF** 16 May 1938; killed in flying accident, 10 May 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer T. O. Walker, m.i.d.; born **Rotorua**, 27 Mar 1915; farmer; joined **RAF** Mar 1938; killed on air operations, 18 Mar 1941.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant L. B. Buchanan, DFC; born **Palmerston North**, 4 Nov 1917; joined **RAF** May 1938; killed on air operations, 13 Apr 1941.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant R. D. Campbell; born **Hamilton**, 7 Jul 1919; joined **RAF** Oct 1938; transferred **RNZAF** Dec 1943; prisoner of war 7 Jan 1941; escaped Oct 1943.

⁷ Squadron Leader H. G. P. Blackmore; born **Wellington**, 15 Mar 1914; joined **RAF** May 1938; killed on air operations, 20 Oct 1941.

Flying Bombays with No. 216 Squadron in Egypt, Pilot Officers Bagnall ¹ and Chisholm ² were among the pioneer transport pilots who carried VIPs and moved stores and personnel to various landing grounds; they also bombed **Tobruk**. Flying Officer Holdsworth, ³ a Lysander pilot with No. 208 Army Co-operation Squadron, flew reconnaissance sorties for **7 Armoured Division** and made many flights on photographic reconnaissances, artillery spotting and for counter-battery shoots.

From **Alexandria** Flying Officers Hughes ⁴ and Milligan ⁵ captained Sunderland flying boats of No. 230 Squadron on anti-submarine, reconnaissance and convoy escort patrols over the eastern **Mediterranean**. Towards the end of June, one crew from their squadron attacked and sank two Italian submarines, one of them in the Ionian Sea and the other between **Crete** and **Sicily**; on the latter occasion the pilot landed alongside the wreckage in a rough sea and picked up four

survivors. About the same time another Sunderland on reconnaissance near **Tobruk** was attacked by four Italian fighters. It shot down one of them and drove off the others after a fifteen minutes' engagement. The flying-boat's fuel tanks were extensively holed but the leaks were plugged with plasticine. 'I had to warn these enterprising captains,' writes Longmore, 'against trailing their coats too close to Italian fighter bases. Though the Sunderland's armament of ten machine guns was quite formidable we could not really afford the loss of even one Sunderland if it could be avoided nor could we afford, from the maintenance point of view, having them return after a self-sought encounter looking like pepper pots.'

From the **Sudan** Flight Lieutenant Magill, ⁶ Pilot Officers Joel ⁷ and Mackenzie ⁸ flew Wellesley bombers in the most difficult operations against enemy airfields, camps and towns in **Eritrea** and **Abyssinia**. Magill, who flew with No. 47 Squadron from Erkowit, was later to be

¹ Wing Commander D. R. Bagnall, DSO, DFC, DFC (US); born **Auckland**, 23 Sep 1918; civil servant; joined **RAF** 1939; commanded No. **40 Sqn, Middle East**, 1943–44; Air Staff, No. 28 Group, AEAf, 1944; Air Branch, SHAEF, 1944–45.

² Wing Commander R. T. Chisholm; born Dunedin, 2 Feb 1912; joined **RAF** 1936; transferred **RNZAF** Jul 1944; commanded No. **194 Sqn**, SEAC, 1944.

³ Flying Officer C. W. Holdsworth; born **Wellington**, 20 Apr 1916; joined **RAF** Jul 1938; killed on air operations, 15 Jun 1941.

⁴ Wing Commander S. W. R. Hughes, OBE, AFC, DFC (Gk); born **Devonport**, 25 Oct 1914; joined **RAF** Jun 1938; commanded Sea Rescue Flight, **Middle East**, 1942; training staff, **RAF Middle East**, 1943–45.

⁵ Wing Commander D. N. Milligan, DFC; born **Wellington**, 19

Dec 1916; clerk; joined **RAF** 6 Dec 1937; killed on active service, 18 Jan 1944.

⁶ Wing Commander G. R. Magill, OBE, DFC and bar, m.i.d.; born **Te Aroha, Cambridge**, 23 Jan 1915; electrical engineer; joined **RAF** 31 Aug 1936; commanded No. 180 Sqdn 1943; Operations Staff, No. 2 Group, 1943–45.

⁷ Wing Commander L. J. Joel, DFC; **RAF**; born Dunedin, 3 Jan 1917; joined **RAF** Aug 1938; commanded No. **55 Sqdn, Middle East**, 1943–44; Operations Staff, No. 38 Group, 1944–45.

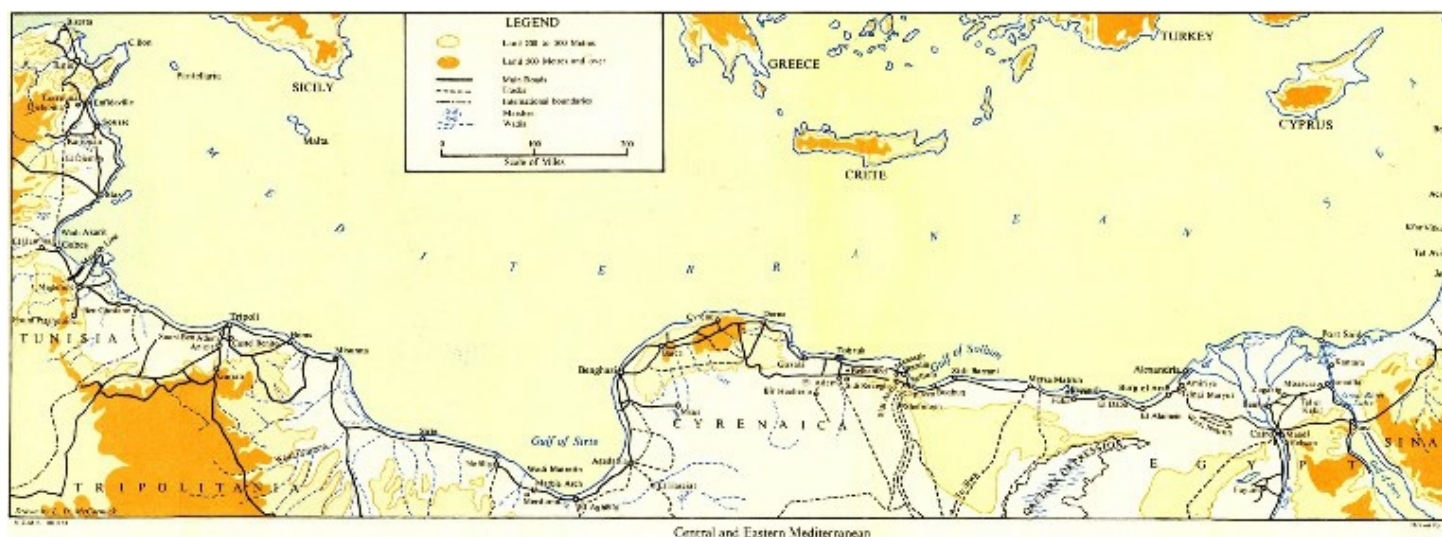
⁸ Flying Officer M. Mackenzie; born Greenpark, 21 Nov 1913; farmer; joined **RAF** Jul 1938; killed on air operations, 27 May 1941.

outstanding as a squadron commander and then in planning air operations with the Second **Tactical Air Force** in **Europe**. Joel, with No. 223 Squadron based at Summit, was to complete three operational tours in the **Middle East** and to command the well-known No. 55 Bomber Squadron. Mackenzie, who was with No. 14 Squadron at Port **Sudan**, did valuable work in convoy escort duties and anti-submarine patrols in the **Red Sea** in addition to his part in bombing operations.

From **Aden**, Flying Officer Young ¹ captained Blenheims on bombing missions to **Eritrea** and was particularly prominent during the Italian offensive against **British Somaliland** in August 1940. Flying Officers Barnitt, ² Hutton ³ and **Nelson** ⁴ also captained aircraft operating from **Aden** on convoy escort and reconnaissance over the **Red Sea** and its southern approaches. Barnitt several times fought off attacks by enemy bombers on ships in the approaches to **Aden**. During an early October patrol when three Italian aircraft approached the convoy, he sent one of them crashing into the sea and another limping away, belching clouds of smoke, in what the admiring and enthusiastic crew of an escort ship described as 'a very gallant action'. A few days later, after a long patrol which included combat with an enemy bomber, he landed at Kamaran

Island to refuel; whilst taking off again an engine failed and he was killed when his **Blenheim** crashed into a corner of a mosque. Barnitt had already been recommended for the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross and this was confirmed shortly after his death. He was the first New Zealander in the **Middle East** to be decorated for war service.

New Zealanders also held a variety of ground posts at this time. Wing Commander Mitchell ⁵ was Senior Air Staff Officer at **Aden**; Squadron Leader Richmond ⁶ was on the signals staff of No. **252 Wing** in Egypt; Squadron Leader Bennett ⁷ was an armament officer with No. **202 Group** at **Maaten Baggush**, Squadron Leader J. S. Smith ⁸ was



Central and Eastern Mediterranean

¹ Squadron Leader R. C. Young, DFC, m.i.d.; born Kakanui, 22 Oct 1913; joined **RAF** 6 Dec 1937; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944.

² Flying Officer H. M. F. Barnitt, DFC; born **New Plymouth**, 13 Jan 1918; joined **RAF** Jun 1938; killed on air operations, 20 Oct 1940.

³ Flight Lieutenant C. R. Hutton; born **Wellington**, 28 Feb 1916; joined **RAF** Jul 1938; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944.

⁴ Squadron Leader A. W. Nelson; born **Wellington**, 18 Oct 1915; clerk; joined **RAF** Aug 1937.

⁵ Wing Commander A. C. Mitchell; born Balcutha, 2 Nov 1904; joined **RAF** 25 May 1928; died on active service, 18 Sep 1940.

⁶ Group Captain R. C. Richmond; **RAF** (retd); born **Wellington**, 14 Mar 1905; joined **RAF** 1930; permanent commission **RAF** 1935; signals duties, HQ Middle East, 1940–41; HQ Fighter Command, 1943–44; commanded No. 70 Wing, 1944; commanded **RAF** Station, Yatesbury, 1947–48; signals duties, No. 3 Group, 1948–49.

⁷ Squadron Leader R. J. Bennett; born **Blenheim**, 9 May 1908; joined **RAF** 1930; killed on air operations, 12 Apr 1941.

⁸ Squadron Leader J. S. Smith; born **Timaru**, 30 Jan 1895; served RFC and **RAF** 1915–21; rejoined **RAF** Feb 1939.

in the operations room at Headquarters **RAF**, **Middle East**, and Squadron Leaders A. H. ¹ and D. H. Marsack ² were doing valuable work as intelligence officers. A small group of men from the Dominion were also serving in **Iraq**, notably at the important Flying Training School at **Habbaniya**; here Squadron Leader Nedwill ³ and Flying Officer Murdoch ⁴ were among the flying instructors.

* * * * *

After three months of war the only major success the Italians could claim was the capture of **British Somaliland**. ⁵ But on the ground they still held the advantage even though they had been slow to make use of it; and when at last, in mid-September, Graziani began his advance into Egypt, Wavell was forced to withdraw his troops from the frontier to prepared positions at **Mersa Matruh**. For about a week the Italian columns, constantly harassed by our ground and air forces, moved

slowly forward until they reached **Sidi Barrani**, where they ground to a halt. They were still some sixty miles short of the main British defences but at the moment Graziani had no desire to advance further until he had built up supplies. A bold offensive a few weeks earlier might conceivably have overrun Egypt, but Italian strategy had succumbed to over-caution and the great opportunity was allowed to slip away.

For British reinforcements had now begun to reach the **Middle East**. Despite the German invasion threat to **Britain**, Churchill and his Cabinet had taken the bold decision to send some of their most precious material and reinforcements to the **Mediterranean**. With the arrival of an armoured brigade towards the end of September, Wavell was not only able to consolidate the defence of Egypt but also to contemplate a limited offensive. And as the weeks passed with Graziani still lingering over his preparations for further advance, Wavell went ahead with plans for a surprise attack. This, however, had to be delayed until the middle of December because the **RAF**, whose support he regarded as essential to success, had to send some of its best squadrons to help the Greeks in **Albania**. In the meantime ground operations were mainly

¹ Wing Commander A. H. Marsack, MBE, m.i.d.; born Parnell, **Auckland**, 6 Oct 1906; joined **RAF** 1930; permanent commission 1936; Special Intelligence, **Middle East**, 1939–44.

² Group Captain D. H. Marsack; born Parnell, **Auckland**, 26 Feb 1909; joined **RAF** 1930; permanent commission 1936; Intell. and Admin. duties, **Middle East**, 1939–45.

³ Squadron Leader R. J. C. Nedwill, AFC; born **Christchurch**, 2 Jun 1913; joined **RAF** 16 Mar 1934; killed on active service, 26 Mar 1941.

⁴ Squadron Leader A. O'S. Murdoch; born Dunedin, 4 Jan 1916; salesman; joined **RAF** 25 Oct 1937; killed on air operations, 27 Apr 1944.

⁵ Here the small British forces which had relied upon the co-operation of the French airfields and garrison in the neighbouring colony of Djibouti had been unable to hold out against a very superior Italian force. But they retreated with the utmost skill. Fighting all the way and supported by the **RAF** squadrons from **Aden**, they made good their withdrawal and under the protection of a few long-range **Blenheim** fighters were successfully taken off to **Aden**.

confined to patrol activity by both sides. But even here the initiative now passed to the British.

Throughout the autumn the small **RAF** force in Egypt continued to strike at the enemy. Supply ports, lines of communication, landing grounds, military camps and dumps—all came under attack. British fighter pilots continued to keep their opponents on the defensive and when the Italians did attempt to retaliate they enjoyed singularly little success. One day at the end of October when fifteen S79s, escorted by eighteen Cr42s, made a determined effort to bomb our forward positions, they were intercepted by twelve Hurricanes and ten Gladiators and returned at least eight short. Again, in mid-November, when a Lysander and a **Blenheim** escorted by nine Hurricanes and six Gladiators were sent to photograph the Italian positions south of **Sidi Barrani**, a swarm of Cr42s rose to give combat; for over half an hour the British formation fought a lively engagement and then returned intact with seven enemy aircraft to its credit and all the required photographs—including some excellent pictures of the Italian anti-tank defences.

But these were difficult days for Middle East Air Command and Longmore had to keep juggling his small resources between the Western Desert, **East Africa**, the **Red Sea** and the **Sudan**, so that the Italians might not secure those advantages to which their vast numerical superiority entitled them. After Mussolini's attack on **Greece** in October, Longmore was obliged to draw upon his small force in Egypt to the extent of three squadrons of Blenheims and one of Gladiators. These units were to do splendid work in support of the hard-pressed Greeks ¹

and their despatch was considered politically necessary at the time, but they could ill be spared if effective assistance was to be given to Wavell's forthcoming offensive from Egypt. Indeed, to keep his promise, Longmore had to strip **Alexandria** and the Canal of their defending squadrons and bring up a few others from **Aden** and the **Sudan**. Even these moves provided a British fighter force of only sixty-five aircraft when the offensive began.

A thin trickle of reinforcement aircraft—Blenheims, Hurricanes and the first Wellington bombers—had begun to arrive from **Britain** but it was months before the loss occasioned by the transfers to **Greece** was offset. For after the fall of **France** the strengthening of British air resources in the **Middle East** was no easy matter. Only the longer range

¹ In the early stages the Italians had made some small progress into Greek territory, supported by Italian air attacks which the numerically inferior Greek Air Force was unable to check. However, with the arrival of British squadrons the situation changed to the advantage of the Greeks in their frontier operations. Blenheims attacked Valona and Sarande Bay, as well as aerodromes in **Albania** within reach; Wellingtons from **Malta** also bombed the Adriatic ports of **Bari** and **Brindisi**, whence reinforcements were going to Valona. By the third week in November the Greeks had captured Koritza and driven the Italians back across the frontier.

machines could be flown out by way of **Gibraltar** and **Malta**, on which route their newly trained crews faced the hazards of the long night-flight south from **Britain**, the unpleasantly short runway at **Gibraltar** and the night landing and take-off from **Malta**. Aircraft of shorter range had to be shipped by sea, which involved the long time-consuming journey round the Cape. Fortunately, however, the possibility of shipping aircraft to **West Africa** and then flying them across to Egypt had already been explored and during the latter part of September 1940 a first flight of five Hurricanes, led and guided by a **Blenheim**, completed the 4000-mile journey from **Takoradi**, on the Gold Coast, via Kano and

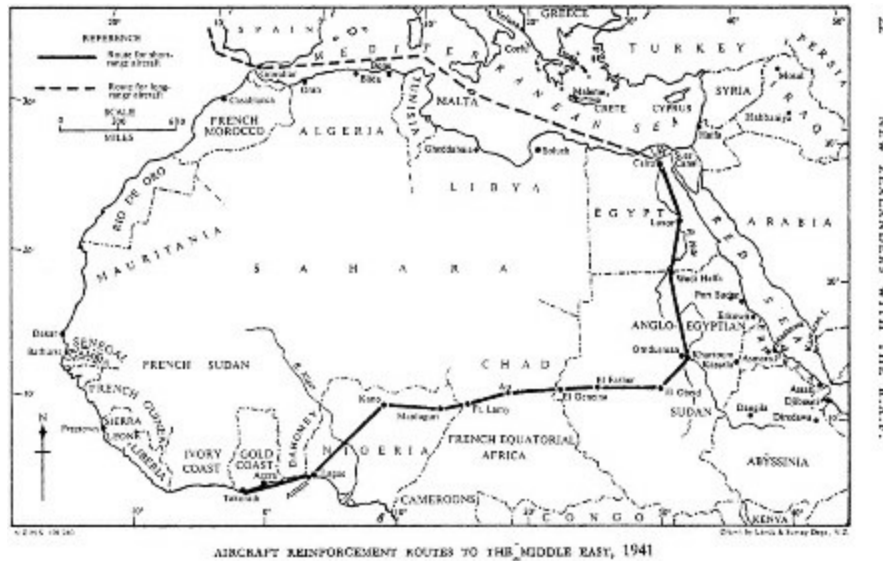
Khartoum, to Egypt.

The opening of this new reinforcement route held great promise which was to be amply fulfilled. But at first many months' work were needed before it was properly organised. Considerable workshops and accommodation had to be built at **Takoradi and various refuelling and other facilities provided for along the way. The climate and the local malaria harassed the men erecting the crated aircraft. There was heavy wear on engines during the long flight over barren and sandy spaces. Weather and other troubles also hampered the air convoys. Early in December 1940, when the first six Hurricanes of No. 73 Squadron were on the fifth lap of their flight, the wireless of the guiding Blenheim failed, its crew lost their bearings and in the gathering darkness all seven machines were forced to land in the desert. Two Hurricanes crashed beyond repair, one of the pilots was killed, and the other four Hurricanes were all badly damaged. With such misadventures the number of aircraft unserviceable awaiting spares along the route soon piled up.**

There were other inevitable causes of delay. When the Hurricanes reached Egypt they had to be stripped of their long-range tanks, overhauled and fitted with guns. Furthermore, when squadrons were moved to the **Middle East their ground staffs and equipment had to travel by sea around the Cape, and on more than one occasion it was found that stores had been packed in cases which bore no distinctive marking. Because of all these various difficulties none of the aircraft supplied via **Takoradi** became available in 1940. Yet as Churchill remarks: 'if the scheme had not been begun in good time the Army of the **Nile** and all its ventures could not have lived through the tragic events of 1941.'**

New Zealand airmen took their share in blazing this air trail over four thousand miles of swamps, dense jungle, barren desert and varying climates. The pioneer flight to which the route owed its foundation had, in fact, been made by Sir Arthur Coningham fifteen years earlier, when as a young squadron leader he led three De Havilland aircraft on the

double journey between Cairo and Kano, in Nigeria. Among



Aircraft Reinforcement Routes To The Middle East, 1941

the pilots who flew some of the first reinforcement aircraft from Takoradi to Egypt were Flying Officers Milne, ¹ Daniell ² and Cotterill, ³ while Pilot Officers Reid ⁴ and Williams ⁵ did good work as navigators in the leading Blenheims. No small contribution to the maintenance of the **Takoradi route in its early days was made by Flying Officers Bagnall, Chisholm and Allcock ⁶ of No. 216 Squadron, who flew Bombay transports along the route carrying stores and spare parts for the various staging posts.**

Experienced pilots were soon chosen to lead formations and Flying Officer Milne in particular frequently performed this duty. These leaders were entirely responsible for the convoy and their difficulties were manifold. Aircraft frequently disappeared from formation and the leader, mindful of the slight margin of petrol they carried, had to decide whether to search for the missing machine or to continue. Radio-telephony, on which so much depended once a formation took to the air, often proved unserviceable and at staging posts the leader was often called upon to decide whether aircraft which had developed some defect should carry on or stay behind for repairs. Not the least of his problems in this period was that of accommodation at the various posts, where

facilities for the weary crews left much to be desired; men often had to spend the night in billets with bug-infested beds and inadequate protection against mosquitoes.

Here is a description of the daily stages between **Takoradi** and **Cairo** provided by one of the pilots:

On the first day we left **Takoradi** with its red cliffs and steaming Gold Coast bush for Lagos, the first staging post in Nigeria, about 380 miles away. The formation coast-crawled to Accra, past steamy swamplands, native fishing villages and the 17th and 18th century Portuguese castles of the old slave traders. From Accra, we flew along about ten miles out to sea to avoid Vichy-French Dahomey and then inland again along the mangrove swamps to put down at Apapa, the airport of Lagos, built on what had once been swampland.

The second day the formation flew on to Kano, a distance of 525 miles. On leaving the lakes the track turned north-east and inland over threatening

¹ Flight Lieutenant R. F. Milne; born **Wellington**, 11 Jul 1920; clerk; joined **RAF** 31 Oct 1938; killed on air operations, 15 Feb 1943.

² Squadron Leader R. D. Daniell, DFC, AFC, Flying Cross (Hol); born **Hamilton**, 29 Oct 1920; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1939; transferred **RAF** Jun 1940; retransferred **RNZAF** Jun 1945.

³ Flight Lieutenant G. W. Cotterill, DFC; born Hastings, 22 Apr 1916; commercial pilot; joined **RAF** Sep 1940; killed in flying accident, 8 Nov 1945.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant R. P. Reid; born Dunedin, 13 Jan 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 4 Jun 1940.

⁵ Flying Officer A. G. B. Williams; born Turakina, 19 Aug

1916; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** 4 Jun 1940; killed on air operations, 25 Jul 1942.

⁶ Wing Commander G. M. Allcock, DFC and bar; born **Wellington**, 14 Dec 1916; commercial pilot; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1938; transferred **RAF** Aug 1939; CGI No. 1651 Conversion Unit, 1942-43; No. 7 Sqdn, 1945.

dense jungle which began to thin north of the river Niger. At last the red dust of Kano appeared, an antique walled city and a centuries old staging post for land traffic between the Sahara and the Congo.

The journey between Kano and El Geneina in the **Sudan**, a total of some 960 miles, was made in two stages on the third day. From Kano a heartening patch of advanced cultivation for some 30 miles was quickly succeeded by scrub and arid country until a convenient road from Kano could be followed into Maiduguri where the flight would put down for refuelling. Leaving Nigeria, course was set across French Equatorial Africa but here the Colonial Troops, unlike their compatriots of the Dahomey, had declared for the Free French and the airfield at Fort Lamy offered a valuable refuelling point and an emergency landing ground. On this stage Lake Fitri was a valuable pinpoint for navigators but could be somewhat disturbing in that, being mainly a mass of swamps, the outline shifted up to thirty miles between the wet and dry seasons. Now in the heart of **Africa**, the country became progressively more barren, more gruelling with only outcrops of rock to relieve the monotony. Finally Geneina was reached. Although situated on a large wadi crossing the route its sandy surface made it somewhat difficult to pick out from the air.

On the fourth day aircraft flew from Geneina to **Khartoum** in two stages, a short one of 190 miles and the other of 560 miles. From Geneina the country retained its desert characteristics with occasional patches of scrub and trees over the short hop to El Fasher where aircraft refuelled. Here in the Sudanese desert aircraft which made forced landings were extremely difficult to locate and the almost inevitable

result for the crews was death from thirst. Accordingly the direct route was soon diverted for fighter aircraft to El Obeid where a temporary area of cultivation was found. Sandstorms were prevalent over the remaining 250 miles to **Khartoum** with consequent low visibility so that the aircraft's track was deflected to starboard until the **Nile** could be located and used as a leading line into **Khartoum**.

From Khartoum aircraft flew to Abu Sueir by covering 520 miles on the fifth day and some 500 miles on the sixth and last day. From Khartoum the route was comparatively easy. With a convenient refuelling point at Wadi Halfa crews had little to do but follow the magnificent course of the **Nile** above the Cataracts, **Luxor**, the Valley of Kings, until finally the great pyramids and the sprawling mass of **Cairo**, topped by the Citadel, came into sight.

As the **Takoradi** air route became firmly established, New Zealanders in company with their comrades from other parts of the Empire and from Allied nations continued the exacting task of ferrying aircraft across **Africa**. Unfortunately the hazards of flight across long stretches of inhospitable country, the vagaries of weather, the inexperience of some airmen and the difficulties of aircraft maintenance under extremely trying conditions all took their toll in lives. The causes of many accidents were never known—typical was the loss of Flying Officer Pettit ¹ in late August 1941 when his aircraft was unable to maintain height and fell into the sea off Lagos. However, the
fore-

¹ Flying Officer N. C. Pettit; born Wairoa, 25 Dec 1920; joined **RNZAF** 12 Sep 1939; transferred **RAF** Apr 1940; killed on air operations, 28 Aug 1941.

sight

of the route's originators, the devotion of its aircrews and the hard work of the ground staffs were to be amply repaid. By May 1943 over

5300 British and American aircraft of many types, including fighters, light bombers and transports, had been flown from **Takoradi** to the **Middle East Command**.

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At dawn on 9 December 1940 Wavell struck at the Italian Army in the **Western Desert**. The attack took the enemy completely by surprise and within a few days not only **Sidi Barrani** but **Sollum** and **Capuzzo** were in our hands and the erstwhile invaders of Egypt were streaming back across its frontier. This success exceeded all expectations for Wavell had planned only a limited advance beyond **Sidi Barrani**. But the opportunities for exploitation which now presented themselves were seized with vigour. Sweeping forward into **Cyrenaica**, British forces under Lieutenant-General O'Connor proceeded to invest **Bardia** which, although strongly fortified and well placed for defence, was captured early in January with 40,000 prisoners. Then came further rapid advance to **Tobruk**, an Italian naval base and a main supply port. Here also there were good perimeter defences, but after a short delay caused by sandstorms these were speedily penetrated and the town fell on 21 January with something like 25,000 prisoners.

At this point further progress was gravely threatened by the British Cabinet's offer of troops and armoured forces to the Greeks. But fortunately the **Greek Government** was satisfied for the moment to face the Italians with its own meagre forces and such aid as could be given by the **RAF**. Wavell's army was thus left free to complete its rout of the Italians and this it proceeded to do in one of the most remarkable operations of the war. While 6 Australian and 7 Armoured Divisions thrust forward along the coastal road to seize **Derna**, **Mechili** and **Benghazi**, a small force cut directly across rocky and waterless country to reach the main highway to the south. The Italian force retreating from **Benghazi**, still 25,000 strong, was thus trapped, and after a brief but desperate effort to break out it surrendered. The British advance finally came to a halt on 6 February 1941 when its advanced guards reached the region of **El Agheila**

Months of disappointment and disaster were soon to follow and all that had been won in **Cyrenaica** was to be cast away in the vain effort to sustain **Greece**, but nothing can obscure the brilliance of this early campaign. Within two months a force never exceeding two divisions had advanced 600 miles over desert territory, utterly routed an Italian army of no fewer than ten divisions, and captured 130,000 prisoners, 1290 guns and 400 tanks at a cost to itself of barely 3000 casualties.



THE WESTERN DESERT,
SHOWING PRINCIPAL AIRFIELDS

But this was not the only achievement of Wavell's **Middle East** Command during the early months of 1941. Simultaneously with the advance into **Cyrenaica**, attacks had been launched against the Italians in **East Africa**. From the **Sudan** British forces pushed into **Eritrea** where, after bitter fighting, they captured the great natural stronghold of **Keren** and swept on to **Asmara** and **Massawa**. Troops from **Kenya** also advanced into Italian **Somaliland** and **Abyssinia**, rapidly capturing enemy bases and airfields despite the difficult country over which they had to fight. So successful was the conduct of the whole campaign that within a few short months the Italians were to lose the whole of their East African possessions and most of **Abyssinia**. The menace of large enemy air and ground forces in the rear of **Egypt** was thus removed and British troops and air squadrons could be moved north, where they were urgently

needed.

The RAF contributed much to the success of both these victories. In the Western Desert Collishaw's squadrons, by dispersing and subduing the opposing Italian air force, enabled Wavell's initial attack to achieve all the advantages of surprise. They then gave most valuable help in the opening stages of the battle by their reconnaissance, bombing and fighter patrols; highly effective attacks on enemy transport and airfields were made by low-flying Hurricanes, some of which made as many as four sorties a day.

Throughout the hectic weeks that followed both fighters and bombers constantly harassed the retreating enemy columns, preparing the way for and covering the advance of our ground forces at every stage. How greatly this air support helped to speed the Army's advance is shown by what happened at **Tobruk**. Here reconnaissance planes secured valuable photographs of enemy positions and minefields and the main air effort was then applied within a defended perimeter around the town. Combined air and naval bombardment during the two nights immediately before the ground assault softened the defences and in the final hours protracted bombing by Wellingtons covered the assembly of our tanks. At dawn on 21 January British tanks and Australian infantry moved forward under fighter cover and a creeping barrage. At the same time Blenheims, Lysanders and Hurricanes operated ahead of the troops to keep the threatened area clear of reinforcements. Quickly piercing the outer defences our forces poured through, and with the help of incessant air attacks the bulk of the artillery was soon established inside the perimeter. The intensity of the effort in the air may be judged from the fact that one squadron with only eight serviceable Blenheims flew thirty-two sorties during the day. By the evening the Australians had captured the escarpment which dominates the harbour and the next morning they entered the town.

The RAF also won a notable victory over the numerically superior Italian Air Force, with the important result that British troops were never seriously held up by enemy aircraft during their victorious sweep

through **Cyrenaica**. From the outset the Italians were driven almost completely on the defensive by the aggressiveness of the small British fighter force, whose only really modern machines were some thirty-odd Hurricanes. Numerous attacks on airfields and landing grounds added to the enemy's difficulties and led to the virtual collapse of his air force in the later stages. When the airfields at **El Adem**, **Gazala** and **Benina** were captured they were found littered with the wreckage of Italian machines. Altogether 1100 enemy planes were counted shattered and abandoned all over the desert. Along with the aircraft wreckage were hundreds of enemy lorries smashed by air attack, while in Cyrenaican harbours lay thirty-five ships that had been destroyed or disabled from the air.

After the capture of **Benghazi** Lieutenant-General O'Connor addressed this special Order of the Day to Air Commodore Collishaw:

'I wish,' he wrote, 'to record my very great appreciation of the wonderful work of the R.A.F. units under your command, whose determination and fine fighting qualities have made this campaign possible.'

'Since the war began you have consistently attacked without intermission an enemy **Air Force** between five and ten times your strength dealing him blow after blow until finally he was driven out of the sky and out of **Libya** leaving hundreds of derelict aircraft on his aerodromes. In his recent retreat from **Tobruk** you gave his ground troops no rest, bombing their concentrations and carrying out low flying attacks on their transport columns.'

'In addition you have co-operated to the full in carrying out our many requests for special bombardments, reconnaissances and protection against enemy air action and I should like to say how much all this has contributed to our success.'

Support for the campaign in **East Africa** followed a similar pattern. The country was difficult and most of the flying had to be done over hostile territory or against well-defended positions in single-engined

aircraft. Nevertheless the British squadrons, with what General Platt politely terms 'their variety of machines', soon gained air superiority. 'By a continuous forward policy they drove their opponents from the air and destroyed their machines on the ground; the army was indeed grateful for the immunity from hostile air attack thus gained.' The **RAF** also did much to reduce enemy resistance on the ground by its frequent attacks on gun positions, forward defended localities and supply lines. 'During the battle for **Keren**,' says Platt, 'determined enemy counter-attacks were broken up by the help of close support from the R.A.F.' Meanwhile, 'our long columns of transport continually on the road between **Keren** and **Kassala**, were never interfered with from the air.' And so it continued as the East African campaign moved to its triumphant conclusion.

* * * * *

But the British run of success in North Africa was short-lived. For **Hitler** had decided that **Germany** must now intervene in the Middle East and this decision was to have an immediate and far-reaching effect on the course of events. Early in January 1941, in order to bolster his shaky ally, **Hitler** sent a strong contingent of the *Luftwaffe* to **Sicily**, and a few weeks later further air squadrons, together with the leading elements of an armoured corps under a young and able commander, **Erwin Rommel**, reached **Tripoli**.

Fearful for the safety of the Rumanian oilfields from air attack **Hitler** also ordered the preparation of plans for the occupation of the **Balkans** and the Aegean coast, including the Greek mainland. This new threat to their country thoroughly alarmed the Greeks and they now decided to accept the offer of help from the British Army which they had previously refused. Complicated discussions followed but it was finally decided in **London** that four British divisions, including two Australian and one New Zealand as agreed by their Governments, should be sent to **Greece** from Egypt. It was a decision fraught with grave consequences. For it meant that at the very moment when German forces were arriving in North Africa to reinforce the Italians, **Wavell** had to deplete his army

in order to send the required help. Indeed it will long be a matter for controversy whether from the strategic point of view a serious error was not made in sending British forces to **Greece** and thus gravely weakening the Army in the Western Desert. But it was a higher strategy decision made primarily in the hope of building up a **Balkan** front and on the additional ground that if **Britain** had left **Greece** unsupported in her extremity she would have been shamed before the world. ¹

Events now moved swiftly. At the end of March 1941 the Germans and Italians counter-attacked in **Cyrenaica**. The weak British forces covering **Benghazi** were taken more or less by surprise and forced to retreat. Rommel followed up with a series of rapid outflanking movements during which the single British armoured division was overrun and two British generals, Neame and O'Connor, fell into enemy hands. Within a fortnight the remnants of the British forces were back at **Sollum**. **Tobruk** was still held, however, for Wavell took the bold decision to leave a force there and keep it supplied by sea. Rommel's failure to capture **Tobruk** was to cost him a year of bitter fighting; meanwhile the ever-increasing difficulties of supply and the ceaseless toll of the desert robbed his advance of its momentum and the German and Italian columns came to rest on the borders of Egypt.

But this was only the beginning. On 6 April the Germans invaded **Greece**, where their strong armoured forces, with powerful air support, quickly broke through the vital **Monastir Gap** and were soon advancing rapidly southwards. The **British Expeditionary Force**, of which only

¹ For a more detailed account of the decision to assist **Greece** see W. G. McClymont, To **Greece**, Chap. 6.

about one half had arrived, did its best to support the Greeks in their heroic resistance but all was in vain. Within three weeks the Greeks were compelled to capitulate and the British troops had no alternative but to withdraw. Some two-thirds of the original force were skilfully evacuated during the last week of April, but 14,000 prisoners were taken

by the Germans and the total loss was over 16,000 with all the heavy equipment.

The final scene of the Greek tragedy was played out in **Crete** where the part of the New Zealand Division evacuated to the island provided its principal defence. Here on 20 May, after heavy bombing attacks, the Germans began their airborne invasion, employing parachutists and great numbers of troop-carrying gliders. The defenders fought bravely and doggedly but the enemy, by determined and, at times, reckless employment of his forces in the air and on the ground, soon gained a firm foothold. His fighters and bombers subdued the anti-aircraft opposition and reinforcements began to arrive in strength. The loss of **Maleme** airfield on the first day proved fatal to the defence and within a week it was clear that **Crete** could no longer be held. Once again the evacuation proved more successful than could have been expected but the proportion saved was smaller than on the mainland.

German superiority in the air was largely responsible for their rapid success in each of these campaigns. In **Greece** and **Crete** it was indeed decisive. The *Luftwaffe* was now at the height of its power with a well-developed technique of co-operation with its ground forces and a highly efficient organisation for supply and replacement. Royal Air Force, **Middle East**, could match neither its strength nor its efficiency, for during these early months of 1941 British air power in this theatre reached its lowest ebb. Reinforcements were not yet arriving in sufficient quantity even to replace losses, while the earlier campaigns in **North** and **East Africa** had seriously reduced the number of operational aircraft with squadrons. Nor was it proving easy to keep serviceable the machines they had. This indeed was only possible by incorporating parts of damaged aircraft in other invalids whose cases were less advanced, a form of cannibalism which no air force can long survive. But such desperate expedients were imposed on Middle East Air Command by a situation in which there was far more to be done than aircraft with which to do it. And in these circumstances there was no hope of maintaining that degree of air superiority which had been largely

attained against the Italians; in its absence our land forces were bound to suffer.

When the Germans and Italians launched their attack in **Cyrenaica** the **RAF** had only four squadrons left in the **Western Desert**—two of Hurricanes, one of **Blenheim** bombers and one with Lysanders for army reconnaissance—while the opposing air force included no fewer than 90 German Messerschmitts and 80 Stuka and Heinkel bombers. In **Greece** the disparity was much greater for the enemy had massed over 1000 aircraft, half of them fighters, whereas the **RAF** could muster barely 200, of which only about a third were fighters. Moreover when, after the successful winter campaign against the Italians in **Greece** and **Albania**, the **RAF** moved up to meet the German attack, it found the airfields it had to occupy were small and ill-equipped; there were no engineers to enlarge them or to provide dispersal or protection; there was no effective warning organisation and virtually no anti-aircraft defence.

Skill and gallantry could and did inflict heavy casualties on superior numbers in the air but were of little avail when the bases were defenceless. Over **Crete** the Germans, operating in large numbers at short range and from secure bases, had complete air supremacy in their hands, virtually without having to fight for it. For there were only three airfields on the island and the few British aircraft that occupied them were soon destroyed; the airfields in **Cyrenaica** from which fighters might have operated across the sea to **Crete** had been captured in Rommel's advance to the Egyptian frontier.

Altogether, in the face of the enemy's marked operational advantages and his great numerical superiority, the **RAF** could not possibly redress the adverse situation which quickly developed on the ground in each of these campaigns. Nevertheless its pilots and aircrews made most strenuous exertions to help our troops in their unequal struggle. During the retreat from **Cyrenaica** the four British squadrons were constantly in the air providing reconnaissance and cover for the Army. They also did their best to hamper the enemy's forward movement by attacking his supplies and concentrations of vehicles; the few

Wellingtons based in Egypt also helped by bombing similar targets and, refuelling at **Tobruk**, they struck at **Tripoli**, the enemy's main supply port.

In **Greece** both fighter and bomber squadrons fought valiantly. In one early encounter twelve Hurricanes challenged thirty Messerschmitts and claimed five of them without loss. Again, during intensive air activity in the second week, Nos. 33 and 80 Squadrons reported the destruction of twenty-nine enemy machines. The bombers also took their toll of German armour and vehicles, as well as attacking targets behind his lines; but they were no match for the German fighters by day and on more than one occasion the whole of a small formation was wiped out.

A most gallant action was fought over **Athens** on 23 April 1941. That day the Germans came through the clear sky in mass formation of dive-bombers with a great ring of fighters circling over them. Watchers on the ground saw the whole British fighter force go up to meet them. It included fifteen Hurricanes in varying stages of disrepair assembled from three broken squadrons. In one long day of fighting these tattered aircraft and their weary pilots charged again and again into six times their number. Five of them were lost; but they brought down twenty-two, with eight more 'probables'. It was a brave gesture. The few surviving fighters with their pilots then continued defiant to the end and they were able to give some cover to the evacuation before they left for **Crete**.

On **Crete** a handful of weary men and worn-out aircraft that had served their time in six months of hard fighting farther north faced odds of more than ten to one. Yet in the first six days of the German bombing they and the few reinforcements which reached them clawed down more than twenty of their opponents before they were overwhelmed. A brave effort was then made to provide some fighter cover over **Crete** from landing grounds some 300 miles away in the Western Desert. Blenheims and long-range Hurricanes carrying external fuel tanks operated at this

extreme range and did succeed in destroying a number of German aircraft, especially at **Maleme**; but it was a costly endeavour for fighter after fighter was either destroyed on the ground at **Crete**, lost over the sea or else, with petrol exhausted, came down in the desert. Meanwhile **RAF** bombers were busy attacking the airfields in **Greece** and the **Dodecanese** from which the German fighters and troop-carriers were operating; they also dropped supplies to our troops fighting on **Crete**. But the number of fighter and bomber sorties that could be flown from distant bases was far too small to affect the issue.

The loss of **Crete** following on that of **Cyrenaica** and **Greece** led to much bitterness and the **RAF** was accused of having 'let down' the Army. In the streets of **Cairo** and in the prison camps of **Germany** and **Italy** **RAF** men were regarded with distinct disfavour, if not openly insulted. But their critics were ignorant of the circumstances of the time. The few squadrons of Middle East Air Command could not be everywhere at once; their bases had been unprotected and insecure and frequently lacked even the most elementary facilities. There was also ignorance of the fact, which even in the later years of the war some soldiers and sailors found difficult to grasp, that air operations were often in the nature of things conducted out of sight of those who benefited from them. Undoubtedly there had been mistakes but, on the whole, the **RAF** had fought hard and well and under most trying circumstances. At the end, many of its units had been reduced to three or four serviceable aircraft. One fighter squadron in the **Western Desert** lost three commanding officers within a fortnight. Another lost no fewer than ten crews in a single week—five of them in the valiant attempts to aid **Crete** and the other five during the fighting round **Tobruk**. These casualties are some measure of **RAF** effort and sacrifice during these months of disappointment and disaster.

Moreover, the air record is not one of complete failure and defeat. For in the same fortnight that **Crete** was lost the **RAF** undoubtedly saved **Iraq** with its oilfields and pipelines. It also helped in the next few weeks to achieve the successful occupation of **Syria**, by which a vital flank of

the **Middle East** was sealed against German infiltration.

An outstanding feature of events in **Iraq**—according to Churchill it was ‘a prime factor in our success’—was the spirited defence of the air base at **Habbaniya** against greatly superior forces well equipped with artillery. **Habbaniya** was the home of No. 4 Flying Training School, where a small group of instructors and pupils had fewer than eighty aircraft at their disposal, most of them quite unsuitable for war operations. Nevertheless the base not only held out against the encircling forces but (with the help of a few Wellingtons from Shaibah) bombed and machine-gunned them so effectively that on the fifth day the enemy departed. By their gallant action the defenders of **Habbaniya** gained time for ground and air reinforcements to arrive and, within a fortnight, despite some belated intervention on the part of the *Luftwaffe*, **Baghdad** and its airfield were captured and resistance in **Iraq** ceased. ¹

¹ What happened at **Habbaniya** is vividly described by Philip Guedella in his *Middle East*, 1940–1942. Here is a shortened version of his account:

Some 8000 Iraqi troops had assembled on the desert plateau which overlooks the airfield and their guns commanded the defenceless grey roofs at short range The threatened place had no means of replying to artillery bombardment except two vintage howitzers, a fragrant memory of the last war, appropriately relegated to decorative duties on the lawn outside the Aircraft Depot. These veterans had now been stripped, cleaned and overhauled for action; but there were no anti-aircraft guns and the Iraqi **Air Force** could muster about fifty first-line aircraft, including American bombers and some six Italian fighters, superior to anything at **Habbaniya**. Undaunted the defenders prepared for the worst. Training aircraft were fitted with unaccustomed bomb racks; a few time-expired Gladiators from the **Western Desert** were hastily rejuvenated and pupils were regaled in unexpected and extensive courses in rear gunnery and bomb aiming. Audaxes, normally capable of carrying 8 × 20 lb. bombs,

were made ready to take the air with a load of 2×250 lb. bombs. Operations continued under heavy fire all the first day; the aircraft working from the main aerodromes, which lay within half a mile of the Iraqi guns, had 'no time to linger.' Starting up behind the hangars, they took off by opening their throttles inside the iron fence, dashing through the gate, racing across the aerodrome, and irrespective of the wind, making a steep climbing turn to miss the plateau; and when they returned a steep turn between hangars served to elude pom-pom fire followed (if they were lucky) by a landing, a sharp turn inside the gate and a quick run to safety round the corner of a hangar

The days that followed were an indistinguishable nightmare. Work began half an hour before dawn and went on until after dark. Flying was continuous; and the women and children were evacuated by air, the transports taking off for **Basra** under cover of dive-bombing by the versatile Audaxes. They took to night flying, a disagreeable pastime, where no flare path could be used and a blind take-off was followed by a landing in the light of the aircraft's own landing lamp, hurriedly switched on when the altimeter registered a height of fifty feet and promptly switched off again on touching down. Their numbers dwindled and the toll of wounded pilots rose. The wastage of aircraft was formidable, only four out of twenty-seven Oxfords remaining serviceable after three days of fighting But a few Blenheims reached them; and ranging farther afield the little force attacked Iraqi aerodromes, destroying a number of aircraft on the ground; supplies intended for the enemy troops on the plateau were sedulously bombed on the way from **Baghdad**; and by 5 May the besiegers were beginning to taste all the pleasures of a siege themselves. The tables had been neatly turned and now **Habbaniya** went over to the offensive.

Throughout these fateful months of hard fighting many New Zealanders were in action as fighter and reconnaissance pilots and as captains and navigators of bomber aircraft. Flying Officers Bagnall and Chisholm were among those who did good work in bomber operations from Egypt. Both before and during the early stages of Wavell's advance

they took their lumbering Bombays night after night over the ports of **Benghazi** and **Tobruk**. At that time it was important to interrupt the forward flow of Italian troops and supplies, particularly of tanks which were shipped between these ports to avoid the wear and tear of the long road journey to the front. For the long flight to **Benghazi** an additional petrol tank was fitted inside the fuselage of the Bombays and this tank had to be refilled during flight from forty 4-gallon petrol tins which, when empty, were kicked out into the night.

Flight Lieutenant Schrader, ¹ Flying Officer Milnes ² and Flying Officer Hogg ³ flew some of the first Wellington bombers which joined in the attack of ports and airfields behind the enemy lines. Later the Wellingtons flew to **Tripoli** to bomb troops and supplies there; a few of them also operated from airfields in **Greece** against Italian Adriatic ports; back in Egypt they bombed airfields from which German aircraft were operating over **Greece** and **Crete**.

Flying Officers Bullot, ⁴ Ferguson, Nicolson and Walker operated over the **Western Desert** with No. 55 Blenheim Squadron. Throughout the advance and retreat this squadron worked particularly hard attacking enemy airfields and supply columns, as well as supporting the ground forces by bombing and reconnaissance. In one month the Blenheims flew forty-nine sorties by day and eighteen by night, principally over **Crete** to help the troops fighting there. Another 110 sorties were made on reconnaissance or bombing missions over the Western Desert. Brushes with enemy fighters became more frequent as German squadrons began to operate over the desert and the Blenheims that returned were often badly shot up. Not one of the four New Zealanders survived. Flying Officer Bullot was lost in January; Walker failed to return from a long reconnaissance to **Tripoli** in March and Ferguson and Nicolson were lost a few weeks later. Indeed such were the hazards of the early operations in the **Middle East** that barely half the men mentioned in this chapter survived the first two years.

Operating first from Egypt and then from **Greece**, Flight Lieutenant Buchanan and **Flying Officer Campbell** achieved a fine record of service

¹ Wing Commander G. L. M. Schrader; born **Wellington**, 11 Apr 1914; clerk; joined **RAF** 8 Jun 1936; killed on active service as result of road accident, 31 May 1943.

² Squadron Leader G. E. Milnes, m.i.d.; born **Christchurch**, 7 Nov 1913; joined **RAF** Sep 1939; killed in flying accident, 18 Jan 1943.

³ Squadron Leader R. J. K. Hogg, DSO, DFC, m.i.d.; born **Milton**, 9 Jun 1916; clerk; joined **RAF** 23 Dec 1938.

⁴ Flying Officer F. R. Bullot; born **New Plymouth**, 27 Jun 1916; joined **RAF** Jun 1938; killed on air operations, 21 Jan 1941.

as captains of **Blenheim** bombers with No. 211 Squadron. During the latter part of the campaign in **Greece**, Buchanan led his flight on eight sorties in eight days and received the award, rare in these early days, of the Distinguished Flying Cross. Flying Officer Fabian, ¹ a New Zealand pilot of the First World War, also served in **Greece** on the operations staff of No. 211 Squadron.

Nearly all records of **RAF** operations in **Greece** were lost but here is one pilot's account of how No. 211 Squadron fared in the early stages:

When the Squadron moved to **Greece**, Fabian had the task of planning the layout of the camp in Paramythia, south of the Albanian frontier and almost midway between Yanina and the Island of Corfu. There was only the stony flower covered bed of the valley just south of the little village of Paramythia for Fabian to work on with sheer peaks rising on all sides. A solitary saloon car comprised the entire transport section and this was used to carry water, petrol, fetch rations or to bomb up aircraft. A tremendous ridge rose to 5,000 feet to the East. A mountain road followed the Kalamas River to the village of Yanina

where was stationed No. 80 (Gladiator) Squadron. Communications were bad. There was one road to the north, and that narrow, and one single track railway.

No. 211 Squadron made a notable raid against the Italians on the morning of February 13. Three flights of Blenheims took off down wind—there was no other way to avoid the mountain barrier—and then flew across the Kalamas River and wound their way up the narrow valleys past Argyrokastron, ‘The Silver Fort,’ avoiding the fire of Italian anti-aircraft guns hidden in the mountain sides. After half-an-hour's flying time the formation was over the target, a mountain ridge north-west of Tepelene, where the enemy was mustering reinforcements. Here Buchanan's flight was attacked by Italian Macchi fighters; one of them was shot down by his turret gunner, not however before explosive bullets had hit the mainspar of one wing and the tail wheel had been shot away. Buchanan, however made a safe landing ...

During the evacuation of **Greece** the Blenheims flew out with men crammed into every available space, even the turrets. But neither Buchanan nor **Campbell** was able to take part. Early in January **Campbell's** aircraft was one of two Blenheims which failed to return from a raid on Valona. He was taken prisoner by the Italians but succeeded in making good his escape in October 1943. Buchanan lost his life while flying with a formation of six Blenheims to bomb **Monastir** in mid-April. Not one of these aircraft returned.

During the campaign in **East Africa**, Flight Lieutenant Magill and Flying Officer Joel were prominent as captains of Wellesley bombers operating against targets in **Eritrea** and **Abyssinia**; Magill commanded a detachment at an advanced base and led many sorties, including the notable raid on Dangila at the end of November 1940, which is said

¹ Squadron Leader A. J. M. Fabian; born **Wellington**, 23 Oct 1898; stores manager; joined **RAF** Nov 1940; transferred **RAAF** Jul 1941.

to have caused consternation among the seven enemy battalions stationed there. Flying Officer Mackenzie did good work in patrol and attack in the **Red Sea** area as a **Blenheim** pilot. He had one narrow escape when, flying to attack the Italians at Nefasit, one of his engines was hit in a brush with enemy fighters and he had to make a forced landing in wild country; fortunately his leader saw his predicament, landed successfully and picked him and his crew up.

Early in April 1941 Mackenzie and Joel both took part in the highly successful attack on five Italian destroyers that were attempting to escape from Massawa. Four of the warships were sunk or disabled while the fifth put back and scuttled herself in the port. On another patrol Mackenzie sighted and attacked an Italian submarine off Massawa; one bomb scored almost a direct hit, a second fell close alongside; nothing more was seen of the submarine.

Adventure and misadventure were frequent in these early days and were accepted as part of the day's work, but the story of Flying Officer Mackenzie and his navigator, Sergeant Fearn, ¹ deserves to be recounted here. Flying **Blenheim** bombers, their squadron was operating over the **Western Desert** and as far as **Crete**. Returning from a sortie to **Crete** Mackenzie and his crew were unable to locate their base. The wireless had failed and, with their aircraft running short of petrol, they decided to bale out rather than risk a crash landing in the desert. All three men jumped safely, unaware they were over the **Qattara** Depression, some seventy miles south of **El Daba**. They had planned to meet at their burning aircraft, but it blew up on hitting the ground and there were no flames to guide them. So each man wandered alone.

During the following days searching aircraft scoured the desert and a **Bombay**, captained by Flying Officer Allcock, first sighted the crashed **Blenheim** on the third evening. 'We looked for a spot to land,' he says, 'for in the Depression, the light colour is drift sands and you can only come down on the brown. We found no survivors by the **Blenheim** but a mile away there was a parachute; the cords were cut.' On the sixth day

Sergeant Fearn was found. He had covered about thirty miles of desert and had lived by ripping open his Mae West and filling it with rain-water. Badly bitten by mosquitoes, he received attention under the **Bombay's** wing before being flown to base. Allcock goes on: 'In the afternoon I went out again and found the second member of the crew, the wireless-operator Sergeant McConnell. ² When I saw him he was crawling too weak to stand. His chest was shrivelled. We doused him under the wing of our aircraft and the water disappeared on his skin like drips on a hot stove. He was also allowed a

¹ Flight Lieutenant M. B. Fearn, DFM; born **Invercargill**, 6 Apr 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1940.

² Sergeant J. N. McConnell; born **Gisborne**, 5 Jan 1921; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** 22 Dec 1940; killed on air operations 15 Jun 1942.

little water by mouth and some gentle feeding. The doctors said that he would have died the next day.' The search for Mackenzie continued. Motor-cyclists were carried to the scene inside the **Bombay** and for three days they rode in ever widening circles from the crashed aircraft but he was never found.

New Zealand fighter pilots operated over all the battle areas. In **Greece** Squadron Leader Shannon led his squadron of **Blenheim** fighters; they had notable success against the Italians in the early stages but later suffered severely at the hands of German fighters. Flying Officer Blackmore was one of his pilots. Also prominent in the air fighting over **Greece** was Pilot Officer Westenra, ¹ who flew Gladiators and was one of the few pilots from his squadron who survived to cover the evacuation. He then operated from **Crete**, where he shot down a Messerschmitt 110 in the early stages of the German attack.

In the Western Desert Flying Officer Spence ² distinguished himself in fighter operations with No. 274 Hurricane Squadron. On one sortie

during the retreat from **Benghazi** he shot down a Ju88 and an Me109 near **Tobruk**; two days later he sent another Me109 crashing into the desert, but during the combat he collided with the enemy fighter and was only just able to get his Hurricane back to the British lines. Like many others his luck failed a few weeks later when he was shot down while making a low-level attack on enemy columns between **Gazala** and **Sollum**.

Three New Zealand Hurricane pilots, Flying Officers Eiby ³ and Lamb ⁴ and Sergeant Laing, ⁵ flew and fought through the early desert campaigns with No. 73 Squadron, already famous for its victories in the skies over **Britain**. These pilots and their comrades in No. 3 Australian Squadron did particularly fine work during the retreat from **Benghazi**. On 5 April when they combined to cover 2 Armoured Division moving back to **Mechili**, they claimed fourteen enemy machines destroyed for the loss of only two Hurricanes. Subsequently No. 73 Squadron remained to operate from within the perimeter defences of **Tobruk**, where its pilots worked hard to protect the beleaguered garrison and the ships bringing supplies. During 14 April, when more than ninety German fighters and bombers attacked the port, the

¹ Squadron Leader D. F. Westenra, DFC and bar, m.i.d.; born **Christchurch**, 29 Apr 1918; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 16 Feb 1940; transferred **RAF** 11 Nov 1940; retransferred **RNZAF** 1 Jan 1944; commanded No. **93 Sqdn, Middle East**, 1943–44, and No. **65 Sqdn**, 1944.

² Flying Officer D. J. Spence; born **Christchurch**, 26 Aug 1920; insurance company employee; joined **RAF** 12 Jun 1939; killed on air operations, 30 Apr 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant W. T. Eiby; born **Christchurch**, 23 Nov 1914; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 20 Nov 1939.

⁴ Pilot Officer O. E. Lamb; born **Auckland**, 10 May 1917; joined **RAF** Aug 1939; killed on air operations, 14 Apr 1941.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant R. I. Laing, DFC; born Wynyard, Tasmania, 11 Mar 1913; bank clerk; joined RNZAF 20 Nov 1939.

squadron flew thirty-four sorties and claimed nine of the enemy along with a further two 'probables'. Lamb was one of three pilots lost that day.

Sergeant Laing had two remarkable escapes. In mid-May his was the only one of six Hurricanes to reach Crete—two were shot down on the way by British warships and the others lost contact with the guiding Blenheim. Then before Laing could take off again his fighter was destroyed on the ground by German bombers. But he got back from Crete—squeezed into the cockpit of another Hurricane with its pilot using him as a cushion! A day or two later he was strafing a German landing ground in the desert and had set fire to two aircraft when, as he puts it, 'a couple of Breda gun shells hit my radiator.' Fumes poured into the cockpit and two Me109s were hot on his tail. One scored hits, the elevator controls started to 'misbehave' and the Hurricane began to lose height. Laing was skimming along the top of the cliffs trying to shake off the Germans when he saw the outer defences of Tobruk. But just as safety seemed within reach his Hurricane flattened out into a wadi and burst into flames, which were licking round his legs before he could clamber out. Thinking he was still in enemy territory he dragged himself to a cave, where he lay exhausted for several hours. But his luck held, for a party of British troops out on patrol found him and took him into Tobruk.

Flying Officer Tracey, ¹ who had been with No. 79 Squadron during the Battle of Britain, flew long-range Hurricanes in fighter sweeps over Crete. On one occasion he had just shot down a Ju52 over Maleme when a Messerschmitt fastened on to his tail. Tracey dived towards the steep cliffs on the coast then pulled clear at the last moment, whereupon the German, over keen on the pursuit, crashed straight into the rocks below. Tracey's propeller had been damaged, his fuel tank holed and the

fuselage ripped by cannon shells, but he succeeded in flying back the two hundred miles across the sea to **Sidi Barrani**, where he made a forced landing after a sortie of four and a half hours. 'Quite a good effort', says the squadron record with masterly understatement. Tracey was also among the fighter pilots to cover the evacuation from **Crete**, and on one occasion when German bombers were attacking ships he intercepted a Ju88 and shot it down into the sea.

New Zealanders also did good work during the brief campaigns in **Iraq** and **Syria**. Flight Lieutenant Murdoch was one of the flying instructors at **Habbaniya** who flew with the **Oxford** trainers and ancient Gordons and Audaxes which did so much to quell the initial ardour of

¹ Flight Lieutenant O. V. Tracey, DFC; born Dunedin, 15 Mar 1915; storehand; joined **RAF** 8 Aug 1939; killed on air operations, 8 Dec 1941.

the rebels. Flight Sergeant Lewis ¹ was bomb-aimer in one of four Blenheims which operated from **Habbaniya**; in just over three weeks he flew no fewer than twenty-four missions which included fighter patrols, reconnaissance, strafing and bombing attacks on enemy airfields. Flying Officers Anstey ² and McArthur ³ were among the Wellington bomber pilots who operated from the **RAF** base at Shaibah against the Iraqi rebels. During one low-level attack on enemy artillery and motor vehicles, Anstey's Wellington was hit by anti-aircraft fire and he had to force-land at **Habbaniya** and then see his aircraft destroyed by the enemy artillery. McArthur made several effective attacks on concentrations of vehicles and on one sortie scored a direct hit on a group of tanks.

In **Syria** Flight Lieutenant Murdoch and Sergeant Jordan ⁴ flew Gladiator fighters in support of **10 Indian Division** and on offensive patrols against Vichy fighters. Flying Officer C. W. Holdsworth, who had done outstanding work in the **Western Desert** and **Greece** on Lysanders, now flew Hurricanes from Aqir in Palestine; he failed to return from a

reconnaissance of the **Damascus** area in mid-June. Pilot Officer Peterson⁵ won distinction for his work as bomb-aimer with Wellingtons of No. 37 Squadron operating from Shallufa in Egypt. In one attack on a fuel depot at **Beirut** he scored direct hits on several storage tanks, causing numerous fires and explosions. Pilot Officer Bourke⁶ and Sergeant G. F. Jones,⁷ who had previously flown on operations over **Crete**, also navigated **Blenheim** bombers on daylight raids over **Syria**. On one raid against an ammunition dump at Hammana they both survived a determined attack by French fighters in which three bombers were lost before the escort of Australian Tomahawks was able to engage the enemy and drive them off.

The record of these early months would be incomplete without reference to the men of the 'flying-boat union'—the crews of the few Sunderland flying-boats based at **Alexandria**, who flew constantly on reconnaissance, escort and anti-submarine patrols, and who also did splendid work on transport missions and in evacuating men from **Greece** and **Crete**.

¹ Pilot Officer R. D. Lewis, DFM; born Salisbury, England, 22 Jul 1916; joined **RAF** Aug 1939; killed as result accidental mine explosion, 22 Jun 1942.

² Flight Lieutenant W. I. Anstey, DFC; born **Timaru**, 22 Mar 1919; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1938; transferred **RAF** Aug 1939; retransferred **RNZAF** Aug 1944.

³ Flight Lieutenant D. H. McArthur, DFC; born Warkworth, 15 Jul 1920; farmer; joined **RAF** 17 Jan 1940; killed on air operations, 4 May 1942.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant L. P. Jordan; born **Blenheim**, 31 May 1920; clerk and salesman; joined **RNZAF** 30 Feb 1940.

⁵ Flying Officer K. S. Peterson, DFC; born **Auckland**, 28 Dec

1913; insurance clerk; joined **RNZAF** 13 Feb 1940; death presumed 5 Sep 1941.

⁶ Pilot Officer L. P. Bourke; born **Palmerston North**, 16 May 1910; teacher; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940; killed on air operations Nov 1941.

⁷ Flight Lieutenant G. F. Jones; born **Invercargill**, 1 Mar 1912; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 2 Jul 1940.

Five New Zealanders—Flight Lieutenants A. Frame, ¹ H. L. M. Glover, ² S. W. R. Hughes, H. W. Lamond ³ and D. N. Milligan—captained Sunderlands in these various duties. Successes against enemy submarines were rare, although Milligan was credited with damaging one of them while making a sweep to cover a Fleet movement from **Alexandria**. The transport work was more interesting and eventful. For example, early in April Frame carried General Wavell and Air Chief Marshal Longmore from Egypt to **Greece**. For the return flight three days later, he had to take off from a harbour which had been mined by enemy bombers, but he solved the difficulty by taxi-ing up a strip of water and then taking off down the same path.

Frame evacuated more than two hundred men from **Greece**. On one flight he arrived at Nauplia Bay at dusk, had great difficulty in locating his passengers, and when dawn came found the bay enveloped in dense black smoke from burning ships. Undaunted, he took off through the swirling clouds of smoke and landed his passengers safely at **Suda Bay** in **Crete**.

Lamond made several similar trips. In a truly remarkable flight on 25 April he brought away no fewer than seventy-four men in one lift, which with the crew of ten as well was, as he remarks, 'quite a number even for those days'. That same evening when he returned after dark the sea proved too calm for the aircraft's landing light to be effective and the Sunderland crashed and turned over. Only Lamond and three of his

crew survived and they drifted about on the upturned wing of their aircraft for several hours before they were picked up. Lamond stayed with the two seriously injured members of his crew and was captured when the Germans overran the area.

* * * * *

The first year of war in the **Middle East** had been an exacting time in which the **RAF** had somehow contrived to make a limited force of aircraft face in all directions. In the early stages the British squadrons had achieved astonishing success against fantastic odds, sweeping an immeasurably stronger enemy out of the sky over three vast provinces in **Libya**, **Eritrea** and **Abyssinia**; and when war came to **Greece** they had done all that was possible. If their resources were insufficient to deny **Greece** and **Cyrenaica** to the *Luftwaffe's* simultaneous attacks, they were not to blame. Much had happened that could not be foreseen

¹ Wing Commander A. Frame, DFC; born **Oamaru**, 6 Sep 1916; joined **RAF** Mar 1938; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944; commanded No. 204 Sqdn, **West Africa**, 1944–45.

² Squadron Leader H. L. M. Glover; born **Dunedin**, 2 Feb 1907; served **RAF** 1930–37; recalled **RAF** Nov 1940; released for duty **BOAC** 1942; appointed Senior Captain **BOAC** 1943.

³ Squadron Leader H. W. Lamond, DFC (Gk); born **Kaukapakapa**, 26 Aug 1915; joined **RNZAF** 4 Jan 1938; transferred **RAF** 15 Mar 1939; prisoner of war, Apr 1941.

and the balance was not wholly unfavourable to British arms. **Cyrenaica**, **Greece** and **Crete** had been lost; but **Egypt** and **Iraq** had been saved, while **Syria** and almost the whole of **East Africa** had passed into our hands; **Malta** valiantly continued to resist all the assaults of the enemy. And now as substantial British reinforcements, new weapons and fresh supplies began pouring into **Egypt**, the stag was set for the next

round in the struggle for control of the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 3 – WESTERN DESERT—THE SECOND YEAR

CHAPTER 3

Western Desert—The Second Year

WESTWARDS from the startling greenness of the irrigated strip on either side of the River Nile runs a vast desert of varying character, inhabited only by nomad Arabs living in tattered tents and herding camels beside the waterholes upon which their lives depend. To the south-east this desert runs down to the **Sudan**; to the south-west it joins the Sahara. Here and there along its northern coast are pockets of cultivation out of which the Italians wrought their Empire, settling colonists in well-designed community buildings around which were scattered the farms. The largest of these pockets, called the Gebel Akhdar, lies in the hump of land to the east of **Benghazi**, considerable enough to support half a dozen towns, settlements of the Italian colonists and one city. Such fertile country is not reached again until the oasis of **Tripoli**. Of this great desert—those parts that lie within the borders of Egypt and **Libya** are almost equal in area to **India**—it is the comparatively narrow coastal strip running from **Alexandria** in the east to **Tripoli** in the west that has come to be known as the ‘**Western Desert**’, and it was back and forth across its barren spaces that the main fighting in the **Middle East** now ebbed and flowed for two long years.

June 1941 found the **RAF** back at the old bases in Egypt from which it had started six months earlier; for Rommel's first offensive from the west had sent its squadrons scrambling back with the remnants of Wavell's Army of the **Nile**. But their situation in that region was less comfortable than it had been when they confronted the Italians, since a German army was now encamped on the stony plateau round **Capuzzo**; moreover the ***Luftwaffe*** was established in some strength at forward airfields in **Cyrenaica** and in the Dodecanese Islands, from where it could strike at **RAF** bases in Egypt, at the **Suez Canal** and the crowded cities of the Delta. To prevent such attack **RAF** bombers now made German fuel dumps and supplies their main objective and a welcome interlude of inactivity by hostile aircraft seemed to indicate success. Meanwhile fighters strafed the German airfields; they also made life

uneasy for the enemy on the roads, systematically raking his thin-skinned vehicles until Rommel was driven to post isolated tanks, like anchored flakships, at five-mile intervals along the way.

Tobruk still held, a lonely island of resistance deep in enemy territory, and fighter patrols covered the small ships which crept along the coast to supply the garrison. An unsuccessful attempt had been made to relieve the port in mid-May. The following month a more elaborate attempt, adorned with the name of Operation **BATTLEAXE**, proceeded smoothly in its early stages. During this second attempt the **RAF** was required to provide the advancing land forces with an 'umbrella' against air attack. For army commanders, after their experience in **Greece** and **Crete**, had developed a strong preference for the reassuring sight of friendly aircraft overhead and the exercise of air power out of sight, though often infinitely more effective, tended to be out of mind for the troops below. The **RAF** complied with the requirements and its fighter force was duly concentrated on this defensive task to the detriment of more rewarding operations. Fortunately the bombers were still free to take the offensive and their attacks on the enemy's advancing columns and against his supply lines were most successful. And when, on 17 June, Rommel thrust an armoured force straight through towards **Buqbuq**, the bombers intervened effectively in support of our forward troops. These were able to withdraw in good order and General Wavell records that 'the enemy tanks which were heavily attacked by bombers of the R.A.F. made only half-hearted attempts to close with our forces.' After three days of confused fighting Operation **BATTLEAXE** ended where it began.

For each of the opposing armies, the British now under Auchinleck and the Germans and Italians under Rommel and Bastico, the immediate problem was the same—to reinforce and re-equip before a major attack could be launched. And here the governing factor was communications. On the British side the fact that the *Luftwaffe* now held virtual control of the **Mediterranean** meant that troops and supplies could reach Egypt only by the long sea journey round the Cape. The enemy also had their

difficulties for their main base at **Tripoli** was 1000 miles away while **Benghazi** was 375 miles back along the same road; and both these ports were a further 400 miles from the mainland of **Italy**, across a passage exposed to attack from British aircraft and submarines based on **Malta**. Consequently the build-up on both sides proceeded slowly and there was a lull of nearly five months in the land fighting while they strove to overcome their supply problems and renew their strength for the next round.

But if there was a close season for fighting on the ground there was none overhead. The war in the air went on all the time—a fact it is as well to emphasise. Day after day **RAF** bomber crews left their bases in Egypt and, after a halt to refuel in the desert, went on to attack enemy shipping and supply dumps at **Benghazi**. Fighter pilots flew continually on a variety of patrols; they covered the forward troops and reconnoitred far behind the enemy lines; they guarded the skies of Egypt and escorted ships in the approaches to **Alexandria** and the **Suez Canal**. They also continued to play a vital part in sustaining the garrison at **Tobruk** by escorting supply ships to the limit of their range as far as **Bardia**. In so doing they depended upon forward landing grounds precariously held by light forces in advance of the main British Army, and the few fighters that could be maintained on patrol at any one time were in constant danger of attack by German squadrons operating from nearby desert bases in overwhelming strength; nevertheless the patrols continued and every ship that made the battered harbour of **Tobruk** owed much to the vigilance of the **RAF**. Simultaneously Blenheims, Sunderlands and Wellingtons were daily on patrol searching for enemy submarines over the eastern **Mediterranean** and in the heat of the **Red Sea** and Persian Gulf; and week by week ferry pilots continued to bring convoys of reinforcement aircraft across the jungle from **West Africa**.

While these various operations continued the **RAF** was steadily building up its strength. New and faster types of aircraft were reaching the operational squadrons: Tomahawk fighters to replace the veteran but now obsolete Gladiators; Maryland light bombers in exchange for the

Blenheim. New airfields and landing grounds were also under construction in the **Western Desert**; more operational training units were being set up in the back areas and others expanded. Equally important, the whole system for supply, maintenance and repair was being thoroughly reorganised, enlarged and dispersed against enemy air attack. For example, in the **Mokattam Hills** on the east bank of the **Nile**, the great artificial caves from which in ancient days the stone had been taken to build the pyramids were cleared and equipped as stores and repair depots; and the inhabitants of the Boulac native quarter of **Cairo** were mystified by a sudden influx of **RAF** technicians as workshops were set up in old warehouses and in disused yards or buildings. A special unit was established for transporting crashed aircraft from the front for reconstruction at these depots; and up in the forward area there appeared new salvage sections which, equipped with mobile cranes and special trucks, ranged the desert to bring back damaged aircraft, and mobile repair units capable of making minor repairs on the spot or else of patching up aircraft sufficiently to enable them to be flown back for more extensive treatment.

Important changes were also made in the sphere of operations for it had become clear during the earlier campaigns that, in spite of the most valiant efforts on the part of aircrew and commanders alike, the operational efficiency of the front-line squadrons was not all that it might be; in particular the organisation on a 'station' basis, brought out from **Britain**, had proved unwieldy when it had been necessary to move units over long distances or push forward flights and squadrons to operate from advanced landing grounds. This was largely because transport, equipment and personnel for carrying out swift movement were lacking. Steps were therefore taken to create self-contained fighter and light-bomber wings each with its own vehicles, its own operational headquarters and its own servicing team, all of which could be moved rapidly from one area to another. At the same time mobile radar posts and air-support controls were established in the forward area, the latter an important innovation by which it was hoped to provide closer and more immediate help to the ground forces. In all these various ways, the

RAF gradually began to create its ‘ **Desert Air Force**’, capable of highly mobile operations in the wilderness of sand and stone but firmly based on a well-organised, safely dispersed system of supply and maintenance.

Much of the success of this reorganisation and indeed most of its inspiration came from Air Marshal, ¹ who had taken over from Longmore in May 1941. Tedder, a graduate of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and a fighter pilot of the First World War thrice mentioned in despatches, had come to the **Middle East** with a broad background in both operations and staff work. Here he was presented with a unique opportunity for defining, developing and organising the role that the air arm should play in the **Mediterranean** war. That opportunity he firmly grasped and he soon became pre-eminent as a strategist and in the framing of policy. He was also able to inspire the willing service of officers and airmen from the highest to the lowest and by skilful leadership weld them into a highly successful team. Apart from his undoubted military gifts, Tedder possessed a cheerful personality of which pleasant features were his addiction to a pipe of longish stem and to the ‘forage’ or field service cap—better known to the irreverent as the ‘fore-and-after’. He also had the happy knack of meeting his men on their own level, and many of those who served with the **Desert Air Force** can recall pleasant moments on desert airfields when their leader dropped in for a chat to see how things were going.

But the early months of Tedder's period of command were far from easy. Apart from the difficulties of reorganisation, he had to meet sharp

¹ Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Tedder, GCB, Legion of Merit (US), Legion of Honour (Fr), Order of Kutusov (**USSR**), Distinguished Service Medal (US), Order of the Crown with Palm (Bel), Order of George I (Gk), Croix de Guerre with Palm (Fr), Order of Orange Nassau (Hol); born Glenguin, Stirlingshire, 11 Jul 1890; served Colonial Service, **Fiji**, 1914; joined RFC 1916; permanent commission **RAF** 1919; Deputy Air Member, Development and Production, 1940; Deputy AOC-in-C, HQ **Middle East**, 1940–41; AOC-in-C, HQ Middle East, 1941–43; Air C-in-C, Deputy to General Eisenhower, 1944; Deputy Supreme Allied

Commander, SHAEF Main (Air) 1944–45; CAS RAF, 1946–49; Chairman, Joint British Services Mission, [Washington](#), and British representative on Standing Group Military Committee, NATO, 1950–51.

criticism of the [RAF](#) from all sides and a renewal of the old cry for separate military and naval air components. With memories of [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) still rankling, many of the critics felt that the main function of the [RAF](#) should be to provide them with a constant impenetrable ‘umbrella’ overhead. They failed to realise that the only sure defence against enemy air attack was to win command of the air, and that this could best be done by offensive sweeps and attacks on airfields often far beyond the scene of the ground fighting.

The main controversy centred round the extent and control of air support for the Army. And after various conferences had failed to settle the matter, Churchill gave his ruling in a strongly worded directive. The RAF had its own dominant strategic role to play and must not, he said, ‘be frittered away in providing small umbrellas for the Army as it seemed to have been in the recent battle.’ It was unsound to distribute aircraft in this way and no air force could stand the application of such ‘a mischievous practice’. On the other hand the [RAF](#) had its obligations to the Army and, Churchill declared, ‘when a land battle is in prospect the Army Commander-in-Chief is to specify to the Air Officer Commander-in-Chief the targets and tasks he requires to be performed both in the preparatory attack and during the battle. It would be for the Air Officer Commanding to use his maximum force for these objectives in the manner most effective.’ These decisions were of the utmost importance for they recognised and defined the role of the [RAF](#) and prevented any attempt to follow the German pattern of complete subordination to the Army. It was now up to all parties to realise each other's problems and to work out a satisfactory system of team work. How well they achieved this, the following years were to demonstrate.

New Zealand participation in the various activities of [Middle East Air Command](#) was now increasing steadily as pilots, navigators, air gunners,

wireless operators and some technicians arrived from the training schools in New Zealand, **Canada** and the **United Kingdom**. A small number of pilots and aircrew also came from operational commands in **Britain**, bringing with them the experience gained in fighter battles over England or in bombing raids over **Germany**. By the end of this second year of the campaign the New Zealand contingent with the **RAF** in the **Middle East** amounted to nearly 300 men, of whom the majority were pilots—no small contribution at a time when **RAF Middle East** was still comparatively small.

Among the new arrivals the outstanding personality was Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham, who took over command of the Desert **Air Force** from Collishaw at the end of July 1941. Coningham, whose remarkable early career has already been recorded, ¹ was to achieve outstanding success in this new role; indeed, it was not long before he outshone every other contemporary commander of tactical air forces in his ability to foresee, prepare for and meet situations and, above all, to give the ground forces the close air support they needed. His was a richly vital personality in which rare powers of leadership and a profound knowledge of air tactics were combined with an immense store of common humanity and friendliness, for he firmly believed that even in a war of machines the ultimate outcome depended on men. He had an alert mind but disliked paper work and insisted on stripping his Battle Headquarters to the barest minimum of essential operational staff; he was withal a shrewd planner with a strong desire for co-operation with the Army, and one of his first actions on appointment was to move his Desert Headquarters to **Maaten Baggush** alongside that of the **Eighth Army**. Thereafter when the Army headquarters moved the Air headquarters moved with it. And it was from that small advanced **Desert Air Force** headquarters working in close contact and mutual confidence with the Army that there originated most of the innovations in tactics and organisation of an air force in the field which were subsequently adopted by the **Royal Air Force** and **United States Army Air Force**.

At his new headquarters, Coningham was joined by Group Captain

H.B. Russell as Senior Air Staff Officer. Russell, also a veteran New Zealand pilot of the First World War, was a specialist in fighter operations who had already served both in **France and with **Fighter Command** in the **Battle of Britain**; he was to be twice mentioned in despatches for his work with the **RAF** in the **Middle East** during the next two years. One of Coningham's chief signals officers was Squadron Leader R. C. Richmond; he had been with the **Desert Air Force** from the outset and his ability and experience proved invaluable in this difficult period; **Richmond** later did good work in improving communications on the **Takoradi** ferry route.**

An experienced fighter leader who came to the **Middle East at this time was Wing Commander Eric Whitley,² who had commanded a squadron of Hurricanes both before and during the **Battle of Britain**. For his first few months in the **Middle East** Whitley was entrusted with planning the air defence of **Cyprus** and the Syrian coast; he then took command of a fighter wing based in Egypt and was later to prove highly successful as leader of a diversionary force which operated deep in the desert on the enemy's flank.**

¹ *New Zealanders with the **Royal Air Force**, Vol. I, p. 10.*

² **Group Captain E. W. Whitley, DSO, DFC; **RAF** (retd); born Epsom, **Auckland**, 17 Aug 1908; joined **RAF** 1930; commanded No. 245 Sqdn 1939–40; **RAF Station, Haifa**, 1941; No. 234 Wing, **Middle East**, 1942; No. 209 and 210 Groups, **Middle East**, 1943; **Fighter Leaders' School**, 1944; No. 58 OTU 1945; **RAF Station, Church Fenton**, 1945.**

Three young New Zealand fighter pilots, Squadron Leaders Ward,¹ Kain² and Bary,³ each of whom had taken part in the air battles over **France, Dunkirk and **Britain**, were now to command squadrons in the **Desert Air Force**. Ward took charge of the famous No. 73 Hurricane Squadron and within a matter of months had won both the **Distinguished Flying Cross** and bar. Kain, who had already led fighters**

in **Britain**, was to command No. 229 Squadron, also flying Hurricanes. Bary was to lead one of the first units equipped with Tomahawk fighters; he had previously flown Hurricane fighters over **Crete** and the **Western Desert**.

Men newly arrived in the **Western Desert** found conditions rather different from those they had enjoyed in their training schools or with the operational commands in **Britain**. For **Desert Air Force** now lived a more nomadic life, something like that of the bedouin who inhabited these parts. There were no tarmac runways, no hangars, no neat headquarters buildings or barracks, no control tower and no concreted petrol stores. The usual desert airfield was nothing but a large space of desert scraped smooth and hard, around the edges of which were scattered a few tents and trucks, the aircraft and the protecting **RAF** armoured cars. Large square marquees housed the various messes, the operations control and the orderly room. Around them were dispersed ridge tents and little bivouacs as sleeping quarters, each with its V-shaped slit trench handy as an air-raid shelter. The rest of the 'outfit' stood on wheels; the office of the Commanding Officer was a caravan trailer; signals, that life-blood of the whole force, operated from a few specially fitted vehicles beneath portable aerial masts; workshops of the engineers were fitted into lorries; the cookhouse itself was often a trailer with a field kitchen dumped outside. The whole camp, tents and all, could be bundled into trucks and be on its way within an hour.

Men dressed to suit these conditions and the blue uniform of the **RAF** was rarely seen. In summer everyone wore khaki shorts, shirt and an **RAF** cap; in winter the uniform was khaki battle dress, augmented by every sweater and jersey on which the wearer could lay his hands, so cold were the nights. In summer it was extremely hot and flies plagued everyone by day, but the cool of the evening was perfect, the nights silent and splendid under the brightest dome of stars and a big,

¹ Squadron Leader D. H. Ward, DFC and bar; born **Whangarei**, 31 Jul 1917; joined **RAF** 31 May 1938; commanded No. **73 Sqdn**,

Middle East, 1941–42; killed on air operations, 17 Jun 1942.

² **Wing Commander D. Kain; born Wanganui, 16 Oct 1915; joined RAF 21 Oct 1935; transferred RNZAF 21 Oct 1944; commanded No. 229 Sqdn, Middle East and Malta, 1942; No. 127 Sqdn, Middle East, 1943; RAF Station, Edcu, 1943–44; and RAF Station, Predannack, 1944–45.**

³ **Wing Commander R. E. Bary, DSO, DFC; born New Plymouth, 9 Jun 1915; joined RAF Jan 1939; commanded No. 80 Sqdn 1943; Wing Leader, No. 239 Wing, MAAF, 1943–44; No. 244 Wing MAAF, 1944–45; killed on air operations, 12 Apr 1945.**

round, almost 'day-bright' moon, which, however, lost a little of its fascination for it was usually as it waxed full that the landing grounds were bombed by the enemy. In winter the days were usually bright but the nights bitter, and sometimes there were torrential rains which bogged down aircraft and turned every rutted track into a morass through which truck drivers floundered and cursed.

The chief torment of the desert was of course the dust-storms. They came more frequently with the khamsin of the spring, a hot wind from the south with the strength to rip down a tent. Their density was that of a London fog, in which every particle was grit. Under the pall of a desert dust-storm the whole area darkened into half-night; a man driving a car could not see its bonnet and two men sitting in a creaking straining tent could barely discern each other across its width. While the dust-storm lasted unabated, bringing gritty misery, all flying was impossible.

But desert life had its compensations; for one thing, it was extremely healthy and with the exception of desert sores—small cuts festered for months when sand filtered into them—there was almost no sickness. Life was simple and the hours of sleep were long. The food might be only bully beef for weeks on end, though usually there was something else as well, but it sufficed. There was nearly always enough water for a cup of tea and even for a bath when one had learnt to bathe

with a tin drinking mug. There were also the pleasures of contrast; and to arrive at the palm trees of the coastal wadi of **Maaten Baggush** after bumping all day over dust and hillock and there to strip and swim in the warm blue sea was a pleasure that had few comparisons.

Aircrew would consider it sentimental to speak of the comradeship of their desert camps, but in every squadron this was most marked. There were few who returned from the desert without some memory of a circle of men squatting outside the tent under the moon, one perhaps playing a violin or a mouth organ and the rest singing 'There was a Monk of Great Renown', 'She'll be Coming Round the Mountain' or 'Shaibah Blues', all with that mixture of sentiment and ribaldry which made up the folk music of the **Air Force**.

But many men came to know more than the desert encampments or even the vast expanse of brown wilderness moving constantly beneath their wings. Deserts have always been associated with one particular peril, that of being stranded in their midst without sufficient food or water; and it was a peril to which pilots and aircrews were especially exposed. Flying a damaged aircraft over inhabited country the pilot could make a crash landing or bale out, always with every hope of help even should he fall into enemy hands. But over the desert, even fifty miles from the coast, there was scant hope unless a man was sufficiently lucky to fall in with wandering Arab tribesmen. Yet, remarkable of the desert air war is not how many airmen lost their lives through landing many miles from help, but rather how many of them contrived to walk back to their squadrons, often piercing the enemy lines in order to do so.

One day towards the end of November 1941, six Blenheims left **Fuka** to bomb enemy tanks and transport on the **Acroma– El Adem** road. In that area they were attacked by a formation of Messerschmitts and four of the Blenheims were shot down. Navigator in one of them was twenty-year-old Sergeant Turton. ¹ Baling out of the burning aircraft, he landed safely to find that his pilot and air gunner had also survived but were both wounded and unable to walk far. While they were debating what to

do some friendly natives came along and took charge of the wounded men, saying they would get them medical attention from the Germans in **Acroma**. Thereupon Turton, who was unharmed, decided that he would not be captured and set out to travel about one hundred miles on foot to the British lines. Fortunately he had a small pocket compass which enabled him to go steadily south-east. Every night he passed enemy encampments at frequent intervals but he skirted them and kept on. After three days he was suffering so severely from thirst that he was forced to live on snails. Eventually he was found by a South African medical officer. His journey across enemy territory, hiding by day and walking by night, had taken him six days, and during the whole of that time he was without food and water.

Gallant efforts like this led to the formation of a 'Late Arrivals Club', with its emblem, a tiny silver boot with wings, worn by those who had walked back 'out of the blue' after they had been obliged to abandon aircraft on the ground or in the air. And as the fighting ranged backwards and forwards over the desert, tales of getting back, sometimes through the enemy lines, became more plentiful. Usually they followed the same pattern: the airmen, individually or in a small group, struggling on through dust and heat towards the welcome of a friendly camp; perhaps a meeting with wandering Arabs who, traditionally hospitable to the stranger, helped British and German impartially; or else an encounter with the enemy, leading to capture or possibly a lucky escape; and finally the eventual return to the unit, footsore and exhausted, with sprouting beard and modest denials of any personal heroism. Yet the gallantry of those who managed to make their way back did much to hearten others who foresaw a similar fate in store for themselves; after all, one could never know whose turn it might be next. And in the months that followed many an airman was to have

¹ Flying Officer R. A. Turton; born **Kakahi**, 22 Dec 1920; cinema operator; joined **RNZAF** 12 Mar 1940; killed on air operations 3 Nov 1943.

cause for gratitude to the Army for its rescue efforts—particularly to the men of the **Long Range Desert Group**.

* * * * *

Throughout the summer of 1941, while the two armies lay watching one another through the dusty glare along the line of the Egyptian frontier, air patrol and attack continued. For British fighter pilots the main task was still to cover the passage of ships to and from **Tobruk**, which placed a heavy strain on both men and machines; and this was now rendered more acute by the insistence of the Australian Government that their battle-worn troops should be withdrawn from **Tobruk**. The withdrawal took place during the months of August, September and October under cover of constant fighter patrols.

The provision of cover both for the supply of **Tobruk** and for naval movements inevitably restricted offensive operations, but whenever possible fighters were sent on armed reconnaissance over airfields, camps and roads behind the enemy front. Such sorties were welcomed by pilots as a relief from the monotonous shipping patrols. Flying Officer O. V. Tracey of No. 274 Hurricane Squadron, Flying Officer D. F. Westenra of No. 112 Tomahawk Squadron, and Flying Officer W. T. Eiby with Sergeants R. I. Laing and E. L. Joyce ¹ of No. 73 Squadron, also flying Hurricanes, were among the pilots who took a prominent part in these missions.

Simultaneously the medium bombers were active both by day and by night against the enemy's supply lines, especially his nearer ports and coastal shipping. Airfields were also attacked—notably the day fighter bases at **Gazala** and **Gambut**, from which the Germans were operating their new and fast Messerschmitt 109F fighters. Squadron Leader H.G.P. Blackmore led No. 55 Blenheim Squadron on many such missions and flying with him were several New Zealand pilots and navigators. By day crews could usually count on a brush with the enemy but their machines were no match for the German fighters. It was during one such encounter towards the end of October that Blackmore was lost when his

formation was intercepted while turning away after a successful attack on the airfield at **Gambut**.

More distant targets on the German supply lines were attacked by Wellington bombers, a small force of which, amounting to five squadrons, had now been built up in Egypt. New Zealand representation among these squadrons was relatively high. Indeed, in the twelve

¹ Squadron Leader E. L. Joyce, DFM; born **Hamilton**, 17 Feb 1920; salesman; joined **RNZAF** 11 Mar 1940; commanded No. **73 Sqdn, Italy**, 1943, and No. 122 Sqdn, 1944; killed on air operations, 18 Jun 1944.

months from May 1941, just under one hundred Dominion airmen flew with the Wellingtons of No. **205 Group**, as it was known; and more than half of them were captains of aircraft.

Sometimes the bombers struck northwards over the **Mediterranean** at targets in **Greece** and **Crete**, notably at the **Corinth Canal**, which provided a short cut for enemy supply ships on passage from Adriatic ports to the Aegean. But the chief task given the Wellington crews was to batter the enemy's North African supply port of **Benghazi**. They did this particular raid so often that it became known as the 'Mail Run'. It was no easy flight. In distance it was roughly equivalent to bombing **Munich** from Norfolk. And while the route was not spattered with guns and searchlights a crew had only to crash-land fifty miles inland on the desert to be faced with the torments, often mortal, of thirst and heat. The defences of **Benghazi** itself were also fierce. Yet more than all these dangers, the chief menace of the mail run was its inevitability—night after night, week after week. One of the squadrons which flew constantly to **Benghazi** composed a song about it called 'The Mail Run Melody', which was sung to the tune 'Clementine'. Here are some of the verses:

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.**

**Out we go on to dispersal,
To complete our Night Flying Test,
Rumour says we're going Northwards,
But we know we're going West.**

Take off from the **Western Desert
Fuka, 60 or 09 (Sixty or Oh-nine),
Same old Wimpy, same old aircrew,
Same old target, same old time.**

**'Have you lost us Navigator?'
'Come up here and have a look',
'Someone's shot our starboard wing off',
'We're alright then, that's **Tobruk**'.**

**Fifteen Wimpys on the target,
Two forced landed in the drink,
Another couple crashed on landing,
Ruddy Hell, it makes you think.**

Snooping round the **Western Desert,
With the gravy running low,
How I wish I could see **Fuka**,
Through the dust storm down below.**

**Trying to get your forty raids in,
Thirty-nine, now don't get hit,
If you don't, you go to Blighty,**

If you do, (Well, never mind!)

**Oh, to be in [Piccadilly](#),
Selling matches by the score,
Then I shouldn't have to do that
Ruddy Mail Run any more.**

There is probably no better expression of all the hopes and fears of bomber aircrew than the words of this song; and on the nights when they were not flying, crews would sit around in their messes with glasses of thin local beer and sing it with an intensity of feeling that only desert life could 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 made [Benghazi](#) of considerably less value to the enemy as a supply base. A New Zealand brigadier caught a glimpse of the port when he passed through as a captive in December 1941. 'The harbour itself was in a mess,' he writes. 'The tide washed through two great gaps in the mole, and alongside the battered wharves were several wrecked ships, some capsized, some sitting on the bottom, rendering most of the jetties useless.' ¹

In these operations by Wellington bombers Flight Lieutenant Coleman ² and Flying Officer Cowan ³ of No. 148 Squadron, Flying Officer D. H. McArthur of No. 37 Squadron and Flying Officer W. I. Anstey of No. 70 Squadron achieved a fine record of service as captains of aircraft. Navigator Sergeant Connolly ⁴ and Air Gunner Sergeants Callister, ⁵ Tarrant, ⁶ Marusich ⁷ and Moore ⁸ also did very good work with their squadrons.

¹ Brigadier J. Hargest in *Farewell Campo 12*.

² Squadron Leader L. W. Coleman, DFC and bar; born [Wellington](#), 10 Dec 1916; joined [RAF](#) Jan 1939; killed on air operations, 11 Mar 1942.

³ Squadron Leader N. L. R. Cowan, DFC; born Hastings, 27 Dec 1919; accountant; joined **RAF** Jul 1940; transferred **RNZAF** Jul 1945.

⁴ Sergeant D. A. Connolly; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jun 1918; auctioneer; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1940; killed on air operations, 21 Jun 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer J. K. Callister, DFM; born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1916; grocer; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1940.

⁶ Warrant Officer R. M. Tarrant; born **Hamilton**, 5 Nov 1915; farm labourer; joined **RNZAF** 12 Mar 1940; killed in aircraft accident, 9 Jun 1944.

⁷ Warrant Officer C. A. F. Marusich, DFM; born **Huntly**, 28 May 1921; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** 18 Dec 1939.

⁸ Flight Lieutenant G. E. Moore, DFM; born Curlewis, Aust, 11 Jun 1915; engineer; joined **RNZAF** 20 Nov 1939.

Flight Lieutenant Coleman was the first New Zealander to win a bar to the Distinguished Flying Cross for operations in the Middle East. ‘His courage and tenacity were outstanding,’ says the citation. ‘In one night raid his was the only aircraft from the squadron to locate the target—an enemy landing ground in the desert—and having found it he made determined attacks with bombs and machine-guns as a result of which at least two Junkers 52 on the ground were destroyed and others damaged.’ On landing back at **Fuka** after this sortie, Coleman was driving in a lorry from dispersal when a Wellington which was coming in to land crashed and burst into flames nearby; he immediately jumped out of the lorry, started up another aircraft nearby and, although bombs and petrol tanks were exploding in all directions, taxied it safely away from the danger area.

Flying Officer Anstey had completed forty-three bombing missions by August 1941; in the first fortnight of that month he flew four times to [Benghazi](#) to attack shipping there, made another two trips across the [Mediterranean](#) to the [Corinth Canal](#) and a further sortie to the [Corinth Canal](#) in between frequent trips to [Benghazi](#); on one occasion when an engine failed he got his Wellington back and landed it skilfully behind our lines without injury to his crew.

McArthur, who also completed many bombing raids, had an unenviable experience after attacking [Benghazi](#) one night in June 1941. As he was turning for home flak hit one engine, causing a slow oil leak; he nursed his machine along fairly well over the sea but suddenly, when only about thirty miles from [Mersa Matruh](#), the propeller flew off, tearing through the fuselage and cutting control lines. Forced to bring his machine down on the sea, he achieved a successful landing in spite of the darkness and, after a severe buffeting, the crew were able to take to the dinghy before the Wellington sank; but it was two days before they were spotted by a seaplane which landed and picked them up; by that time all were suffering badly from thirst and exhaustion.

Among the air gunners Sergeant Moore's record was typical. Including his early operations over [Germany](#), he had by mid-1941 completed forty-six bombing missions. His ability as a gunner was demonstrated one night in June when three Italian fighters attacked his Wellington over [Benghazi](#); by accurate fire he drove off the first two before they could do any damage; the third persisted, however, using its greater manoeuvrability to good effect, but in the end it too was fought off and shot down by Moore's determined shooting. An episode in which Sergeant Marusich showed great fortitude occurred in September: 'During an attack on [Derna airfield](#),' says the official report, 'he was badly wounded by shellfire and although suffering severely from pain and loss of blood he made light of his injuries, thus permitting his comrades to devote their attention to the work in hand.'

By the end of 1941 quite a large group of New Zealand pilots,

navigators and air gunners were flying Wellingtons of No. 108 Squadron, which was formed at Shallufa in September. Flight Lieutenants D. R. Bagnall and K. F. Vare, ¹ Flying Officer Anderson ² and Flight Sergeant Gray ³ were especially prominent as captains of aircraft and Sergeant Curno ⁴ as air gunner. Bagnall was now a veteran of bombing operations in the **Middle East** for he had flown Bombays in the first raids on **Tobruk** and **Benghazi**; he had also ferried men and equipment to **Greece** and on one such trip had his aircraft destroyed by enemy fighter attack on the airfield at **Heraklion** in **Crete**. Vare had taken a prominent part in the formation and establishment of his squadron at Shallufa, no easy task in those days of mobile operations and shortage of equipment.

Subsequently he flew many sorties to **Benghazi** and in November 1941 led Wellingtons on the first occasion when two operations were flown on the same night. Later in mid-January he made a remarkable 'proving flight' in the first Liberator to reach the **Middle East**—at the time, aircraft spares were urgently needed by a squadron recently transferred to **South-east Asia** and Vare completed the 12,000-mile return flight from Egypt to **Sumatra**, stopping only to refuel at **Karachi** and at **Bangalore**.

Anderson had already completed twenty-seven raids with Bomber Command before he joined 108 Squadron. By May 1942 he had doubled this total with operations against ports and airfields in the **Middle East**. Here is his account of the way things went and of one particularly 'shaky do' as he calls it:

We were based at airfields in the **Daba- Fuka** area and the usual procedure was for us to have a preliminary briefing there in the morning, after which crews would fly their Wellingtons to an advanced landing ground some 200 miles forward in the desert. We were bombed up at base but made this flight with a small petrol load since it made take-off easier in the heat of the day. The advanced grounds were merely patches of desert levelled off and were quite difficult to locate in dust storms—especially L.G. 60 which was some distance from the coast but much favoured because its surface, being the bed of a dried lake, was

fairly smooth. On arrival at the advanced base, one member of the crew was left to guard the aircraft and make certain that the tanks were filled and minor faults rectified. After briefing and a meal there was time for a short rest if take off was late, but the only resting place available was the aircraft and it was surprising how cold a Wellington could be out in the desert.

¹ Wing Commander K. F. Vare, AFC; born **Wellington**, 20 Jan 1913; clerk; joined **RAF** 23 Aug 1937; killed on air operations, 2 Jan 1944.

² Flight Lieutenant J. R. Anderson, DFC and bar; born **Lyttelton**, 10 Sep 1916; electrical fitter; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939; transferred **RAF** May 1940; retransferred **RNZAF** Jul 1944.

³ Flying Officer W. H. Gray, DFM; born **Wellington**, 11 Jun 1916; draughtsman; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

⁴ Flying Officer L. C. Curno, DFM; born **Dunedin**, 17 Nov 1911; mechanic; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

Taxying out for take off in the dark and swirling sand raised by other machines could be quite harrowing when the flarepath became obscured and other aircraft and obstructions not clearly definable. With take-off safely accomplished the flight to the target was usually uneventful, consisting of one long climb trying to get as much height as possible. Over **Benghazi** the flak was concentrated and pretty accurate—gunners and searchlight operators there had plenty of practice for there was rarely a night when no aircraft visited them. Bombing raids were seldom made above 12,000 feet as this was the best a Wellington IC could manage in the thin air even when stripped of all possible equipment. A typical mail run trip took about seven hours from the advanced base and on return there crews would be interrogated and then after a short rest until dawn their aircraft would be refuelled for the return to base.

We had a rather eventful trip one night towards the end of October while making our bombing run over **Benghazi**. We were caught in a searchlight cone and then hit several times by anti-aircraft fire. The fuselage was badly holed, hydraulic pipeline severed and the undercarriage fell down and bomb doors jammed open. The extra drag reduced our speed on the flight back and when we were about ten miles short of our advanced base one of the engines cut out owing to lack of petrol so I gave the order to bale out. Just after they had gone the other engine stopped and the aircraft began to go down in a glide. There was no time for me to leave the controls and clip on my parachute so I switched on the landing lamps, did up my straps and hoped for the best. Fortunately the ground was reasonably level and the Wellington ploughed along and made a fairly good landing.

This was anti-climax but a very pleasant one after my thoughts during the last few minutes. A moment later, to my surprise, the wireless operator and rear gunner popped their heads through the door from the rear cabin to join me in wiping away the perspiration. They had missed the order to bale out.

We rested until dawn and then leaving the two of my crew to guard the aircraft I walked north and found the road four miles away where a passing lorry gave me a lift to our advanced landing ground where two of the others had already arrived. We commandeered a truck and soon found both the aircraft and the other 'caterpillars'.

The RAF assault against enemy ports and shipping helped our own forces to win the race to build up strength and supplies. By the middle of November 1941, Auchinleck was ready to attack. The main purpose of the new offensive, which was to be known as Operation CRUSADER, was to recapture **Cyrenaica**, destroying the enemy's armour in the process and then, if all went well, to continue the advance towards **Tripoli**; at the right moment the **Tobruk** garrison would make a violent sortie and join up with the advance. The opening moves were nicely timed to anticipate an attempt by Rommel to eliminate that troublesome British

strongpoint inside his territory.

Coningham's squadrons of the **Desert Air Force**—they now included a formidable array of modern fighters, new and fast **Boston** light bombers and some **Beaufighters** for ground attack—were to play an important part both before and during **CRUSADER**. In the preliminary phase, the chain of bases between the enemy's back areas and his front lines were sedulously bombed while fighters maintained a high degree of activity to obstruct observation of our preparations. The extent to which they succeeded in blinding the enemy may be gauged from the fact that the subsequent ground attack achieved complete surprise—Rommel himself was in **Rome** when it began. Over the last few days before the land offensive opened, the **RAF** attack was switched from the enemy's supplies to his air forces; the landing grounds at Berka, **Benina**, **Barce**, **Derna**, **Gambut**, **Gazala**, **Martuba** and **Tmimi** were all bombed and a good deal of damage was done to repair shops, hangars, runways and aircraft on the ground. More and more reconnaissance sorties were made as the hour of attack drew close; sturdy **Boston** bombers now making their appearance were temporarily employed on this role. Another new note was seen in the adaptation of some fighters to carry bombs, notably the versatile Hurricane, which soon proved itself highly efficient in the fighter-bomber role.

Early on 18 November, after a night of storm and heavy rain, the **Eighth Army** surged forward. Overhead its troops saw a sky full of friendly aircraft—'whole shoals of fighters swept by, glinting like little silver splinters in the sun and bombers cruised steadily along with their fighter escorts fooling all around them'—which was indeed a novel spectacle for the watchers on the desert and so different from the grim days in **Greece**, when it had been almost second nature for them to dive for cover when anything flew overhead. But now the tables had been turned. This time some of the **Luftwaffe's** airfields were waterlogged, while at others facilities had been damaged or destroyed, so British fighters found few adversaries to fight in the sky and more aircraft to damage on the ground; a few combats took place over **Martuba** and some

transport aircraft were shot down near **Barce**, but apart from this there was little opposition in the air. Later, as its landing grounds dried out, the *Luftwaffe* began to hit back and there were some spirited engagements. On the morning of the 20th, for example, two squadrons of Tomahawks (No. 112 RAF and No. 3 Australian) encountered a formation of Me110s and shot down four of them; later the same day Hurricanes met a number of Ju87 dive-bombers escorted by Me109s. They forced the Ju87s to jettison their bombs and in the mix-up which followed two Messerschmitts and four of the bombers were shot down for the loss of four British fighters.

Meanwhile on the ground the enemy had, after a hesitant start, reacted strongly and in violent actions between 19 and 23 November defeated the British armour and overrun a South African brigade. Thereupon Rommel, scenting a major victory, set out with his *Afrika Korps* and an Italian armoured division to the frontier, but in such breathless haste that the consternation he caused in an area of vulnerable dumps and airfields was almost matched by the disorganisation within his two panzer divisions. Heavy losses were also suffered in several actions with ground forces and from attacks by Desert Air Force; indeed, virtually unprotected by their own air force, the enemy columns soon experienced the pangs our troops had known and endured when it was the *Luftwaffe* that dominated the skies. After three days Rommel returned in haste to the **Tobruk** area, where the New Zealand Division had meantime pressed forward to join hands with the garrison there.

A major battle now developed at **Sidi Rezegh** and **Belhamed** as Rommel sought to destroy the New Zealand Division. He inflicted heavy losses and broke the **Tobruk** 'corridor', but the effort was too much for his troops and in the face of British reinforcements the enemy was in full but orderly retreat by 10 December. After a brief stand at **Gazala** this withdrawal continued and by Christmas British troops were in **Benghazi** once again. But this time the enemy retreat had not been turned into a rout and the hard core of his forces had not been destroyed. Somewhere to the east of **El Agheila** Rommel and his *Afrika Korps* were still at

large.

The RAF continued to give full support to the land battle. Its activities left the Germans practically blinded in the air and wrought great destruction among the unarmoured transport and supply vehicles operating behind the German front; airfields, ports and dumps were bombed; and there was constant patrol and attack above the actual fighting area. Clashes with the *Luftwaffe* were frequent and at first the balance of casualties in air combat was fairly even; but after a few days it swung steadily in favour of the **RAF**, thanks largely to the skill and gallantry of its fighter pilots, for their machines were not equal in performance to the Messerschmitt 109F. There was a notable action on the last day of November when a Tomahawk wing intercepted some fifty enemy fighters and bombers that were preparing to attack the New Zealand Division. Our pilots shot down no fewer than fifteen of them and damaged ten others for the loss of three; and the Germans were forced to jettison their bombs instead of dropping them on our troops. 'Your fellows have been simply magnificent,' declared **Freyberg**. 'My men are full of admiration and gratitude'; Auchinleck expressed his appreciation for 'the magnificent co-operation of the R.A.F.' which had supplied 'a constant stream of valuable information', while their fighters provided 'almost complete protection' and the bombers disorganised the enemy 'often in answer to calls from my troops.'

During the pursuit across Cyrenaica Coningham's squadrons kept up their good work. Constant fighter patrols practically drove the *Luftwaffe* from the sky; and although sandstorms and the difficulty of distinguishing friend from foe reduced the scale of effort against ground targets, reconnaissance aircraft brought back evidence of 'considerable confusion as far back as **Benghazi**'. Simultaneously **Desert Air Force** gave remarkable demonstrations of its new-found mobility. At Gazala 10,000 gallons of petrol arrived while the landing grounds were still under shellfire and for two hazardous days working parties plied their trade in advance of the front line; again at **Mechili** the advanced **RAF** party reached the landing ground as the last of the retreating enemy left

in a cloud of dust and by the next day it had 15,000 gallons of fuel there—one day later four squadrons were operating from the landing ground and four more were refuelling for operations farther forward. Another example of the excellent work done by the ground staffs occurred when a party sent to prepare a landing ground deep in the desert far ahead of the Army had a runway of 1000 yards cleared as the first squadron landed, and had four squadrons suitably accommodated on the next day, with more coming in for fuel and a force of bombers standing by.

A novel and interesting feature of CRUSADER air operations, in which New Zealand airmen played a leading part, must be recorded here. This was the attack on Rommel's supply lines south of [Benghazi](#) by a small force of thirty-two Hurricanes and Blenheims sent to operate from bases in the heart of the Cyrenaican desert. Although almost completely isolated and with its landing grounds under frequent attack by enemy bombers, this small force accounted for several hundred enemy vehicles, including some petrol tankers; and it destroyed more than thirty enemy aircraft in the air and on the ground. Wing Commander Whitley was in charge of the two squadrons and the few [RAF](#) armoured cars which guarded their landing grounds. 'For two months,' says an official report, 'he led this force with great determination in the face of all manner of difficulties and as well as planning its operations he led many of the Hurricane fighter sorties himself.' Towards the end of November 1941 'Whitforce', as it came to be known, was joined by Hurricanes of No. 73 Squadron commanded by Squadron Leader Ward. In the next few weeks Ward led a series of attacks on airfields and convoys in the [El Agheila](#) region, during which enemy machines were destroyed on the ground and damage done to airfield facilities; he also shot down two Ju88 bombers and damaged a Messerschmitt 110 during sweeps over the battle area.

New Zealand fighter pilots certainly saw plenty of action during CRUSADER. Squadron Leader Bary, for example, led his Tomahawk squadron in the first interception of what became known as 'Stuka parties'—formations of Junkers 87 dive-bombers escorted by fighters. It was on the second day of the offensive that Bary's Tomahawks, in

company with another squadron, intercepted an enemy formation over the desert and after a spirited engagement scattered them, claiming two Ju87s destroyed with two fighters and another dive-bomber probably destroyed. A week later Bary led his pilots in another fierce engagement against some twenty Ju88 bombers escorted by Messerschmitt 109s and Italian G50 fighters; they claimed three fighters and one bomber destroyed, together with six probables, for the loss of only two Tomahawks.

Flight Lieutenant Strachan ¹ frequently led Hurricane fighter-bombers against the enemy columns streaming back along the coast road and across the desert. A typical mission was flown on 8 December to attack convoys moving from **Acroma** to the coast road. The Hurricanes found and bombed their target and then six of them swept down with machine guns blazing to set more lorries on fire and damage others; meanwhile the other six Hurricanes circled above as top cover and beat off an attack by enemy fighters, destroying two of them without loss. Another outstanding Hurricane pilot was Flying Officer Tracey, who had already destroyed eight enemy machines before CRUSADER began. Early in December he led part of a two-squadron escort to Blenheims bombing enemy concentrations west of **El Adem**. In that area the Hurricane met some twenty Messerschmitts and in the battle which followed destroyed three of them. During the battle Tracey saw one of his fellow pilots bale out, so he circled the descending parachute and then landed alongside a surprised South African, squeezed him into his cockpit and took off back to base.

Flying Tomahawk fighters, Flight Lieutenant Westenra was prominent with No. 112 Squadron, which operated intensively in support of the Army and on sweeps over enemy airfields. On one patrol early in December Westenra shot down two Italian G50s while escorting Blenheims to bomb enemy columns on the **Capuzzo** road; shortly afterwards he led his squadron in a very successful strike against the German airfield at Magrun, where at least fifteen German and Italian machines were either destroyed or damaged on the ground. Three other

pilots who saw action with Westenra's squadron were Sergeants Hoare,² Glasgow³ and Houston.⁴

Flying Officers Hammond,⁵ Watters⁶ and Crawford⁷ flew some of the first Beaufighters to operate over the **Western Desert**. They were

¹ Squadron Leader I. D. S. Strachan; born **Christchurch**, 20 May 1917; clerk; joined **RAF** 27 Sep 1937; commanded 65 Sqdn 1944–45; killed on air operations, 29 Jan 1945.

² Flight Sergeant B. P. Hoare; born **Hawera**, 3 Sep 1921; clerk; joined RNZAF Nov 1940; killed on operations, 8 Feb 1942.

³ Sergeant F. D. Glasgow; born **Edinburgh**, 16 Nov 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Jul 1940; killed on air operations, 25 Nov 1941.

⁴ Sergeant W. E. Houston; born **Hastings**, 7 May 1922; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940; killed on air operations, 12 Dec 1941.

⁵ Wing Commander D. H. Hammond, DSO, DFC and bar; born **Christchurch**, 14 Mar 1916; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1940; commanded No. 489 (NZ) Sqdn 1945.

⁶ Squadron Leader J. Watters; born **Waikino**, 4 Feb 1916; civil engineer; joined **RNZAF** 20 Sep 1939; transferred **RAF** 9 Jul 1940; retransferred **RNZAF** 11 Jul 1945.

⁷ Flying Officer H. H. Crawford; born **New Plymouth**, 25 Aug 1916; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939; killed on air operations, 6 Feb 1942.

members of No. 272 Squadron which had moved forward into the desert shortly before **CRUSADER** began; previously it had been engaged on long-range convoy patrols. With their formidable armament of four

cannon and six machine guns, the Beaufighters were particularly suitable for ground attack and they rapidly proved a new power in the desert. And since their operations were partly planned and partly freelance, they began a remarkable kind of aerial buccaneering which was rich in incident.

In one sortie, Hammond and his navigator were sweeping low over **Tmimi** airfield when their aircraft struck a telegraph pole, tearing off part of the wing, and it was only by desperately pushing the aileron control hard over that Hammond just managed to lift the damaged wing and keep on a level course. But he had not the strength to hold on for long, so he called his navigator forward and together they contrived to manage the controls and bring the aircraft safely to its base over 400 miles away—a remarkable feat of flying.

Watters was with the formation of six Beaufighters which, one day in mid-November, arrived over **Tmimi** airfield just as five Ju52 transports had taken off; the British pilots shot down all five of them and then went on to set four more aircraft on fire on the ground; shortly afterwards they intercepted and shot down two more German reconnaissance machines and finally, before setting course for base, shot up a column of enemy troops.

Crawford, who flew in many attacks against enemy airfields, had a remarkable adventure towards the end of December. After being shot down over the desert, he was captured by the Germans but succeeded in making his escape just before dawn two days later. Unfortunately, in his first headlong rush through the darkness he fell and injured his foot; he was soon unable to walk at all and might well have perished had he not met some wandering bedouin, who looked after him for several days and then helped him to reach a British forward unit at **Barce**. Crawford returned to his squadron only to lose his life a few weeks later when his Beaufighter was hit by flak during a low-level attack on enemy vehicles near **Martuba**; he made a gallant attempt to land his machine on the desert but the ground proved too rough and it crashed and caught fire.

Transport pilots also did work during CRUSADER by carrying forward urgent supplies and evacuating casualties. Flying Officer Chisholm was prominent in these duties as captain of a Dakota aircraft of No. 117 Squadron. At the height of the battle he helped to answer an urgent call for ammunition from British tanks near Sidi Rezegh. When the call came, ships carrying the ammunition had only reached Port Sudan in the Red Sea, so the Dakotas flew a shuttle service from that port to a landing ground near the scene of the fighting. The Dakotas continued to fly up ammunition and spares for several weeks and undoubtedly made an important contribution at a critical point in the battle.

Missions of a more unusual kind were flown during CRUSADER by Pilot Officer T. J. W. Williams, ¹ a New Zealand bomber captain. He took part in the attempt that was made to interfere with enemy inter-tank radio communication from the air. For this novel experiment six specially-equipped Wellington aircraft had been flown out from the United Kingdom and, because of the lively interest displayed by the British Prime Minister in the project, they came to be known as 'Winston's Wellingtons'. Unfortunately this first attempt does not appear to have met with any notable success. For one thing the Wellington aircraft themselves, flying low over the battle area, proved highly vulnerable. One night towards the end of November 1941, when Williams was on patrol over the enemy lines, his aircraft was attacked by several fighters and badly hit; the front turret was put out of action, the wireless transmitter damaged and the hydraulic tank holed. The leaking tank was plugged with rags and the wireless operator stood by holding them in place, thus enabling Williams to complete his patrol and return to base. After two of the six Wellingtons had been shot down and all the others damaged the jamming patrols over the battle area were temporarily withdrawn; but experiments with radio counter-measures, in which both Pilot Officer Williams and Sergeant Russell ² took part, continued and they resulted in more effective action during the Alamein battles.

The first days of 1942 found the **RAF** established on forward airfields in the vicinity of **Benghazi** while advanced guards of the Eighth Army had reached **El Agheila**. They were now halfway to **Tripoli** and, given time to renew their strength, they might well press on to that region and end the war in **Africa**. But this was not to be. Just as a year previously Wavell's further advance had been prevented by the call to **Greece**, so now progress was again halted by the urgent need to defend the **Far East** against **Japan's** attack. As far as the **RAF** was concerned whole squadrons, maintenance units and equipment of various kinds were now transferred or else diverted from the **Middle East** to destinations in **South-east Asia**. The Army suffered similar deprivation

¹ Flight Lieutenant T. J. W. Williams, DFC and bar; born **Napier**, 21 Aug 1915; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** 2 Jul 1940.

² Flight Lieutenant A. G. Russell; born Milton, Otago, 15 Dec 1918; clerical cadet; joined **RNZAF** 4 Jun 1940.

and for both Auchinleck and Tedder the next few months were to prove a most trying and frustrating period. Already the advance to the Tripolitanian frontier had placed a considerable strain on the British supply system, for the port of **Benghazi** had not yet been opened and it was a thousand miles back to **Cairo** and **Suez**. Rommel, on the other hand, had now come within easier reach of his bases as a result of his retreat and, under cover of heavy air assault on **Malta**, was receiving substantial reinforcement by way of **Tripoli**.

Suddenly, towards the end of January, Rommel struck back. Leaving his main force of armour halted and largely discarding air support because it would take time to bring up all the petrol they would require, he sent infantry in lorries racing across the hill country of the Gebel Akhdar in an outflanking movement from the north. The British forces, caught unawares and in the midst of supply difficulties, were forced to give ground. It was typical of Rommel that he should make such a

sudden surprise move, setting out eastwards again, so it is said, with only a few days' rations in hand and less than a hundred tanks; similarly that, having achieved initial success, he should continue his advance with bold unorthodoxy. And his action in dispensing with air support seemed justified at first for the weather just then was a formidable alternation of driving rain and sandstorms; but as the skies cleared his columns were to suffer severely from lack of such protection.

During the opening stages of the enemy attack **Desert Air Force** had to contend with waterlogged airfields and the difficulties of moving back; its forward positions had been insecurely held and when the military screen in front of it collapsed abruptly, the main fighter force at Antelat received only the briefest warning of the enemy's approach. It was no simple matter to evacuate eight squadrons at short notice from a sodden landing ground; but with six men under each wing, the Kittyhawks and Hurricanes were moved on to the single strip and the last of them took off as shells began dropping on the airfield; six unserviceable machines had to be left behind, but the whole move compared favourably with the large numbers of aircraft abandoned by the *Luftwaffe* in its retreat a few weeks earlier.

It was not long before our fighters were operating strongly again, attacking the advancing enemy and regaining air superiority over the forward area; some Hurricanes encountering a force of dive-bombers, just as their own petrol was running low, disposed of them and then forced-landed safely with dry tanks. **Boston** and Maryland light bombers joined in the daylight attack and by night Wellingtons operating from advanced landing grounds bombed concentrations of lorries in the enemy's rear. Tomahawks, Kittyhawks and Hurricanes harassed the enemy continually as he pressed forward along the desert tracks and on one day claimed 120 lorries destroyed. All these operations were flown despite frequent sandstorms.

As Rommel continued his advance the fighter squadrons were compelled to move back once more; at **Benina** they took off only as the enemy approached, and again they left little behind. But by the

beginning of February, Rommel had outrun his supplies and his columns, lacking the weight to press home their advance, were finally halted. Their advance, which had begun so brilliantly, petered out from a combination of resistance on the ground, resistance in the air and lack of petrol and supplies. By the middle of February stability had returned to the war in the desert, with the **Eighth Army** firmly holding a line from **Gazala** to **Bir Hacheim**. A lull of some three months in the ground fighting now followed, during which the opponents sought once again to build up their strength.

Although this final outcome of CRUSADER was somewhat disappointing, the campaign had nevertheless produced substantial dividends. Our front line, even after the retreat, was still well to the west of the Egyptian frontier instead of along it, so that the airfields of eastern **Cyrenaica** were now in our hands. **Tobruk**, which had been a tremendous strain on our resources while besieged, had been relieved and, what was even more important, the temporary possession of airfields to the west had enabled convoys to be run through to help **Malta**. In the desert, new methods of tactical support had been tried out, and while still capable of improvement, they were a great advance on anything that had gone before. The scheme of mobile wings had proved a triumphant success, enabling Coningham's squadrons to keep up with every movement in a campaign of extraordinary fluidity. The new maintenance organisation had also proved its worth; in four months its units had received 1035 damaged aircraft—brought in from points scattered all over the desert—and during the same period had repaired and delivered back 810 of these machines to the battle area. Altogether the men of the Desert Air Forces could feel a justifiable pride at their achievements. Between mid-November 1941, when the **Eighth Army** went into action, and mid-February 1942 when the position stabilised at **Gazala**, they had flown well over 10,000 sorties and destroyed some five hundred German and Italian machines in the air and on the ground. Gaining command of the air, they had protected our troops, safeguarded our ships, defended **Suez** and **Alexandria** and seriously mauled the enemy's ground forces.

And now, during the interval in the ground fighting, they continued with patrol and attack. Night fighters fought defensive combats over Egypt, Bostons assiduously bombed the chain of enemy airfields from **Tmimi** to **Benghazi** and fighter-bombers attacked transport on the roads. Wellingtons continued to fly night after night on the 'mail run' to **Benghazi**—the port was bombed on no fewer than sixty-nine occasions during the spring of 1942—and seriously hampered the unloading of German supplies. Patrols over our forward positions were maintained daily while reconnaissance over the eastern **Mediterranean**, in search of enemy ships and in protection of our own, was constant.

The enemy air forces were almost equally active. They raided **Tobruk** and the forward areas, made sporadic attacks on **Alexandria** and the Canal and ran a special supply service from **Greece** and **Crete** to **Derna**. They also kept up patrols to hold off our attacks. Their effort against Egypt was, however, limited by the fact that the main preoccupation of the *Luftwaffe* bombers during these months was the assault against **Malta** from **Sicily**.

And while these operations continued **Desert Air Force** completed the reorganisation begun by Tedder in the previous year. The fighter squadrons were now placed under separate operational control; this was organised on the 'leapfrog' principle with two identical operations rooms, one forward and one rear, which under fluid conditions could act in the same way as squadron forward and rear parties and so maintain continuity of operations in spite of frequent moves. Simultaneously the principles of air support were defined more clearly for the benefit of air and ground forces alike, and in order to overcome the vexed problem of identification of ground targets agreement was finally reached on the marking of all British vehicles with the **RAF** roundel. The maintenance and repair organisations were further developed and expanded while airfield construction was pushed ahead and facilities improved. By May 1942, Coningham's **Desert Air Force**, although somewhat depleted by withdrawals to the **Far East**, was thus well prepared to support a ground offensive by the **Eighth Army**. Unfortunately, however, it was not called

upon to do so; for it was the enemy who struck first.

Rommel opened his attack on 26 May with an outflanking movement in the familiar manner. This time the main weight of his armour drove south, passed round **Bir Hacheim** and then pushed north towards the main British position at the desert crossroads known as 'Knightsbridge'. A fierce armoured battle developed in this region, soon to be nicknamed 'The Cauldron'. Meanwhile the enemy cut gaps through the minefields of the main British line in order to provide himself with a shorter supply route than that round the southern flank. It was not long before the 'Cauldron' was boiling over.

From the outset Coningham's squadrons were active both in close support of the **Eighth Army** and in air battles with the *Luftwaffe*. The first day they broke up several heavily escorted raids by Stukas and claimed a good bag of enemy aircraft; thereafter they concentrated against the German troops and armour, disrupting their supplies and hindering their advance—two attacks on the morning of the 30th reduced some fifty enemy vehicles to blazing wrecks. In these operations Kittyhawks now appeared as fighter-bombers and they flew dangerously near the ground. Their losses were considerable but results appeared to justify them, German prisoners testifying to the alarming accuracy of the attacks and cursing the inadequate protection afforded by their own aircraft. And as the fight swayed to and fro in the 'Cauldron', General Auchinleck reported that 'our own **Air Force** is co-operating magnificently in the battle.'

After four days of assault from the air and stiffening resistance on the ground, the enemy supply position had become serious and the whole issue hung in the balance. But then, under cover of sandstorms which prevented the **RAF** from operating intensively, Rommel contrived to widen the gaps in the British minefield and drew back upon them to replenish his supplies. Thereafter events moved swiftly to a climax. Mistaking his temporary withdrawal for exhaustion, the British launched an attack aimed at crushing the enemy bridgehead. It failed in the face of superior German armour and a powerful array of anti-tank artillery.

Rommel thereupon seized the initiative, turning his main effort against **Bir Hacheim** at the southern extremity of the British line.

Here the **RAF** was already supplying the isolated garrison and defending it against the assaults of the *Luftwaffe* with no little success. Now it redoubled its efforts to help the gallant **Free French Brigade**, who were rejecting calls to surrender in language of increasing impropriety. And as the air attack mounted the sight of Stukas crashing in flames and bombs bursting among enemy vehicles 'on their very doorstep' drew murmurs of appreciation from the defenders. 'Bravo! Merci pour le R.A.F.' signalled their commander; and with commendable gallantry and a laudable command of idiom, Coningham replied: 'Bravos à vous! Merci pour le sport.' The dive-bombers were beaten—indeed so many were destroyed or damaged that the Germans had to bring in Ju88s hurriedly from **Crete** to fill the gap—but the garrison, pounded by a mass of heavy artillery and short of water and supplies, was forced to give up the position after fifteen days' fighting; under cover of the **RAF** a brave remnant fought its way out and lived to fight again. Their dogged defence of this desert outpost became something of a legend for the fighting French but it was an episode in which the **RAF** had played no small part. And it seriously upset the plans on which the enemy had based his offensive.

With our southern flank broken and his supplies thereby assured, Rommel now swung north and the fighting round **Knightsbridge** reached a new fury. At its close the enemy were masters of the field and our own armour gravely reduced, compelling a general withdrawal to the Egyptian frontier. Then things went wrong and soon the Eighth Army was falling back in headlong retreat. The Germans followed up swiftly, crashed through the defences of **Tobruk**, capturing over 30,000 men and great quantities of supplies, and then immediately swept on towards the Egyptian frontier. Auchinleck was forced to order further withdrawal, first to **Matruh** and then to **El Alamein**, where there existed a relatively narrow front of about thirty-five miles which could not be turned since it lay between the sea and the vast salt-pan known as the **Qattara**

Depression. Here the defence was hurriedly reorganised with what resources were available and the enemy was at last halted—only sixty miles from **Alexandria**.

Throughout this black fortnight, when all that our forces had so painfully won seemed to be slipping away, the **Desert Air Force** fought hard and continuously. During the **Knightsbridge** battle Bostons, Hurricanes and Kittyhawks went out hour after hour on a shuttle service of bombing and strafing, returning only to refuel, re-arm and take off again. The landing grounds shimmered in the June heat under a constant cloud of dust kicked up by the take-offs. Beneath it, ground crews worked each hour of daylight and far into the darkness; they abandoned their tents and dug themselves holes in the ground beside their aircraft in the dispersal areas, flinging themselves wearily into these holes to get a few hours' sleep when exhausted. After dark they muffled their heads in blankets and worked on their aircraft by the light of pocket torches; and they continued to work through bombing raids in which the enemy was using peculiarly unpleasant anti-personnel missiles known as 'butterfly bombs'. And while these men toiled on the ground through the midsummer heat, the pilots and aircrews flew, fought and flew again, without time to shave their beards or change their clothes. Certainly they earned Auchinleck's acknowledgment that 'it should be made clear that R.A.F. support for the Army has been unstinted at great sacrifice throughout the present campaign.'

But the greatest achievement of **Desert Air Force** came during the retreat to **El Alamein**; for while the **Eighth Army** was moving back some 400 miles in a fortnight, it not only escaped destruction on the ground but it also escaped decimation from the air. This second fact was the more remarkable since, for days on end, the coastal road presented the astonishing spectacle of a congested mass of slowly moving troops and transport, a target such as pilots' dreams are made of. A little attention from Stukas and Messerschmitts and the lorries must have piled up in endless confusion. But the enemy bombers did not appear and the **Eighth Army** reached **El Alamein** virtually unmolested from the air—

during one period of three days when the congestion was greatest, its casualties on the road from air attacks are recorded as being just six men and one lorry. This incredible immunity was partly due to the inability of the *Luftwaffe* to keep up with Rommel's advance but, when due allowance is made for this fact, the German dive-bombers could still have wrought havoc among our retreating forces had their activities not been vigorously discouraged by the Royal **Air Force**. Much of the work of its squadrons was done out of sight of our troops; highly effective attacks, for example, were made on the **Gazala** airfields as soon as they were occupied by the enemy, so crippling the German fighter effort from the start. Later, enemy squadrons were twice caught on the ground, at **Tmimi** and **Sidi Barrani**, at critical moments during the pursuit. And such fighters as the Germans did manage to bring forward were kept so busy trying to protect their own forces that they had little leisure to attack ours. But the Army realised the protection the **RAF** was giving it. 'Thank God, you didn't let the Huns Stuka us,' **General Freyberg** told Tedder, 'because we were an appalling target.' ¹

Coningham's squadrons certainly gave the enemy little rest. After the fighters and light bombers had finished by day, the Wellingtons carried on by night. Released from the **Benghazi** 'mail run'—a change greeted by the crews with cheers—they moved up to the Western Desert and flew a steady sixty or seventy sorties every night against the enemy's concentrations. And even though **Desert Air Force** was continually forced to retire from its forward bases, the effort in the air was increased and not diminished. During the first week of the German attack Coningham's squadrons flew 2339 sorties, but in the last week, when the **El Alamein** line was withstanding the initial shock, they flew 5458. At the same time, the proportion of aircraft serviceable, so far from declining as the fight continued and casualties mounted, actually showed a slight improvement. All this was made possible by the strenuous and indeed heroic efforts of the air and ground crews, by the boldness of their leaders and the remarkable efficiency of the organisation that had been created. Weeks before, Coningham had had plans prepared for retreat as well as for advance and the landing grounds

to the rear had been stocked with petrol and bombs. His squadrons were therefore able to make a steady withdrawal, fighting all the time. And as they moved back, repair and salvage units stripped the airfields of all useful equipment and supplies. The result was that the *Luftwaffe* advanced on to empty desert while the **Royal Air Force** moved back on to well-stocked bases from which it could operate with greater intensity.

¹ This was after the New Zealanders' brief stand at **Minqar Qaim**. Actually the Division did suffer two bombings on 26 June, but as its official historian points out: 'The outstanding feature of **Minqar Qaim** was not its impact on the enemy or its contribution to **Eighth Army's** operations, but that the Division escaped annihilation. The Division's concentration on the escarpment made it vulnerable to air attack.' — J. L. Scoullar, *Battle for Egypt*, p. 135.

Thus did the **RAF** give the **Eighth Army** almost complete and continuous support. The only exception was at **Tobruk**, where the enemy had things all his own way after the loss of **Gambut airfield** drove our main fighter force back out of range. But the very swiftness and immensity of the disaster at this point, when our fighters were virtually absent, points the contrast to the successful retirement along the rest of the route where they were so very much present. As the British Prime Minister, 'watching with enthusiasm the brilliant, supreme exertions of the **Royal Air Force** in the battle', told the House of Commons afterwards: 'When we retreated all those hundreds of miles at such speed, what saved us was superior air power.'

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During these eventful months of early 1942, New Zealanders played their part with **Desert Air Force** in steadily increasing numbers. While fighter pilots gave a good account of themselves in the air battles with the *Luftwaffe* and in attacks on ground targets, bomber crews shared to the full the dull monotony of the 'mail run' to **Benghazi** and the nightly raids on the enemy's rear areas; they also joined in the land battle with

good effect when the opportunity came. And although their contingent was still relatively small, the New Zealand airmen had already achieved something of a reputation for skill and efficiency among their comrades from other parts of the Commonwealth. By June 1942 twenty-five of them had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, four more had won a bar to this decoration and another twelve had received the Distinguished Flying Medal for operations with the **RAF** in the **Middle East**.

An interesting feature of this period was the arrival in the Middle East of that outstanding air leader, Sir Keith Park, who took command of Air Headquarters, Egypt, at the beginning of January 1942. The appointment was opportune since, following his command of the most active fighter group in the Battle of **Britain**, Park was thoroughly experienced in organising and leading an aggressive fighter defence. Shortly after his arrival the Germans began more frequent incursions from their bases on the island of Rhodes and in the **Dodecanese**, but under Park's direction the air defences of Egypt—day and night fighters, anti-aircraft batteries, searchlights and the radar and observer corps warning system—were organised into a more efficient team and the raiding bombers given a hot reception. During the six months prior to the decisive battle of **El Alamein**, no fewer than forty of them were shot down over Egypt by our fighters alone. At a time when all three services were struggling to build up adequate supplies in Egypt, this successful defence was of the greatest importance.

Among our fighter pilots with **Desert Air Force**, Squadron Leader Derek Ward, in command of No. 73 Hurricane Squadron, and Flight Lieutenant Westenra, who led a flight in No. 112 Kittyhawk Squadron, were again outstanding on operations. Ward brought his Hurricanes back to the **Western Desert** early in February after spending a few weeks based at **Port Said** in defence of the Canal Zone; they were now used to defend the bases of the **Desert Air Force** at **El Adem**. At dawn one early February morning a flight of German bombers flew in from the sea and Ward took off in his Hurricane to intercept. Here is his report of the subsequent

engagement, during which he shot down a Heinkel III bomber:

My approach was observed, and the enemy aircraft dived down to sea level. I carried out an astern attack with no apparent result. There was continuous return fire from the top twin-machine guns. I carried out another astern attack firing at port and starboard engines. Both engines were damaged and oil came back and covered my windscreen. The enemy aircraft could not maintain height and belly-landed on the water, north of **Tobruk**.

During the lull at **Gazala**, Ward's squadron continued night operations over the forward area. On one patrol early in May while strafing **Barce** airfield, Ward caught sight of a large four-engined bomber flying directly in front of him; a short burst set one of its engines on fire and a second saw the bomber enveloped in flames; a few moments later it crashed and exploded in a sheet of flame that lit up the whole area. With the opening of the German land offensive, Ward's squadron returned to day operations and was soon in action over the battle. Ward led sortie after sortie and his Hurricanes did particularly good work in aid of the French Brigade at **Bir Hacheim**, dropping supplies and intercepting enemy air formations. One of the most successful missions in this eventful period was flown on 12 June. 'At 1935 hours,' says the record, 'twelve Hurricanes were detailed to sweep S.E. of **El Adem**. It was the fourth sortie of the day. Near Acroma they met a large force of Ju87s and Ju88s covered by Me109 and Macchi fighters and in the hectic fight which followed five Stukas were shot down with four more probably destroyed. The only damage suffered by us was one Hurricane slightly damaged.' By this time Ward himself was credited with six enemy machines destroyed with a further four 'probables'. But like so many of his gallant comrades of the early years, his luck eventually failed him. It was towards the end of this same month, while he was leading his Hurricanes as escort to a formation of **Boston** bombers, that German fighters made a surprise attack. Ward was one of four pilots lost.

Flight Lieutenant Westenra was frequently in action with his squadron. One day towards the end of January when the **Eighth Army**

was pulling back to **Gazala**, he led an attack on German armour near Fort Sculedine, where six vehicles and one tank were destroyed or damaged. By mid-February the Kittyhawks were flying sweeps from **Gambut** and on the 14th Westenra's squadron scored a notable success. Led by the redoubtable Australian fighter pilot, Squadron Leader C. R. Caldwell, later to be credited with the highest number of kills in operations by **Desert Air Force**, eighteen Kittyhawks encountered a formation of some thirty enemy aircraft over **El Adem** and claimed the destruction of twenty. On another occasion in March, Westenra was leading seven aircraft of his squadron which took off from their base at **Gambut** to patrol the forward area. Here they intercepted fifteen Ju87 dive-bombers escorted by Messerschmitt 109s and Macchi 200s. In breaking up the enemy formation Westenra claimed a Macchi 200 destroyed and a fellow pilot a Ju87. Later in the month Westenra was concerned in experimental dive-bombing with Kittyhawks, which led the squadron to turn to this new role.

Two other fighter pilots prominent during these months were Flight Lieutenant J. E. A. Williams, ¹ flight commander with No. 450 Kittyhawk Squadron, and Flight Sergeant Joyce flying Hurricanes with No. 73 Squadron. Williams shot down a Messerschmitt while leading his flight over **Gambut** one day in June; about the same time, Joyce, on night patrol in defence of our desert airfields, shot down one of the Ju88 bombers that were making frequent raids after dark when our fighters were grounded. Sergeants Baker, ² Howell, ³ Musker ⁴ and Wilson ⁵ did good work flying Hurricanes and Pilot Officer Mitchell, ⁶ Sergeants Newton ⁷ and Thomas ⁸ as Kittyhawk pilots. And it is interesting to record that two New Zealanders, Sergeants Bailey ⁹ and Burman, ¹⁰ flew some of the first Spitfires that reached **Desert Air Force** in June 1942.

With the Beaufighters that were employed both on shipping protection and in low-level attack against airfields and transport behind the enemy lines, Flying Officer Makgill, ¹¹ Flight Lieutenant **Hamm-**

¹ Squadron Leader J. E. A. Williams, DFC, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 6 May 1919; joined **RAF** 17 Jan 1938; commanded **No. 450 Sqdn** 1942; prisoner of war, 31 Oct 1942; shot attempting to escape from Stalag Luft III, 29 Mar 1944.

² Flying Officer R. L. Baker; born Nethem, **Surrey**, 29 Mar 1920; railway fitter; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939; killed on air operations, 20 Oct 1943.

³ Flight Sergeant A.E. Howell; born Ballarat, Aust, 10 May 1915; clerk; joined **RNZAF** May 1940; killed on air operations, 3 Apr 1942.

⁴ Warrant Officer K. McK. Musker; born Uruti, 30 Jan 1916; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 28 Oct 1940.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant A. S. Wilson; born Milton, 2 Apr 1921; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** 27 Oct 1940.

⁶ Pilot Officer S. S. Mitchell; born **Wellington**, 28 Dec 1920; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** 19 Jan 1941; killed on air operations, 31 May 1942.

⁷ Flight Lieutenant R. H. Newton, DFC; born **Wellington**, 8 Oct 1918; civil engineer; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941.

⁸ Warrant Officer H. G. E. Thomas; born **Masterton**, 25 Nov 1919; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** 30 Nov 1940; prisoner of war, 5 Sep 1942; safe in **UK** 24 Apr 1945.

⁹ Warrant Officer B. W. Bailey; born **Motueka**, 31 May 1919; mechanic; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941; prisoner of war, 30 Jun 1942.

¹⁰ Warrant Officer D. C. Burman; born Maidenhead, England, 7 Oct 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; killed on air

operations, 16 Aug 1944.

¹¹ Flying Officer J. E. Makgill; born **Auckland**, 1 Nov 1913; engineer; joined **RAF** 6 Dec 1939; killed on air operations, 25 Jun 1942.

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, Flying Officer Watters and Flight Sergeants Cutten ¹ and **France** ² were prominent on operations. The daily entries in their squadron records are brief, but here is one that indicates the spirit and dash with which Beaufighter crews operated.

1 May 1942. Three aircraft took off at dawn on strafing expedition in Agedabia area. Found and attacked five lorries near Bigrada; one towing a petrol bowser blew up in a most satisfying fashion. Later sighted twelve vehicles heading north each towing trailers carrying oil drums. Spectacular fire followed our attack. Further north came upon larger convoy and attacked with machine guns, causing fires and confusion. Soon after this "R" chased a Ju 52 near the coast and it forced landed on the beach. On return his Beaufighter showed a rifle bullet hole in the fuselage directly under pilot but bullet had been deflected by elevator control.

Crews were not always so fortunate. On 15 June, when twenty-six sorties were flown to cover a large convoy bound for **Malta** from **Alexandria**, six aircraft were lost, two being shot down by enemy fighters and two more possibly by our own naval guns; another stayed with the convoy to the utmost limit of his endurance and may have run out of fuel on the way back. However, one also reads that on this same day a crew on reconnaissance patrol 'found the **Italian Fleet**, made careful observation of its composition and position and then flashed "a rude word" on the aldis lamp at the nearest cruiser, which promptly opened fire, very inaccurately.' They then went on and shot down an Italian fighter.

A highlight in Beaufighter operations was the low-level attack on 2 July against the group of landing grounds at **Sidi Barrani**, where four Ju87s and two Messerschmitts were destroyed and another thirteen other aircraft damaged.

The men who flew heavy bombers, the Wellingtons and the few newly-arrived Liberators, had a less spectacular part to play; but it was none the less important and it is now known that during the retreat to **El Alamein** the larger bombs they dropped caused considerable damage at enemy landing grounds and among supply vehicles.

Most of the bomber men already mentioned in this chapter continued to fly regularly with their squadrons, achieving a fine record of service. Squadron Leader Macfarlane,³ Flight Lieutenant Pownall,⁴

¹ Flight Lieutenant A. G. Cutten; born **Auckland**, 13 Sep 1911; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1940.

² Flying Officer J. S. **France**; born Gore, 17 Jun 1917; stock clerk; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940.

³ Squadron Leader M. H. Macfarlane, DFC and bar; born **Christchurch**, 25 Oct 1916; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1939; transferred **RAF** Jan 1940; retransferred **RNZAF** Jul 1945.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant C. A. Pownall, DFC; born **Wellington**, 15 Jan 1915; electrical engineer; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1939; joined **RAF** Jan 1940; retransferred **RNZAF** 18 Jan 1945.

Flight Sergeants Armstrong,¹ Metcalf² and Starky³ also did good work as captains of aircraft and Flight Sergeants James⁴ and Coleman⁵ as air gunners. Each of these men had already flown on operations with Bomber Command in England; Coleman and James, for example, had each completed fifty missions against targets in **Germany** and the **Middle East** by April 1942. And while the nightly raids with Desert Air

Force might be somewhat less exciting than those against targets in the Ruhr, yet incident was not lacking. For instance, after one sortie to **Benghazi** when the flak batteries were more than usually active, Armstrong landed back with his Wellington holed in twenty-six places. On another night Metcalf's machine ran short of petrol on the return flight from **Derna** and he and his crew were forced to bale out over the desert; they managed to collect together but it was two days before they were found and picked up. One NCO pilot, Sergeant Black,⁶ after his Wellington had come down in the sea off **Sollum**, was lucky enough to be spotted with his crew in their dinghy the next day by a Walrus of the **Fleet Air Arm** and then picked up a few hours later by a rescue launch. Inevitably others were less fortunate. Here is what happened to a crew from No. 148 Squadron in which Sergeant Spence⁷ was second pilot.

We were briefed to attack an enemy convoy steaming towards **Tripoli** [he writes]. After flying up to advanced base in the afternoon we took off for our mission just after dark.

Everything went smoothly until we crossed the coast north of **Benghazi**, when suddenly the port motor of our Wellington started to overheat and in a very short time it seized up; the plane started losing height very rapidly, although the starboard motor was at full throttle so the captain ordered everything possible to be jettisoned, and turned back. We crossed the coast again and let go the bombs. The plane seemed to hold its height for a time but soon the good motor started to heat and we began to lose height again.

The night was so black we couldn't tell how far off we were from the high ground until suddenly we hit with a tremendous crash and skidded along for quite a distance. We all got out unhurt and although I had been dragged along on the floor behind the bomb bays I only received a small knock on the hip. The plane seemed to be in small pieces. We reckoned we were then about 80 miles behind the German lines, then around **Gazala**, so decided to try and walk back. After smashing up everything not already

¹ Flight Lieutenant C. A. Armstrong, DFM; born **Auckland**, 15 Apr 1918; customs clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1940; killed on operations, 12 Jun 1944.

² Flying Officer A. G. Metcalf, DFM; born Bradford, England, 5 Jun 1919; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1939; killed on air operations, 28 Dec 1943.

³ Squadron Leader J. B. Starky, DSO, DFC; born **Gisborne**, 10 Nov 1916; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 2 Jul 1940.

⁴ Warrant Officer A. James, DFM; born **Wellington**, 24 Jan 1920; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1939.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant K. K. J. Coleman, DFM; born **Blenheim**, 20 Mar 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1940.

⁶ Flying Officer A. T. Black; born **Christchurch**, 10 Jul 1912; ledgerkeeper; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940.

⁷ Warrant Officer B. W. Spence; born **Napier**, 25 Nov 1917; customs clerk; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940; prisoner of war, 23 Feb 1942.

written off in the crash and filling our only two surviving water bottles, the six of us set off about midnight using the compass found undamaged in the wreck.

After only a few hours walking in flying boots over the terribly rough ground in this region we were all worried with blisters. About two O'clock we almost bumped into an enemy tank and in trying to get round it came across some more. Whichever way we turned we saw tanks; we must have walked into the middle of an enemy laager in the darkness so decided the only thing to do was to try to work our way through them. In single file we crept past tank after tank and although we could hear

the crews coughing and talking we were not seen and when we finally realised that we had passed through safely we were six considerably shaken men.

Shortly after this the moon came up and we were able to see where we were placing our very sore feet. We continued walking with ten minute breaks every hour until just as it was getting light in the East, we were suddenly stopped with the cry of 'Halt', at which we all threw ourselves flat. From the voice we could tell it was not friendly so after a hurried whispered conference we crawled back the way we had come and tried to get round him to the South only to walk into another challenge. This time we decided to try the North and were able to go about 200 yards before once again the cry of 'Halt' rang out, this time accompanied by the noise of a rifle bolt being worked. We simply froze to the ground expecting a bullet every second. After a few agonizing moments we crawled back the way we had originally come.

By this time it was getting quite light so we crept back looking for cover but could find nothing except an occasional stunted bush about a foot high, so settled down to await the coming of the search parties we were sure would be out the moment the sentries reported our presence, yet although we lay all that day in clear view of several parties of Italians, working on roads, no attempt was made to find us. However we had one or two scares, once when a motor-cyclist passed within 20 yards of us and another when about ten tanks rumbled past about 200 yards away. We had bully beef and biscuits with us but we were unable to swallow them on our ration of two mouthfuls of water each twice a day.

As soon as it became dark enough we set off on a compass course we had worked out during the day and were able to pass the enemy parties apparently before sentries had been posted. That night we covered a considerable distance without any alarms and when morning came we reckoned we had covered about 30 miles from the crash. As there was no sign of life anywhere we decided to keep walking before we got too weak from lack of water so on we went. Our ten minute spells every hour had become by this time twenty minutes and even thirty minutes. Every step

was agony. The one member of the crew who had shoes, had them fall to pieces about this time so we had to bind them up with blankets. Although we were suffering terribly from the heat at this time we still kept our blankets and Irvine jackets because the nights were so cold.

About mid-day we saw a plane very low, flying straight for us and couldn't tell because of the haze, whether it was a Hurricane or a M.E.109. By the time we could see the markings and recognise it as a Hurricane and were able to fire our flare pistol and wave our shirts, it was right over us and we were not seen, a great disappointment.

Shortly after this we came across a bird's nest among the stones with two eggs in it. They made a delightful drink when beaten up with a little of our nearly exhausted water supply. We each had two and a half spoonfuls.

Later in the afternoon we had to climb a fairly high hill and on top we found an old observation post and in it half a bottle of red Italian wine which we shared out after a few thoughts of poison. About this time we must have started having hallucinations from lack of water because we all saw what looked like deserted British trucks and Bren carriers down the other side of the hill; but when one of the crew volunteered to climb down to search them for water he found only empty desert. After a rather longer rest than usual we set course again until after dark when we had another experience of seeing quite clearly a truck looming up out of the darkness which just disappeared as we approached.

Soon we came to a bigger bush than usual with, of all things, green grass growing under it, so as we could go no further lay down to sleep. We must have slept for quite a time for when we woke, the grass was very wet with dew and we were able to lick off quite a bit of water before forcing ourselves to walk on. We were now down to about 15 minutes walking every hour and realised we were about at the end of our endurance, but thought we must be getting near our lines as the lack of movement convinced us we must be in 'No-Mans Land'.

Just before dawn we collapsed and fell asleep where we lay. We were awakened by one of the crew shouting and we looked up to see him pointing ahead towards a group of trucks parked on the horizon facing West. We could make them out as British and guessed they were a party on the road from **Tobruk** to **Gazala**, stopped for breakfast. With new strength and very pleased with ourselves we set off, waving and trying to shout and firing off our revolvers. As we approached we could see a small group of men on a slight rise examining us through glasses and then two of them started walking in our direction. When they were about fifty yards off we realised they were German but I think we were all too far gone to take it in enough to worry.

The officer greeted us in English and told us to follow him. Sure enough as we approached we could see that the trucks were British but were being used by the Germans. We had walked into an anti-tank group and behind the guns were the German crews watching the British tanks about two miles away. One of the officers even lent us his glasses so that we could get a good look at them. The Germans gave us what water they could spare and we were soon bundled into a staff-car and taken back by stages to **Derna** where we were able to get our feet attended to and as much water as we wanted.

It was during these months that a few Liberator bombers began adventurous operations in support of the patriot forces in **Yugoslavia**, dropping agents, supplies and ammunition near their mountain fastnesses, and three experienced New Zealand bomber pilots, Flight Lieutenant Rolph-Smith, ¹ Flying Officers Madill ² and J. A. H. Smith, ³ were among the crews specially chosen for these duties. Rolph-Smith

¹ Squadron Leader D. M. Rolph-Smith, DFC, Order of the White Eagle (Yug); born **Auckland**, 19 Jun 1919; salesman; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1939; transferred RAF Jan 1940; killed in flying accident, 18 Nov 1943.

² Squadron Leader S. J. Madill, OBE, DFC, Order of the

Crown (Yug); born Auckland, 14 Dec 1913; farmer; joined RNZAF 24 Nov 1940.

³ Squadron Leader J. A. H. Smith, DFC, Order of the Crown (Yug); born Hastings, 21 Apr 1920; baker and pastrycook; joined RNZAF 15 Jul 1940.

flew the first sortie on 26 March 1942, when he made a survey of the proposed area of operations; during the following months all three pilots were to make a valuable contribution to this hazardous work and win high commendation for their skill, resource and endurance.

At first the Liberator crews concentrated on establishing contact with the partisans, dropping leaflets to explain their intentions and parachuting down agents who would act as liaison officers and send back radio reports and instructions as to the best dropping areas. Then, after a few weeks, regular supply dropping sorties began. The usual round trip meant a flight of some thirteen hours, much of it over wild, mountainous country. There were other difficulties. Meteorological reports were either non-existent or unreliable, the weather was frequently appalling with rain, icing, electrical storms and thick cloud and there was always the danger of interception by enemy fighters. Navigation was especially difficult, since wireless aids often could not be used because of static and astro-navigation became impossible when the stars were obscured or the sextant mirror frosted over. All too often crews reached the vicinity of the dropping zone only to find that thick low cloud covered their pinpoints, hiding the signals of the reception party—then there was no alternative but to return with their containers and packages. But undaunted, they went back again; and by their persistence they enabled the partisans to receive sufficient help and encouragement for them to hold out during a very difficult period of constant German pressure.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 4 – WESTERN DESERT—THE THIRD YEAR

CHAPTER 4

Western Desert—The Third Year

'ROMMEL will be in Cairo within a few days,' boasted the German radio on 30 June 1942. And the Italian dictator Mussolini was already at **Derna** preparing for the triumphal entry, having brought with him, so it is said, a white horse on which he proposed to lead the procession.

But the high hopes raised by the enemy's rapid advance into Egypt were doomed to disappointment. For Rommel's forces were well-nigh exhausted and, in the face of British air superiority and stiffening resistance on the ground, they now proved unequal to continuing their race across the desert. Against the advancing columns Coningham's squadrons flew over seven hundred sorties a day. **'The continuous raids by day and night are hindering us seriously,'** reported the enemy, **'and the supply situation has become even worse.'** Meantime, under cover of the constant **RAF** attack, the British army was able to recover from the disorganisation of its retreat; and at **El Alamein** it turned to fight. The troops fought stubbornly and by the end of the first week in July they had fought the enemy to a standstill. For the moment at least, **Cairo** and **Alexandria** were safe.

In his despatch, General Auchinleck pays high tribute to the part played by **Desert Air Force** during this first phase of the battle for Egypt. **'Our air forces,'** he writes, **'could not have done more than they did to help and sustain the Eighth Army in its struggle. Their effort was continuous by day and night and the effect on the enemy was tremendous. I am certain that had it not been for their devoted and exceptional efforts we should not have been able to stop the enemy on the El Alamein position.'**

Attack and counter-attack now succeeded each other as Auchinleck sought to regain the initiative at **El Alamein**. But while his efforts resulted in some improvement in our general position, they failed in their main purpose of driving the enemy back; our reserves were too few

to maintain the initial momentum of the attacks and our armour, some of it new and inexperienced, suffered heavy losses. By the end of July both sides were thoroughly exhausted by the long battle and it was clear that a stalemate had been reached. The ground fighting slackened and once again both sides became involved in a struggle to build up supplies and renew their strength.

The RAF continued to operate intensively throughout these weeks. Baltimores and Bostons, based in the Canal Zone but operating from forward landing grounds, pattern-bombed the enemy troop positions from dawn to dusk; indeed their formations, well protected by fighters, operated with such regularity that they became known to those watching below as 'The Eighteen Imperturbables'. Simultaneously Kittyhawks, Hurricanes and some newly-arrived Spitfires took off from their landing grounds along the **Cairo- Alexandria** road to range ceaselessly over the enemy's lines, attacking ground targets and shooting down Stukas and Messerschmitts; Beaufighters strafed enemy airfields and transport behind the front. At night the attack was continued by the heavy bombers now withdrawn to Palestine for lack of room in Egypt. Wellingtons, refuelling in the Canal Zone, attacked troop positions in the light of flares dropped by Albacores; they also bombed the port of **Tobruk**, for the old familiar target of **Benghazi** was now far beyond their reach. The few Liberators, however, could still reach the latter port direct from Palestine and their crews played their part well.

The effect of all this effort and endeavour is seen in the diary of the German ***Afrika Korps***, where difficulties of supply and damage and loss caused by our air attacks receive repeated mention. On 21 July, Rommel himself reported that 'the enemy air force by its continual day and night operations has caused considerable loss among our troops, delayed and, at times, cut off our supplies the supply situation is tense owing to continual attacks on German supplies at **Tobruk** and **Matruh**.'

The lull in the ground fighting during August brought a decline in air activity over the battlefield. Even so, Coningham's fighters and bombers flew over 5700 sorties that month, excluding shipping sweeps

and protection; for with the enemy gradually concentrating fighter squadrons at **Fuka** and **Daba**, it was essential to retain our air supremacy over the forward area and to defend our bases from surprise attack. An interesting feature of this period was the defeat of the German attempt at high-level reconnaissance with pressurised Ju86 aircraft, capable of flying at 45,000 feet. Specially stripped Spitfires, operating in pairs, accounted for three of them within a month. The first victory—a solo effort—was obtained at 49,000 feet on 24 August by Flying Officer Reynolds, ¹ **RAF**, the 38-year-old chief test pilot at a large maintenance unit. He shot down another in mid-September. The technique was for one pilot to guide another within visual range of the enemy, whereupon he climbed to the level of the Ju86 to fire at the latter's engines; the other pilot waited below and, if necessary, finished off the winged bird.

¹ Flight Lieutenant G. W. H. Reynolds, DFC; born **London**, 27 Aug 1905; car-sales manager.

But the main **RAF** effort was directed against Rommel's supplies. For the enemy was now beset with the difficulties attendant on maintaining an army with land lines of communication stretching 600 miles to the west, and an army, moreover, that was in immediate need of reinforcement in men and equipment. **Matruh** and, more especially, **Tobruk**, which he had brought into use as reinforcing ports, became the objectives for ever-increasing bomber raids. Simultaneously our torpedo-bombers went out against shipping, and their attacks, together with those of our submarines, made it most difficult for the enemy to run supplies across from **Greece**. The repeated raids on **Tobruk** prevented the Germans from making anything like full use of this port. This, in turn, forced them to bring up supplies from Benghazi either in lorries, which soon wore out, or in small coastal craft which provided attractive targets for our long-range Beaufighters. And **Benghazi** itself was now under attack by the Liberators. According to Admiral Weichold, chief German liaison officer at Italian Naval Headquarters, about 35 per cent of the total enemy cargoes despatched to North Africa during August failed to

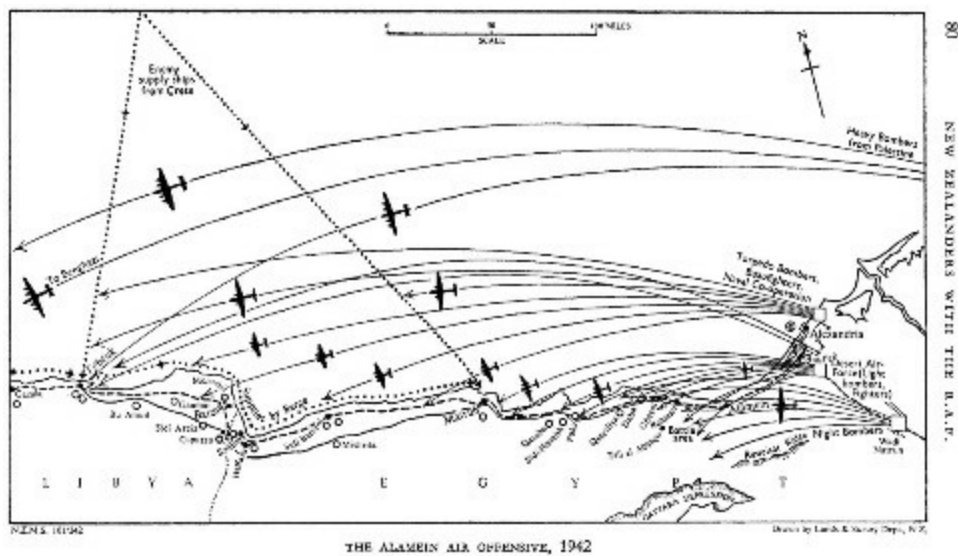
reach their destination.

While the enemy's supplies were thus being curtailed our own were arriving in the Canal Zone in an ever broadening flow, with which the enemy entirely failed to interfere. Night after night German aircraft dropped mines in the **Suez Canal** but these were quickly swept up. Apart from this, not only our ports and bases but the long desert road from **Cairo** to **Alexandria**, crowded with military traffic and flanked on either side by camps and landing grounds, were seldom visited by the *Luftwaffe*. In the face of our continuing attack, Kesselring was compelled to employ most of his bombers as well as his fighters in protecting Rommel's communications by land and sea. Thus did the **RAF** continue to hold the initiative as our ground forces prepared for their next battle.

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In mid-August 1942 General Alexander took over command in the **Middle East** and General Montgomery was appointed to lead the **Eighth Army**, Churchill's directive to Alexander being 'to take or destroy at the earliest opportunity the German Italian Army' With these changes of command and the arrival of strong reinforcements, a new spirit infused our forces in Egypt and the way was paved for a major offensive.

Particularly important was the greater unity of purpose and understanding now achieved between **Desert Air Force** and **Eighth Army**; Montgomery at once showed a keen appreciation of the part that could and should be played by the **RAF** in the land battle and the close liaison he now established with Coningham was to be reflected in



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highly successful operations during the next few months. ‘I hold,’ said Montgomery, ‘that it is quite wrong for the soldier to want to exercise command over the air striking forces. The handling of an air force is a life study and therefore the air part must be kept under air force command **Eighth Army** and the **Desert Air Force** have to be so knitted so that the two together form one entity. The resultant military effort will be so great that nothing will be able to stand up against it.’ The land and air forces would retain their own commands, each qualified to face its special problems, but they would operate under a combined plan. And since the soldier no longer wished to control the air striking force, there was little danger of dissipating air power in small instalments at the will of ground formations whose vision was limited to a few attractive targets on their own immediate front. For the air front, as Coningham pointed out, was indivisible and penny packets of air power were a luxury that could only be afforded at certain times. Judgment on the question of targets must be the result of agreement between the army and air commanders. This would be reached in the light of the situation as a whole; and it might well lead them to disappoint a section of their front by declining to use the bombers on one particular hostile concentration in order to dispose of a more formidable mass twenty miles away, whose safe arrival at its destination might affect a whole week's fighting on the entire front.

Above all, it was now generally realised that while the army had one battle to fight—the land battle— **Desert Air Force** had two. It had first of all to beat the enemy air force so that it might then go into battle against his land forces with the maximum possible hitting power. And as Montgomery pointed out: ‘If you do not win the air battle first you will probably lose the land battle.’

Meantime things remained fairly quiet in the desert where the two armies faced each other on the line south from **El Alamein**. Desert Air Force continued to operate but at reduced pressure and, apart from the heat and a plague of flies, its squadrons now lived more comfortably than they had done for many months. Water was plentiful; the recreations of **Alexandria** were at hand; and such luxuries as fruit and fresh meat appeared on the trestle tables in mess tents. And while the desert airmen gratefully absorbed a few civilised comforts for a change, training and re-equipment proceeded. The fighter force became stronger. It soon had twenty-one squadrons and the standard of serviceability was further improved; moreover, there were now three squadrons of Spitfires sweeping high over the desert and causing Messerschmitt pilots to look apprehensively upwards instead of down.

The land fighting suddenly flared up again at the end of August when Rommel, realising our growing strength, decided to make a last bid to break through to **Alexandria**. Some fierce clashes took place, especially round Alam el Halfa, but with his moves anticipated and in the face of a vigorous defence, the enemy onslaught failed to make any real progress; and within a week the battle was over. During the fighting the **RAF** made a strenuous and sustained effort in support of the **Eighth Army**. On the eve of the enemy attack, Coningham told his men: ‘The battle is on. Good luck in your usual brilliant work. This defensive land fight for Egypt will be followed later by an offensive and then away we go. Meanwhile go for him in the air whenever you can.’ And go for him they did. In five days **Desert Air Force** flew over 3000 sorties. Fighters held the ring over the battlefield and protected our troops from the **Luftwaffe**—now making a somewhat belated effort— while bombers,

fighter-bombers and fighters alike hammered away at enemy troops and armour. Bunched up by the pressure of our artillery and tanks, these latter offered a superb target and it was most effectively dealt with. 'The continuous and very heavy attacks of the R.A.F.,' says Rommel, 'absolutely pinned my troops to the ground and made impossible any safe deployment or advance according to schedule.' And General Bayerlein, Chief of Staff of the *Afrika Korps*, afterwards declared: 'Your air superiority was most important, perhaps decisive We had very heavy losses, more than from any other cause.'

With Rommel's second attempt to break through to **Alexandria** thus defeated, the **Eighth Army** intensified its preparations for a major offensive. The RAF for its part continued with reconnaissance, patrol and attack over and beyond the enemy front, and more especially with the assault on his supply lines. And here it was that the seeds of the enemy's final overthrow and defeat were sown. For Rommel's weakness lay behind him and with the mounting offensive—from **Malta** as well as **Egypt**—against his shipping, his ports, and transport on the desert roads, his forces in Egypt were now deprived of the material and, above all, the petrol that were so essential for victory in desert warfare. During October, our aircraft and submarines between them sank some 50,000 tons of enemy shipping on the North African routes. Of the cargo of which Rommel was thus cheated, 65 per cent was fuel. Small wonder that one of his generals afterwards remarked bitterly: 'El Alamein was lost before it was fought. We had not the petrol.'

Meanwhile, in the desert, the enemy had been forced on the defensive and, as Rommel himself admits, our command of the air now actually dictated the enemy's military dispositions:

... the first and most serious danger which now threatened us was from the air. This being so, we could no longer rest our defence on the motorised forces used in a mobile role, since these forces were too vulnerable to air attack. We had instead to try to resist the enemy in field positions which had to be constructed for defence against the most modern weapons of war.

We had to accept the fact that, by using his air-power, the enemy would be able to delay our operations at will, both in the daytime and—using parachute flares—at night. For no man can be expected to stay in his vehicle and drive on under enemy air attack. Our experience in the ‘Six-day Race’ had shown us that any sort of time-schedule was now so much waste paper. This meant that our positions had henceforth to be constructed strongly enough to enable them to be held by their local garrisons independently and over a long period, without even the support of operational reserves, until reinforcements—however much delayed by the R.A.F.—could arrive.

The fact of British air superiority threw to the winds all the tactical rules which we had hitherto applied with such success. There was no real answer to the enemy's air superiority, except a powerful air force of our own. In every battle to come the strength of the Anglo-American air force was to be the deciding factor. ¹

At the end of September 1942, Rommel, now a sick man, flew to **Germany for treatment. When he returned a month later it was to find his army fighting a desperate battle and the situation gone beyond hope of recovery.**

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Such was the background of events against which men of the Desert **Air Force flew and fought during the summer and autumn of 1942. Led by their distinguished fellow countryman, Air Vice-Marshal Coningham, New Zealand airmen continued to share in all phases of the air activity.**

The fighter pilots in their Hurricanes, Kittyhawks and Spitfires patrolled the battlefield at the height of the land fighting and intercepted formations of enemy fighters and dive-bombers; they also escorted light bombers on their missions and, turning often to the fighter-bomber role, attacked ground targets with good effect. Squadron Leader Hayter, ² Flight Lieutenants J. E. A. Williams and Ingram ³ were

specially prominent in such operations.

Hayter commanded a squadron of Hurricanes which put up a very fine effort; in one action early in July he and his pilots broke up a formation of enemy fighters and, without loss, drove down two of them and damaged seven others. Williams, who was a flight commander in No. 450 Kittyhawk Squadron, flew consistently in patrol and attack. One day in mid-September, while leading ten Kittyhawks over the **El Alamein** positions, he sent two Stuka dive-bombers down to explode on the ground and damaged a third; during another sortie

¹ *The Rommel Papers*, p. 286.

² Squadron Leader J. C. F. Hayter, DFC and bar, m.i.d.; born **Timaru**, 18 Oct 1917; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 5 Dec 1938; transferred **RAF** 18 Aug 1939 and **RNZAF** 16 Aug 1944; commanded No. **274 Sqdn, Middle East**, 1942; No. **74 Sqdn, Middle East and Europe**, 1943—44.

³ Squadron Leader M. R. B. Ingram, DFC; born Dunedin, 13 Dec 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 28 Jul 1940; commanded No. **152 Sqdn, SE Asia**, 1943—44; died of injuries received on air operations, 11 Jul 1944.

against the enemy airfield at **Daba** he shot down a Ju88 bomber. Ingram was also a flight commander in No. 601 Spitfire Squadron; he frequently led patrols over the battle area and in various actions shot down three Messerschmitts and damaged another. Four other fighter pilots who did good work at this time were Flight Sergeants R. H. Newton and Morrison, ¹ who flew Kittyhawks with No. 112 Squadron, and Flying Officer Hesketh ² and Flight Sergeant D. C. Burman with No. 145 Spitfire Squadron.

Less spectacular but equally effective work was done by the men who flew Beaufighters and Hurricanes in defence of our bases in Egypt against enemy night bombers; the results they achieved were highly

creditable, since the isolated raiders flying in from the sea were anything but easy to intercept. Flight Lieutenant Mackenzie,³ with Pilot Officer Craig⁴ as his radio observer, were a most successful Beaufighter crew in No. 46 Squadron; one night early in July they intercepted and shot down a Heinkel III bomber near **Alexandria** and then a few weeks later they shot another night bomber down in the sea off Aboukir; a further encounter followed in September when they caught a Heinkel approaching **Alexandria** and sent it down with engines on fire to explode on the ground within sight of one of our airfields. Warrant Officer E. L. Joyce did similar execution flying a Hurricane of No. 73 Squadron, a unit, incidentally, with which New Zealanders had been associated since the early days of the war. One night he picked up a Ju88 flying 400 feet above him over **Maaten Baggush**. Following the bomber despite the fact that it was turning and circling, he closed to 50 yards and opened fire. Three of the Hurricane's cannons jammed and the enemy aircraft again took violent evasive action, including sharp dives and steep climbing turns, but, says the official report, 'Joyce clung tenaciously to its tail despite return fire and finally closed in to engage the enemy aircraft successfully with his one cannon.' By the end of August, Joyce, who had now been flying with No. 73 Squadron for over a year, had brought his score to eight enemy aircraft destroyed—five of them at night. The Beaufighters and Hurricanes also went out to strafe enemy airfields by night and some of the first sorties against German air bases in **Crete** were flown by Mackenzie and Craig.

¹ Flying Officer T. H. Morrison; born **Auckland**, 8 Jun 1920; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941.

² Squadron Leader C. R. Hesketh, DFC; born **Auckland**, 12 Jun 1913; solicitor's clerk; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941.

³ Wing Commander R. M. Mackenzie, DSO, DFC, AFC; **RAF**; born Tai Tapu, 8 Sep 1916; joined **RAF** 23 Aug 1937; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944; commanded No. 227 Sqdn, **Middle East**, 1943; Training Staff, HQ **RAF**, **Middle East**, 1944; transferred **RAF**

1947.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant A. L. Craig, DFC; born Dartford, England, 10 Dec 1917; metalworker; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940.

More than fifty New Zealanders captained bomber aircraft during these months, with others flying as navigators, wireless operators and gunners. Squadron Leader L. J. Joel did particularly fine work both as pilot and formation leader of **Baltimore** light bombers operating mainly against targets on or near the battlefield; they frequently met intense anti-aircraft fire and on several occasions Joel's machine was hit and damaged, but each time he managed to land back safely and continue flying. Also flying Baltimores were Warrant Officers Baker ¹ and Askew, ² both pilots, and Warrant Officer Callender, ³ a navigator. On one raid against an enemy petrol dump their squadron ran into heavy flak and most of the aircraft were hit; one crashed and blew up, two others also came down but their crews survived. In Callender's machine both engines failed and a propeller fell off; he and two other members of his crew baled out at once only to land in the midst of the enemy; their pilot found his cockpit hood jammed so he crash-landed in no-man's-land and then escaped under fire.

The crews of the heavier bombers—most of them flew Wellingtons for there were still only a few longer range Liberators and Halifaxes—went out by night to attack enemy ports, shipping and supply dumps; they also bombed concentrations of tanks and vehicles in the battle area. Here are some of the men who captained Wellington aircraft on many such missions: Squadron Leader Morton, ⁴ Squadron Leader Steel ⁵ and Flying Officer Fleming ⁶ of No. 40 Squadron; Flight Lieutenant Hetherton, ⁷ Flying Officer Holdaway ⁸ and Flight Sergeant Spinley ⁹ with No. 37 Squadron; Flying Officer B. H. Gray ¹⁰ and Pilot Officer Stewart ¹¹ of No. 70 Squadron; Flight Lieutenant Beale, ¹²

¹ Flying Officer L. T. Baker; born **Wanganui**, 2 May 1915;

audit clerk; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940; drowned on active service, 29 Sep 1943.

² Flight Lieutenant G. D. Askew; born **Sydney, NSW**, 17 Oct 1914; packer; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

³ Warrant Officer H. R. Callender; born **Auckland**, 30 Jan 1919; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940; prisoner of war, 6 Oct 1942.

⁴ Wing Commander J. E. S. Morton, DFC, m.i.d.; **RAF**; born **Invercargill**, 11 Jun 1915; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 14 Jun 1939; transferred **RAF** 17 Jan 1940; commanded No. **40 Sqdn**, 1942—43; Chief Training Instructor, No. **203 Group, Middle East**, 1943—45.

⁵ Squadron Leader F. J. Steel, DFC; born **Masterton**, 7 Jul 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 20 Nov 1939.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant R. T. Fleming, DFC; born **Opotiki**, 23 Sep 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940; prisoner of war, 13 Aug 1944.

⁷ Squadron Leader J. A. Hetherington, DFC; born **Tapanui**, 14 Oct 1915; electrical engineer; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

⁸ Flight Lieutenant E. A. Holdaway, DFC and bar; born **Carterton**, 8 Jan 1918; storeman; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

⁹ Flight Lieutenant M. Spinley, DFM; born **Wellington**, 1 Nov 1922; butcher; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Feb 1945.

¹⁰ Flight Lieutenant B. H. Gray, DFC; born **Waverley**, 10 Dec 1912; commercial traveller; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

¹¹ Flight Lieutenant D. R. Stewart, DFM; born Belfast, **Canterbury**, 8 Oct 1915; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 22 Dec 1940.

¹² Squadron Leader H. H. Beale, DFC and bar; born Waipiro Bay, 10 Sep 1916; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941; died of wounds while prisoner of war, 8 Apr 1944.

Flying Officer E. L. Gray, ¹ Flight Sergeants Taaffe ² and Craig ³ of No. 104 Squadron; Flying Officer Campbell, ⁴ Flight Sergeants Momo ⁵ and A. T. Black of No. 148 Squadron; and Flight Lieutenant Kofoed ⁶ who captained a **Halifax** of No. 462 Squadron on many long-range missions. Several of these men were flight commanders of their units; all performed their duties with conspicuous courage, ability and steadfastness. And the same may be said of navigators like Flying Officer Spence ⁷ and gunners such as Flight Sergeant Piper, ⁸ both of whom were killed while attempting to escape after being shot down in a raid on **Tobruk**.

A special word must be added about the men who flew with No. 162 Wellington Squadron for, in addition to bombing missions, they carried out special flights to discover the strength and coverage of enemy radar and radio systems as well as calibrating and checking our own. Flying Officers Watson, ⁹ Hegman ¹⁰ and King ¹¹ each captained aircraft of this unit. In September 1942 Watson and Hegman went to **Malta** and in a period of twelve nights flew eight special missions over **Sicily** and **Italy**. Three months later Hegman made another similar series of flights, after which Sir Keith Park signalled: ‘ **162 Squadron** aircraft have done a first-class job for **Malta** by revealing the extent of enemy R.D.F. cover in the Central Mediterranean. We are now able to route our aircraft to achieve maximum of surprise and the minimum danger of interception.’

Another sphere of operations in which New Zealanders were prominent was the attack on enemy ships at sea by Wellington torpedo-bombers. These aircraft, rather slow and vulnerable by day but with the advantage of range, had been brought in to close the gap left by

¹ Flight Lieutenant E. L. Gray, DFC; born **Wellington**, 24 Mar 1911; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant R. J. Taaffe, DFM; born **Frasertown**, Hawke's Bay, 14 Dec 1918; ledgerkeeper; joined **RNZAF** 18 Jan 1941; killed on air operations, 24 Nov 1943.

³ Flight Sergeant L. L. A. Craig; born **Auckland**, 22 Jan 1918; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 7 Nov 1942

⁴ Flight Lieutenant F. V. Campbell, DFC; born **Otahuhu**, 14 Sep 1916; butter-maker; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant R. J. R. Momo, DFC; born **Christchurch**, 9 Apr 1922; apprentice electrician; joined **RNZAF** 23 Mar 1941.

⁶ Wing Commander W. R. Kofoed, DSO, DFC; born **Outram**, 28 Dec 1915; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

⁷ Flying Officer N. Spence; born **Rimu**, **Canterbury**, 8 Nov 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940; presumed killed on 18 Sep 1942 while attempting to escape.

⁸ Flight Sergeant C. C. Piper; born **Ohakune**, 3 May 1918; labourer; joined **RNZAF** 1 Oct 1940; killed attempting to escape, 18 Sep 1942.

⁹ Squadron Leader R. J. Watson, DFC; born **Waimate**, 5 Jul 1916; law clerk; joined **RNZAF** 1 Dec 1940; killed on air operations 5 Mar 1944.

¹⁰ Squadron Leader J. A. Hegman, DSO, DFC; born **Auckland**, 23 Jun 1916; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941; killed on air

operations, 15 Feb 1944.

¹¹ Flight Lieutenant N. R. King, DFC; born Christchurch, 16 Dec 1915; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

the day patrols and thus prevent enemy ships getting across under cover of darkness. Some of the Wellingtons acted as search aircraft. Equipped with radar and carrying parachute flares, they patrolled the shipping lanes nightly and on finding a target reported by radio; they then 'homed' strike aircraft to the position and dropped flares around the convoy to illuminate it for attack. Pilots of the strike aircraft had no easy task for their torpedoes had to be dropped from about seventy feet and on dark nights it was difficult to estimate this height and avoid flying into the sea. Squadron Leader Harding ¹ and Flying Officer Frame ² of No. 221 Squadron did good work as captains of search aircraft, while Flight Sergeants A. G. Metcalf and Rusbatch, ³ Sergeants Fraser ⁴ and Hornung ⁵ each captained Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron.

One night in September Metcalf and his crew, which included a Scot, an American and two other New Zealanders, flew in a squadron attack against a convoy off **Tobruk**. There were three merchant ships escorted by no fewer than twelve destroyers, and as the Wellingtons approached they were given a hot reception. And since it was a clear night with a full moon the bombers were a good target. After some manoeuvring, Metcalf flew in very low to launch two torpedoes at a large cargo vessel and a few moments later two violent explosions were seen as they struck almost amidships. But as the Wellington swept over the convoy it met a veritable hail of anti-aircraft fire; one shell burst under the starboard engine, ripped open the fuselage, put the wireless out of action and wounded the operator, Flight Sergeant Cumming, ⁶ in both arms and a thigh. The bomber, however, remained airborne and when Metcalf had set course for base he went back and dressed Cumming's wounds. Thereupon, although in considerable pain, Cumming set about making repairs to the wireless; then having sent out the necessary signals he assisted the navigator, who had also been wounded, to guide the

machine back to Egypt. Over base it was found that only one undercarriage wheel could be lowered but Metcalf succeeded in making a safe landing. Later the crew had the satisfaction of receiving confirmation that they had sunk the supply ship.

¹ Wing Commander A. H. Harding, DFC; born **Wellington**, 1 Sep 1918; civil servant; joined **RAF** 7 Aug 1938; transferred **RNZAF** 1 Jan 1944; commanded Special Duties Flight, **Malta**, 1942; No. 353 Transport Sqdn, **India**, 1945.

² Flight Lieutenant J. S. Frame, DFC; born **Mosgiel**, 26 Jul 1916; cost clerk; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941.

³ Warrant Officer T. D. Rusbatch; born **Oamaru**, 19 Dec 1918; mechanic; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant W. A. Fraser, DFC, DFM; born **Dunedin**, 8 Dec 1921; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

⁵ Flight Sergeant W. Hornung, DFM; born **Christchurch**, 12 Sep 1918; customs clerk; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; killed on air operations, 10 Apr 1943.

⁶ Flying Officer J. D. C. Cumming, DFM; born **Christchurch**, 2 Jun 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 1937.

A remarkable experience was shared by Sergeant Joyce ¹ and the crew of his **Wellington** bomber. They were struggling back after a raid on shipping at **Tobruk** with one engine out of action, having jettisoned everything moveable in the aircraft, when the strain proved too much for the remaining engine and the pilot had to crash-land in the desert. They were then some fifty miles south-east of **Tobruk** and well behind the enemy lines. The landing was successful, no one was hurt, and when daylight came the crew began to reconnoitre their position. Enemy aircraft flew overhead but apparently did not see them; some wandering

Arabs they met proved suspicious and unhelpful.

On the second day Joyce led a party to the coast road with the idea of capturing some form of transport; two men hid in a burnt-out lorry on one side of the road and two more behind a pile of stones on the opposite side. Convoys passed by continually for two hours and then, suddenly, at a moment when the road was otherwise clear, a staff car appeared. As it drew near one of the men stepped out into the road and held up his hand. The car stopped. Two German officers were in the front seats with an orderly behind, but they were too surprised to offer resistance in the face of a levelled revolver. The Germans were relieved of their weapons and the British airmen took over the car and drove back to their aircraft. There they picked up their companions, loaded food and water, and set off eastwards across the desert. They passed abandoned camps, narrowly avoided an old minefield, and were making good progress the following day when the front axle broke. Walking on they reached the vicinity of the German lines at night and began making their way stealthily forward. At one point they found themselves among parked German transport, and when one driver leaned out of his vehicle to pass a remark they muttered a reply and passed on safely. But shortly before dawn they blundered over an escarpment into a forward post where they were promptly surrounded and captured.

The next day they were put on a truck bound for a prison camp at **Tobruk, accompanied by two Italian drivers and two Italian guards, each carrying revolvers. As they drove along there was a pleasant exchange of smiles and gestures amidst which the aircrew made their plan; and at the first stop they fell upon the Italians and disarmed them. With one of the Italians still at the wheel the truck now drove eastwards, climbing towards **Halfaya**. Next morning they left the road and began making their way across the desert but became lost; several times the truck became bogged and the men, several of whom were now showing signs of illness, had to dig it out. Eventually they came across an abandoned dump which provided some food, including,**

¹ Pilot Officer J. L. Joyce; born **Wellington**, 11 Jun 1918; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

above all things, prunes, but these were most welcome as all the men were now covered with desert sores. On the tenth day, while searching for water, the party was fortunate to be surprised by two trucks from the **Long Range Desert Group** and it was from its desert rendezvous that the airmen, after handing over their Italian prisoners, were finally picked up and flown back to their squadron. They had spent nearly a fortnight in the desert.

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With his supply lines under continual attack, Rommel was unable to keep pace with the British build-up in Egypt. By mid-October 1942, on the eve of the last and greatest battle of **El Alamein**, Montgomery had a superiority of some two to one in men, tanks and guns; and the disparity in fuel and ammunition stocks was even greater. In the air the **RAF** had some 1200 aircraft based in Egypt and Palestine; the Germans and Italians still disposed of nearly 3000 machines in the **Mediterranean** area but they had barely 700 in **Africa**, and of these little more than half were serviceable. General Alexander, British Commander-in-Chief, regarded the coming battle with confidence. 'We had the advantage over the enemy in men, tanks and guns and we had a vigorous and enterprising field commander who knew well how to employ these advantages. The Eighth Army was certainly the finest and best equipped we had put in the field so far The Royal **Air Force** had established such complete air superiority that enemy aircraft were unable to interfere with our preparations, and Eighth Army was kept supplied with regular air photographs of the enemy disposition.'

In the great events which now unfolded, **Desert Air Force** was to lead the way. According to the overall plan, its crews were to start intensive attacks against the enemy air force four days before the opening of the land battle, which was timed for 23 October. An earlier opportunity,

however, occurred which Coningham was quick to seize. On the 6th, very heavy rain began to fall, and three days later reconnaissance photographs showed the enemy landing grounds at **Daba** under water and those at **Fuka** usable only with the greatest difficulty. Coningham at once sent some 500 fighters and bombers against these two groups of airfields, where their attacks destroyed or put out of action some thirty enemy aircraft and did great damage to airfield transport, dumps and gun positions. It was thus against opponents already seriously weakened that **Desert Air Force** opened its full offensive ten days later. **Boston**, **Mitchell** and **Baltimore** light bombers with Hurricane, Kittyhawk, Spitfire, Tomahawk fighters and fighter-bombers were then let loose in successive attacks, and by the eve of the land offensive it was estimated that more than half of the *Luftwaffe's* effective strength in the area had been disabled. Indeed, such was the degree of air superiority achieved by Coningham's squadrons that all the preliminary moves and dispositions for Montgomery's ground attack were made without the slightest interference from the enemy either in the air or on the ground. The assaulting infantry of **30 Corps**, for instance, moved forward on the night of the 22nd and spent the whole of the next day in their slit-trenches in advance of our main positions without being in any way observed or molested.

Shortly after dark on 23 October British guns opened up with the heaviest barrage so far heard in **Africa** and under its cover our infantry, including that of **2 New Zealand Division**, moved forward all along the line. **Bostons** laid smoke screens, **Wellington** bombers began continuous attacks on enemy guns and concentrations, while Hurricane night fighters strafed troops and vehicles. With the dawn, Hurricane, Kittyhawk and Spitfire fighters and **Boston**, **Mitchell** and **Baltimore** light bombers went into action to operate at record intensity throughout the day, the light bombers making no fewer than fourteen consecutive attacks. To our infantry and tanks pressing forward through gaps made in the enemy minefields the fighters gave complete immunity from enemy air attack, while the light bombers operated incessantly against the enemy ground forces, concentrating on their vehicles and gun

positions. The anti-aircraft fire, however, was often intense and the light bombers suffered severely, six being shot down and ten more seriously damaged. Enemy air activity on the other hand was slight and Spitfires even patrolled high over his forward fighter landing grounds without being seriously challenged.

Throughout the following days and nights, as hard fighting developed on the ground, **Desert Air Force** continued to operate at high pitch. The airfields were clothed in a persistent cloud of dust kicked up by the continual take-offs; and beneath it air and ground crews alike toiled in a sweating, grimy fury of assault. Over the battlefield, squadrons helped our troops to smash enemy counter-thrusts and on several occasions even prevented Rommel's armour from assembling to launch an attack. 'On 28 October,' writes Montgomery, 'the enemy made a prolonged reconnaissance of Kidney Ridge, probing it for soft spots while two German Panzer Divisions waited in the rear. In the evening they began to concentrate for attack, but **Desert Air Force** intervened to such effect that the enemy was defeated before he had completed his forming up.'

And when in turn our own troops drove forward, Coningham's squadrons went ahead to weaken the opposition. On 2 November fighters and bombers flew more than 600 sorties in support of a determined thrust by ground forces. The fighters also dealt effectively with the *Luftwaffe's* belated efforts to join in the battle. On 28 October, for example, an attempt by Ju87s to attack our forward positions was so completely frustrated that the once formidable Stukas jettisoned their bombs on their own troops. A few days later a formation of British and American Kittyhawks intercepted thirty Ju87s escorted by fifteen Me109s. The American fighters held the ring; the British fighters closed in and shot down seven of the enemy without loss to themselves; and again the Stukas jettisoned their bombs on their own troops.

Meanwhile our bombers had made things so difficult for the enemy behind the front that Rommel was reduced to flying in petrol from **Crete**—much to the disgust of the German bomber crews relegated to

these duties. Their supply ships were being regularly sunk; and three consecutive attempts to bring convoys into **Tobruk** during the latter part of October all ended in failure. Here is what happened to the last convoy. Consisting of two merchant ships and a tanker, escorted by four destroyers, it was first sighted by a reconnaissance **Baltimore** north-east of **Benghazi** on the afternoon of 25 October. Wellingtons duly found and attacked the ships during the night but were unable to claim any definite success. The hunt therefore continued and the following day the convoy was again located off **Derna**, where it was carefully shadowed until it came within range of our day torpedo-bombers. Two attacks were then launched by Beauforts, which scored hits on the tanker and damaged at least one of the merchant vessels. The same evening Wellingtons followed up with an attack just outside **Tobruk** harbour, where they hit the larger merchant vessel and caused a huge explosion which covered the whole convoy with black smoke and flying debris. More Wellingtons went out during the night but all they could find was the tanker blazing furiously from stem to stern.

The fighting at **El Alamein** had lasted ten days when our reconnaissance aircraft began to return with reports of traffic streaming west along the coastal road. The enemy had had enough and, under cover of his artillery, had started to break away. Under pressure from our ground and air forces, this withdrawal soon became a headlong rush in which the Germans left many of the Italian troops without transport in which to retreat or even to supply their daily rations of food and water; and when they were finally cut off and abandoned, our aircraft flew over dropping food and water to keep them alive until they could be rounded up in prison camps.

Some 30,000 prisoners and immense quantities of equipment were captured at **El Alamein** by our victorious troops. The subsequent pursuit, however, was hampered in its early stages by heavy rain. Montgomery's armour and vehicles, attempting to strike across the desert and encircle the enemy, were bogged down for two days and Rommel, with the main body of his army, got away to a good start. Thereafter our ground forces

seized every opportunity to round up the enemy, but in the meantime the task of striking at his retreat fell mainly to the **RAF**; General Alexander records that 'during this phase when X Corps was unable to come to grips with the enemy, the work of the Royal **Air Force** was particularly valuable.' Even so, opportunities for striking heavy, and perhaps decisive, blows were missed at **Fuka, Matruh**, and in the frontier passes where the congestion and confusion of the enemy was greatest. This was partly due to flooded airfields restricting operations and also to the fact that a large part of the fighter force was held back to cover our forward troops against enemy air attack.

However, although the **RAF** was not able to deliver a really concentrated attack at this stage it at least made things extremely uncomfortable for the enemy. ¹ All the way from **Daba** to the Egyptian frontier both fighters and bombers continued to attack his retreating columns, and they kept it up right across **Cyrenaica** with squadrons leap-frogging ahead to operate from landing grounds well forward—sometimes in advance of the main army and protected only by armoured cars. One particularly bold move was made by Coningham on 13 November when he sent two squadrons of Hurricane fighters, completely by air transport, to a landing ground about 180 miles east of **Agedabia**, ahead and to the south of even our forward troops. To the great surprise of the enemy, the Hurricanes suddenly appeared over his columns retreating round the bend of the Gulf of **Sirte** and inflicted considerable damage—they also destroyed enemy aircraft on the ground at **Agedabia** and **Gialo**.

During the pursuit it was, in fact, the fighter and fighter-bombers that moved forward most rapidly for they were now highly mobile and needed fewer supplies. Reconnaissance parties descended on the desert airfields as fast as the enemy abandoned them and with the help of forward troops prepared the way for ground staff to move in and receive the squadrons. Many of the captured airfields presented a different appearance from that left by the **RAF** during its retreat six months earlier, when almost every aircraft had been got away. At **Daba**, for

example, there were about fifty enemy aircraft in various stages of unserviceability, some shattered, a few only slightly damaged; one Messerschmitt 109G was taken and soon its engine was running. Piled in one corner and intended for salvage were the remains of thirty-nine Messerschmitts and an unrecognisable heap of further wreckage.

¹ ‘That night [7/8 November] enemy bombers flew non-stop attacks against the **Sollum- Halfaya** position Next morning there was still a 25-mile queue of vehicles waiting to get through the passes. Traffic had moved very slowly ... as a result of the incessant attacks of the R.A.F.’

‘All that day [8 November] ... formations of British bombers and close-support aircraft attacked the coast road and inflicted serious casualties on our columns’— *The Rommel Papers*.

On 11 November, while the New Zealand Division was occupying the frontier area, our fighters caught up with the enemy air force and had a most successful day, shooting down aircraft not only over the frontier but also on the enemy's own landing grounds far beyond at **Gambut** and **El Adem**. Two days later our Hurricanes and Kittyhawks were flying from the same two airfields bombing and machine-gunning enemy transport in the **Gebel Akhdar**. By 16 November the main British fighter force was operating from **Gazala** and during the next two days it destroyed thirty-seven Ju52 transport aircraft by means of which the enemy was trying desperately to relieve his fuel shortage. When Montgomery's advanced troops entered **Benghazi** on 19 November, two fighter wings were established at **Martuba**, and a week later they moved forward to **Msus** to cover the next stage of the advance. One important result of this rapid occupation of the airfields in the hump of **Cyrenaica** was that our fighters could now cover ships bound for **Malta** almost all the way from **Alexandria**. And towards the end of November they saw a convoy safely through to the besieged island—the first to reach Grand Harbour for three long months.

Meanwhile the bombers had begun to move westwards carrying some

of their petrol and supplies forward from one landing ground to another. In the first few days of their advance the 'heavies' came forward 200 miles from Palestine to Egypt and carried all their own bombs; later on they moved another 300 miles forward into **Libya**. Both light and medium bombers continued to strike at the retreating enemy columns until these passed out of range. **Tobruk** and **Benghazi** were also bombed to prevent their last-minute use by the enemy for supply. Then as targets thinned out with our speedy re-occupation of **Cyrenaica**, a large part of the Wellington bomber force was transferred to **Malta**, where it would be well within range of enemy ports in **Tripoli** and **Tunisia**.

Rommel's retreat from **Alamein** to **El Agheila**—nearly a thousand miles in eighteen days—constituted a record for the course, but equally remarkable was the way in which our land and air forces kept on the enemy's tail despite most unfavourable weather, delays imposed by mining, ingenious booby traps, the destruction of roads, and some stubborn rearguard actions.

Each day units moved farther westwards, tumbling all their gear into lorries and getting out again on to the crowded coast road, which grew worse rather than better, for whole stretches of it had been practically blasted away by bombs or washed out by floods. Tents were abandoned and men stretched themselves to sleep on the ground behind whatever shelter a truck would provide. Bully beef became not so much the staple as the only diet and a mug of hot tea often a thing to be dreamt of. Fighter pilots returning from patrol settled in circles to talk wistfully of tenderly cooked steaks and other delicacies. But nobody cared very much for this was an advance. And day and night as the enemy fled to the west they pursued him, striking at his columns and destroying his vehicles and aircraft.

At Agheila, where naturally strong defensive positions existed, Rommel put up a show of a fight so the **Eighth Army** paused to renew its strength before launching an attack. Meanwhile Coningham's supporting fighter squadrons had cut out the coastal bulge at **Benghazi** and moved across the inland desert to Antelat, **Agedabia** and **El Haseiat**. From these

airfields they now bombed and machine-gunned enemy strongpoints, bases and landing grounds; their attack on **Marble Arch** airfield was so continuous that the German fighters based there were forced back to **Nofilia**, fifty miles to the west. Simultaneously our bombers made heavy raids on the Tripolitanian ports.

Short of supplies and lacking adequate fighter cover, Rommel began to retreat from **Agheila** on 13 December before he had been seriously attacked by our land forces. Then Coningham once again turned his squadrons on to the retreating enemy and Montgomery records: 'They did a great execution on the coast road.' By the end of December the enemy had withdrawn to prepared defences at **Buerat**. But the Eighth Army followed up quickly and when, after a brief stand, Rommel's forces again took to the road, our troops cheerfully renewed the pursuit, their vehicles now chalked with the words: 'On to **Tripoli**'.

Desert Air Force kept up with the new advance, helped greatly by an increasingly efficient air transport organisation. At Marble Arch airfield two thousand land mines had to be lifted, but as soon as enough safe space was available for landing and dispersal the squadrons were signalled to advance. First to arrive was a fighter-bomber wing which, with the aid of transport aircraft, made the move entirely by air. Fighters, ground crews, staff, equipment, bombs, petrol and oil all arrived at **Marble Arch** in one combined operation on 18 December. The pilots helped the ground crews prepare for action and within two hours the first fighter-bombers were off to attack the enemy, who were taken by surprise on the road to **Sirte**. They had thought that **Marble Arch** would be out of action for a week, but it was in use by the **RAF** within two days of its evacuation.

Such was the pattern and speed of forward movement by the squadrons during the rest of the great advance. It was achieved in the face of mounting difficulties; for the enemy tried every device to slow up the fighter-bomber squadrons that were attacking his columns on the roads westwards towards **Tripoli**. He resorted to still heavier mining of

airfields and their surroundings; he also began ploughing up landing surfaces in the most fantastic manner, one craftsman in particular creating enormous furrowed whorls of rich complexity and individual design until a burst of cannon fire from a fighter overhead turned him from the plough; his touch was never seen again and his successors worked more hastily on less elaborate lines.

The enemy's efforts availed him little since our forces simply made new airfields. Ground parties went ahead in small convoys escorted by **RAF** armoured cars, tracking over the desert to select the new sites. The sand was levelled, soft patches were filled in with hard core, scrub torn out and burnt, rocks and boulders shifted and a landing ground carved out of the rough surface, often within forty-eight hours; then a radio message brought the aircraft forward. Moreover, the technique quickly improved. One landing-ground site, 1200 yards square, selected in the **Bir Dufan** area was serviceable in three hours, enabling fighter formations to move forward in one hop of 140 miles; and at **Tripoli** itself, where the airfield was most thoroughly ruined by the enemy, three new grounds were carved out of the desert in twenty-four hours. All along the way the Army gave invaluable help; at one point the New Zealand Division detailed two thousand troops to pick up stones and make a landing ground; and there were cases where a whole brigade performed this service for the **RAF**¹—striking evidence that inter-service collaboration was now complete.

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For the fighter pilots these had been particularly eventful months. In the weeks before the **Alamein** battle, they had fought and won a notable victory over the **Luftwaffe**; thereafter they had maintained and pressed home their advantage by aggressive action in the air and by continual attacks on the enemy's landing grounds. And while thus gaining and holding the initiative, they had been able to give invaluable help to their comrades on the ground. With the advance, units had been continually on the move, operating from as many as a dozen different landing grounds within a month; and it is worth remembering that a

squadron of aircraft with all the cumbersome necessities of petrol, bombs, servicing equipment, signals and operations control, does not move as easily as a squadron of tanks or armoured cars. Yet hot though the pace was, the Desert fighter squadrons never fell behind and never failed to carry out their assignments.

Some idea of the intense activity of these three remarkable months may be gained from these entries in the operational diary of one Kittyhawk fighter wing:

¹ 5 NZ Brigade Group lost 14 killed and 49 wounded under attacks by fighter-bombers while picking up stones on one of these fields.

L.G.91. October 31st. Two hundred sorties were made on armed recce, ground strafing and bomber escorts. A Stuka party was intercepted and five Ju 87s and two Me 109Fs destroyed, with six more probables. During other operations three more Messerschmitts were destroyed, two more and one Ju 87 probably destroyed, with eight others damaged. Fifty vehicles, eleven ammunition dumps were also attacked and four lorries carrying petrol blew up. Altogether this month, for the loss of fifteen pilots, forty-two enemy machines have been destroyed, eighteen probably destroyed and twenty-two damaged in the air. A further twenty-one aircraft were destroyed or damaged on the ground.

L.G.101. November 8th. Fighter, bomber and strafing attacks against enemy transport on the **Sollum** road were pressed home during the day, twenty MT being destroyed and twenty-five damaged. 'B' party arrived at L.G.106.

L.G.106. November 12th. Fighter sweeps over the **Tobruk** and **Gazala** areas with little opposition from enemy aircraft. (Advance party left at 0500 hours and arrived **Gambut** satellite at 1630 hours.)

Gazala No. 2. November 17th. Successful fighter sweeps over

Benghazi and Magrun. In the air nine enemy machines, including two Me 109Fs and one Ju52 Transport, were destroyed. On the ground eight more aircraft and ten MT vehicles were destroyed, with another thirty-six vehicles, some carrying troops, damaged. Three of our pilots are missing.

Martuba No. 4. November 20th. Patrols over our forward troops in the **Msus/ Agedabia** areas and reconnaissance flights as far as **El Agheila**.

Martuba No. 4. November 30th. Wing and Squadron parties left for Antelat. Altogether during this month the wing has advanced a distance of nearly 550 miles, much of the travel being by desert tracks, sometimes almost impassable owing to bad weather yet squadrons continued to operate efficiently at all times due to keenness and unflagging energy of the ground staffs.

Belandah No. 1. December 10th. Long range strafing and bomber attacks on enemy transport resulted in over thirty vehicles being damaged. A successful bombing attack was also made at **Nofilia** airfield.

Marble Arch. December 19th. Advance party arrived. Airfield so thickly sown with mines that it was impossible to locate squadrons on the edge of the landing ground itself and as few personnel as possible were encamped near the aircraft. Extensive fighter bomber attacks were made on the **Sirte** road where twelve vehicles were destroyed and over one hundred damaged; there were attacks on camps and anti-aircraft posts were also machinegunned. Two of our pilots are missing.

Alem-El-Chel. December 30th. Air activity on a greatly increased scale. On two occasions patrols encountered hostile aircraft and dealt with them effectively, eight Me being destroyed, one probably destroyed and two damaged. We lost no aircraft.

Hamreiat East. January 14th. Fighter sweeps south of **Tauorga** and over the **Sedada** area. Forty-eight aircraft escorted South African Bostons to bomb **Bir Dufan**. Other aircraft carried out fighter-bomber

raid on enemy concentrations, west of Gheddahaia.

Tripoli. January 24th. Advance party arrived at Castel Benito 0500 hours, occupied landing ground 0730 hours. Air party arrived am. Bombing raid made on Ben Gardane aerodrome. Wing assumed control of airport pending arrival of station personnel. Guard placed on Chianti Brewery pending arrival of military authorities!

Squadron Leader J. E. A. Williams led one of the Kittyhawk squadrons of this wing during the Alamein battle. After a series of profitable sorties, he was unlucky enough to be forced down behind the enemy lines and taken prisoner; eighteen months later, in March 1944, he took part in the famous escape from Stalag Luft III in Germany and was one of the fifty officers shot on recapture.

Pilot Officer Fallows ¹ and Sergeant Fourneau, ² Flight Sergeants Holmes, ³ R. H. Newton and Thomas ⁴ flew Kittyhawks throughout the whole period. They saw plenty of action. For instance, on the eve of Alamein, Fallows and Thomas were flying with their squadron as escort to Baltimores and Bostons attacking Daba; fifteen enemy fighters dived on the Kittyhawks and in the dogfight which followed Fallows shot down one Messerschmitt and Thomas damaged another. At the height of the land battle, Newton's squadron flew forty-eight sorties a day; in a sweep over Fuka they claimed four Ju87 dive-bombers and two Messerschmitts for the loss of one pilot; Newton accounted for one of the dive-bombers. While patrolling Benina airfield during the advance to Benghazi, Holmes's squadron intercepted bombers carrying in fuel for the German panzer units and shot down seven of them. Holmes got a Heinkel.

Three Spitfire pilots who flew consistently in patrol and attack were Flight Lieutenants M. R. B. Ingram and D. F. Westenra and Flying Officer C. R. Hesketh. When his squadron intercepted a Stuka party over Matruh, Ingram shot down one of the escorting Messerschmitts and then went on to share in the destruction of a dive-bomber. A few days later he destroyed another Messerschmitt over El Agheila. During the advance to Tripoli, Hesketh's squadron intercepted enemy fighters over Tamet and

shot down five of them. Hesketh got two Macchi 202s; bits and pieces fell from both machines and then they crashed into the sea. During this air battle his squadron leader was forced to land on the sea and Hesketh remained to mark and report the position, thus enabling a speedy rescue to be made.

Flying with one of the Hurricane 'tank-buster' squadrons were Pilot Officer McGregor ⁵ and Sergeant Paton. ⁶ On the first day of the Ala-

¹ Flight Lieutenant G. Fallows; born Eltham, 23 Jun 1921; clerk; joined RNZAF Mar 1941; prisoner of war, 26 Mar 1943.

² Flying Officer S. J. Fourneau, DFC; born Norsewood, 12 Apr 1919; orchardist; joined **RNZAF** 3 May 1941.

³ Flying Officer N. C. Holmes; born **Ashburton**, 25 Dec 1919; labourer; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant B. H. Thomas, DFC; born **Kaponga**, 25 Sep 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 21 Dec 1940.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant P. N. McGregor; born **Auckland**, 25 Dec 1917; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant J. B. Paton; born **Wellington**, 25 Mar 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 19Feb 1941.

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battle, McGregor hit two tanks and shared another. A few days later Paton shared in the destruction of more than a dozen lorries; during the attack his Hurricane was hit, forcing him to land in the desert, but he managed to get back to his squadron and resume flying at once.

New Zealanders also flew with the bomber squadrons which played a notable part both before and during the **Alamein** battle with their continual raids on enemy ports and shipping, their attacks on airfields, supply dumps and transport, and their bombing of enemy concentrations on the battlefield. Some of the men who did outstanding work as bomber captains have been mentioned earlier in this chapter, but there were now others like Squadron Leader McKay, ¹ flight commander with a squadron of long-range Liberators, Flying Officer A. B. Smith, ² who captained a Wellington bomber of No. 40 Squadron, and Pilot Officer O'Connor ³ and Sergeant Franich ⁴ of No. 37 Squadron, also flying Wellington bombers. There were also navigators like Flight Sergeant Blaikie, ⁵ wireless operators like Flying Officer Crawford ⁶ and Flight Sergeant Temm, ⁷ and gunners like Flight Sergeants Campbell ⁸ and Henderson. ⁹

The bomber men saw their share of episode and incident. For example, Flying Officer Smith and his crew were returning from operations over **Tripolitania** one night when engine trouble forced their Wellington down on the sea; the men spent eighty hours in a dinghy before they finally paddled ashore; then some Arabs helped them to return safely to their base. 'We were about twenty miles off the coast when we took to the dinghy,' says Smith. 'We drifted for a while hoping for rescue, then we started paddling southwards to make sure we did not land in German territory. We divided ourselves in three shifts rowing in pairs continuously until finally we reached the coast. We had

¹ Group Captain J. J. McKay, DSO, DFC, DFC (US); born **Nelson**, 2 Jun 1916; salesman; joined **RAF** Oct 1937; permanent commission **RAF** Sep 1945; commanded No. 178 Sqdn, **Middle East**, 1943; SASO, HQ Levant, 1944; commanded No. **240 Wing**, **MAAF**, 1944—45.

² Flight Lieutenant A. B. Smith, DFC; born Veletta, Paraguay, 13 Mar 1914; accountant; joined **RNZAF** 19 Jan 1941.

³ Squadron Leader B. M. O'Connor, DFC; born **Palmerston North**, 28 Nov 1916; architectural student; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer L. B. Franich; born **Dargaville**, 2 Oct 1916; salesman; joined **RNZAF** 23 Mar 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer I. A. Blaikie, DFM; born **Christchurch**, 23 Jul 1918; landscape gardener; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; killed on air operations, 5 Aug 1944.

⁶ Flying Officer H. J. Crawford; born **Dunedin**, 21 Oct 1918; salesman; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

⁷ Flying Officer A. W. Temm, DFM; born **Auckland**, 16 Sep 1918; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940.

⁸ Warrant Officer D. B. Campbell, DFM; born **Dargaville**, 8 Jun 1920; postman; joined **RNZAF** 13 Feb 1940.

⁹ Pilot Officer F. M. H. Henderson, DFM; born **Putaruru**, 6 Mar 1922; surveyor's assistant; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

been drenched to the skin every night in the dinghy and got little sleep. When we walked ashore, we staggered like drunken men.'

Flying Officer Earl ¹ and his crew had a similar experience while operating against **Tripoli** from **Malta**. Flying back one night through storms and head winds, their Wellington ran out of fuel and they had to land on the sea. Rough water and gusting winds did not prevent Earl from putting the bomber down successfully and he and his crew were picked up the same morning.

The faithful Wellington— 'Good old Wimpey' to its crews—was still the mainstay of the **RAF** bomber force in the **Middle East**, but some of

our men flew American built aircraft with which certain units were now equipped. For instance, with one Marauder squadron Flight Sergeants Miles,² Freeman,³ McMillan⁴ and Spedding⁵ as pilots, and Flying Officer Connell⁶ as navigator, did good work in reconnaissance and torpedo or bombing attacks against enemy ships. Connell had been with the squadron when it was equipped with Blenheims and had been prominent in operations both over the **Western Desert** and in night intruder missions against German air bases in **Crete**. He was lost when his aircraft went missing without trace during a sweep over the Aegean Sea. The Marauders, three carrying torpedoes and six carrying bombs, made one particularly successful attack on the harbour and port installations at Meles Bay in the **Dodecanese**. Torpedo aircraft scored hits on two large freighters, which blew up and sank, while the bombers hit dock buildings and straddled two smaller cargo ships with their bombs. McMillan's aircraft was badly damaged by flak during this attack and was one of the two aircraft which failed to return.

Sunderland flying-boats of No. 230 Squadron had continued their long patrols over the **Mediterranean**, but in mid-February 1943 all but three of them were sent south to cover the **Indian Ocean** approaches to the **Red Sea**. Of the original group of New Zealanders who had been with the squadron in the earlier years, only navigator Flight Lieutenant R. P. Reid now remained to complete an exceptionally long tour of over two years. Squadron Leader D. N. Milligan, who had earlier completed an eventful period with Sunderlands, now became flight commander in an Australian Baltimore squadron, operating against enemy shipping in the **Aegean Sea**.

¹ Squadron Leader R. C. Earl, DFC; born **Bristol**, England, 6 Jan 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941.

² Flight Sergeant R. G. Miles; born **Ashburton**, 15 Apr 1922; clerical cadet; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941; killed on air operations, 27 Jun 1943.

³ Flight Lieutenant N. D. Freeman; born Dunedin, 19 Dec 1917; advertising salesman; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

⁴ Flight Sergeant N. A. McMillan; born **Thames**, 15 Jun 1916; fisherman; joined **RNZAF** 1 Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 21 Feb 1943.

⁵ Flying Officer F. M. Spedding; born **Christchurch**, 11 Mar 1919; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941.

⁶ Flying Officer B. T. Connell; born **Christchurch**, 19 Dec 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940; killed on air operations, 15 Feb 1943.

The work of the transport crews deserves special mention. From the start at **El Alamein**, they flew forward petrol, water, bombs, ammunition and a variety of other stores, and on their return flights carried back casualties to base hospitals; they also made it possible for fighter squadrons to leap ahead in the desert with the minimum of delay. Indeed, without their untiring and devoted efforts, things would have been very different; for instance, there would often have been no water at all for the men at the forward landing grounds. Here are a few extracts from what one New Zealand transport pilot wrote of his experiences at this time:

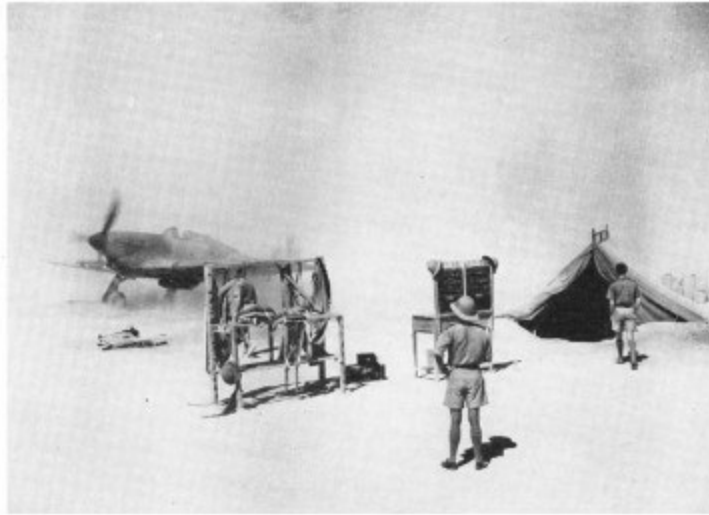
Everyone up forward was needing supplies and we were determined to see they got them. So night and day the Hudsons plied back and forth with their loads. Early on we helped establish a Hurricane fighter wing far ahead in **Cyrenaica** to strafe the retreating enemy. Our C.O. went ahead to locate the landing ground (no easy task) and set up some kind of flying control. A few hours later I flew the first Hudson on to that stony, bumpy, strip, and from then on Hudsons and Bombays landed in a steady stream with their cargo of petrol, oil, tentage, ammunition and rations. The next day we picked up the ground crews of the fighter wing.

They piled in with all necessary equipment. There was no weighing of anything; it was left to the pilot's good sense to judge when he had enough on board. I fear many a Hudson flew at figures which would startle its makers but there was never an accident attributable to overloading. The Hurricane fighters went with the transports that day and no time was lost in refuelling them on arrival. They did their first operation the same afternoon.

... One day while flying low as usual, I spied two men vigorously waving their shirts in a rather remote part of the desert. Thinking they might be a couple of Huns or Italians who wished to be taken prisoner, I landed on rocky ground about half a mile away. Armed with sten guns we went towards the two waifs who presented a very ragged spectacle. It transpired that one was the wireless operator and the other chap a gunner from a torpedo Wellington which had attacked a tanker in **Tobruk the night before the opening of the **Alamein** offensive. Their aircraft had succumbed to flak and crashed outside **Tobruk** about dusk. The two lads had travelled one hundred and seventy miles in nineteen days without water, except dew, and only one old tin of bully beef. They were exhausted, so we lost no time in getting them back to base.**

As the advance continued, our transports were fully employed moving other squadrons forward to their newly acquired bases or on to new ones rapidly constructed by the Royal Engineers, whose efforts were little short of brilliant. We moved ourselves forward to **El Adem, near **Tobruk**, and continued to operate from there—days and days of petrol to forward army columns at **Msus** and bombs to Soluch near **Benghazi** in readiness for the light bombers. Everyone laboured unceasingly, loading and unloading aircraft, very often on two sorties per day.**

On one occasion, leading a formation of five Hudsons with an escort of Hurricanes, I set off to deliver eight tons of petrol to a forward army column near **Msus. There were thunderstorms and a high wind and I was unable to locate the airfield, famous for its elusiveness to searching aircrews. I located the army column, however, which was passing by an unused Italian**



A Hurricane prepares to take off from a desert airfield

A Hurricane prepares to take off from a desert airfield



An Australian Gladiator patrol returns to its base

An Australian Gladiator patrol returns to its base



A bomber is re-armed

A bomber is re-armed

Italian cruiser *San Giorgio* on fire in Tobruk harbour



Italian cruiser *San Giorgio* on fire in Tobruk harbour



Derna airfield after an RAF raid

Derna airfield after an RAF raid

Flooded 'bivvy'



Flooded 'bivvy'



Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur
Tedder, AOC-in-C Middle East

Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, AOC-in-C Middle East



Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham and Lieutenant-General Sir
Bernard Montgomery

Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham and Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Montgomery



Boston bombers take off in formation

Boston bombers take off in formation



A 'Shark Squadron' Kittyhawk

A 'Shark Squadron' Kittyhawk



'Bombing up' a Halifax

'Bombing up' a Halifax



Servicing a Wellington bomber

Servicing a Wellington bomber



Salvage convoy drivers wait for their evening meal

Salvage convoy drivers wait for their evening meal



Beaufighter attacks an enemy train, October 1942

Beaufighter attacks an enemy train, October 1942



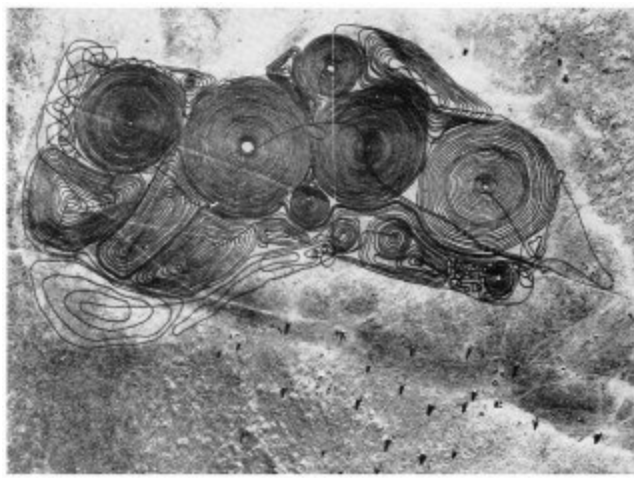
Salvage crews collect destroyed German aircraft at Daba airfield

Salvage crews collect destroyed German aircraft at [Daba](#) airfield



Axis transport destroyed on the Derna road

Axis transport destroyed on the [Derna](#) road



Ploughed-up enemy airfield near Nofilia

According to a photographic interpretation officer, three tractors were used: one man 'was a bit jerky in his driving', the second 'ploughed very closely', and the third 'was somewhat of an artist'.

Ploughed-up enemy airfield near Nofilia

According to a photographic interpretation officer, three tractors were used: one man 'was a bit jerky in his driving', the second 'ploughed very closely', and the third 'was somewhat of an artist'.



A Hurricane tank-buster attacks enemy armour in Tunisia

A Hurricane tank-buster attacks enemy armour in Tunisia



A Baltimore squadron intelligence officer briefs aircrews

A Baltimore squadron intelligence officer briefs aircrews



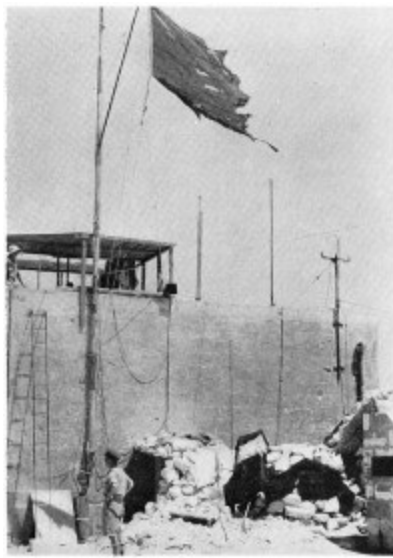
Arming a Wellington torpedo-bomber

Arming a Wellington torpedo-bomber



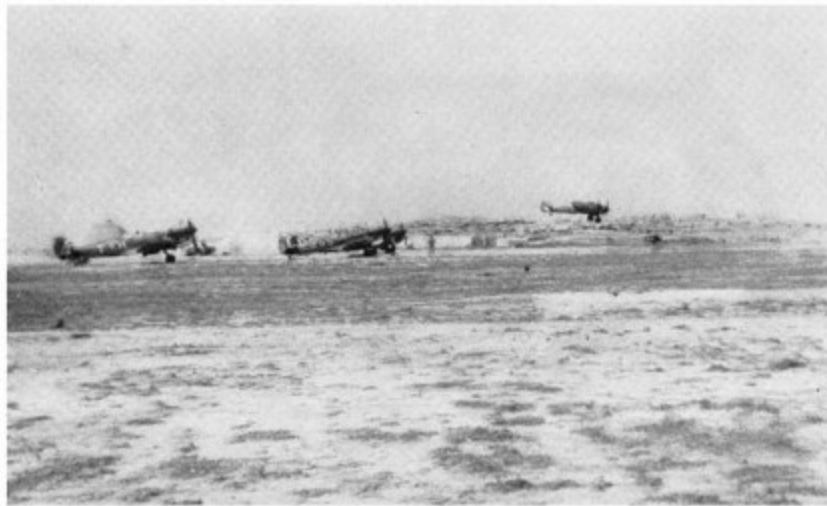
Grand Harbour, Malta

Grand Harbour, Malta



The air-raid warning flag flies over the operations room at Luqa airfield

The air-raid warning flag flies over the operations room at Luqa airfield



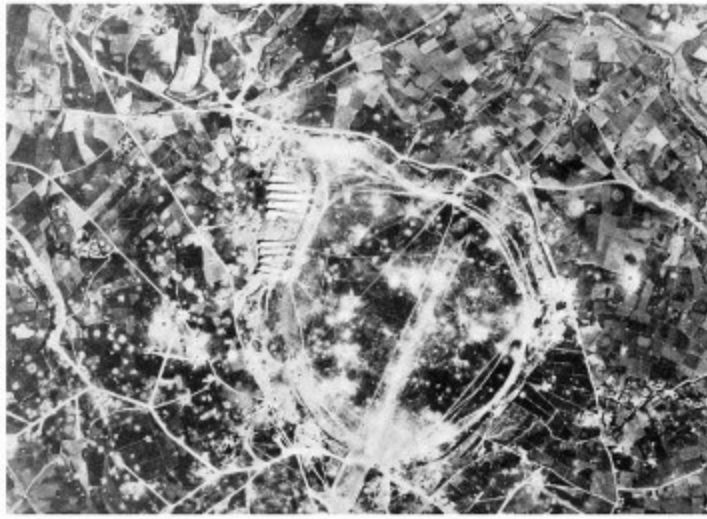
Spitfires on a Malta airfield. A Beaufighter comes in to land

Spitfires on a Malta airfield. A Beaufighter comes in to land



Air Vice Marshal Sir Keith Park, AOC-in-C Mediterranean, with men of a Malta bomber crew

Air Vice-Marshal Sir Keith Park, AOC-in-C Mediterranean, with men of a Malta bomber crew



Takali airfield and dispersal areas, April 1942

Takali airfield and dispersal areas, April 1942



Baltimores fly in formation to attack gun positions near Cassino

Baltimores fly in formation to attack gun positions near **Cassino**



A bombed railway bridge at Arezzo

A bombed railway bridge at **Arezzo**



No. 111 Squadron Spitfires in Italy

No. 111 Squadron Spitfires in Italy



Marauder crews in eastern Italy prepare to move off

Marauder crews in eastern Italy prepare to move off



USAAF bombers attack Naples harbour

USAAF bombers attack Naples harbour



South African Air Force Beaufighters make a rocket attack on Lussin Island, an enemy base for midget submarines

air strip, so determined to set down there and deliver the goods. As it had been in enemy territory only a few hours earlier, I had a sickening feeling as the wheels touched down that the ground would be mined. But all went well and we unloaded as the Hurricanes waited above. We restarted our engines and were soon back over **El Adem** in a blinding sandstorm that reduced visibility to less than one hundred yards.

Early in January came orders to move on from **El Adem**. We arrived at **Marble Arch** in driving dust, and pitching camp was difficult. The desert was too stony to take tent pegs so it was necessary to dig up sufficient rock, to piles of which we anchored our flimsy homes. These air moves were strenuous; not enough time, not enough trucks, not enough water, not enough energy to last the long day. On one occasion one of our lads took his Hudson down to land just in front of me. There was a healthy sort of explosion as he touched off a mine and the rear of the aircraft disappeared entirely. Tempers sometimes frayed but generally everyone managed at least a show of cheerfulness. At night in the flapping mess tent by the light of Hurricane lamps we ate our meagre fare, but there was a solid feeling of success in this advance across the sands. **Tripoli**, an image of which everyone conjured up in their minds, was soon going to fall.

New Zealand pilots like Squadron Leader R. J. Chisholm and Flight Lieutenant R. D. Daniell had been among the pioneers of air transport in the **Middle East**. Now, in this third year, some forty Dominion airmen flew with the squadrons of No. 216 Transport Group while others held ground posts connected with air transport. Chisholm, for example, was attached to Air Vice-Marshal Coningham's headquarters during 1942 as his Air Transport Officer and then took command of a flight; Squadron Leader Neill,¹ Squadron Leader Gow² and Flight Lieutenant Halse³ were specialist navigation officers, while Flight Lieutenant Stewart⁴ commanded one of the staging posts set up to cover North **Africa**—these staging posts were small units that were stationed at remote airfields to service transport aircraft engaged on long flights between base and forward areas.

Among the men who captained transport aircraft during the advance to **Tripoli** were Flight Lieutenant Daniell, Flying Officers Gale⁵ and New⁶; they were later to do equally good work in **Burma**. Three more captains who achieved a fine record were Flight Lieutenant Warden,⁷

¹ Wing Commander J. R. Neill, m.i.d.; born Dunedin, 11 Feb 1913; army instructor; joined **RAF** 1937.

² Wing Commander I. R. Gow; born **Wellington**, 9 Aug 1917; joined **RAF** Jun 1938; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944.

³ Flight Lieutenant E. M. Halse; born Carterton, 31 Jan 1917; assistant theatre manager; joined **RAF** 6 Oct 1938.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant T. A. Stewart, DFC; born Dunedin, 1 Mar 1917; joined **RNZAF** 17 Sep 1938; joined **RAF** 9 May 1939; retransferred **RNZAF** 14 Aug 1945.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant D. Gale, DFC; born Dunedin, 28 Apr 1922; mechanical draughtsman; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant B. D. New, DFC; born Te Karaka, 30 May 1921; accountant; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941.

⁷ Flight Lieutenant G. W. Warden, DFC; born **Auckland**, 23 Jan 1913; metal worker; joined **RNZAF** 15 Feb 1941.

Flying Officers Norman ¹ and Gibbs, ² each of whom was subsequently to carry out many hazardous supply dropping missions over **Sicily, Italy** and the **Balkans**. Valuable work was also done by Flight Lieutenant Ford ³ and by Flying Officer Culliford. ⁴

Brilliant successes in air supply operations were to be reserved for other theatres of war, but it was in the **Middle East** that RAF Air Transport made a firm beginning; indeed it was on the experience gained in the desert campaigns and the difficulties there overcome that the subsequent achievements were largely based. Meanwhile the efforts of the transport crews did not pass unnoticed. Here is a tribute to one phase of their work from **2 New Zealand Division**:

Would you please convey to the air units involved the gratitude of the New Zealand Division for their help and co-operation during the recent fighting. The total of 420 cases safely evacuated by air from a position in close proximity to the enemy and virtually behind his lines would appear to be the largest undertaking of its kind so far in this theatre of war. By cutting out a journey of one hundred and sixty miles over rough desert tracks it must have saved many lives and spared our wounded a great deal of suffering and so contributed to their earlier recovery. The work of the pilots in landing all types of planes on improvised airfields under extremely bad conditions was most praiseworthy. May I also express my gratitude for the immediate response to all requests for assistance and supplies of blood and other stores which contributed greatly to the solving of our difficulties. ⁵

* * * * *

At dawn on 23 January 1943, just three months to the day since the

Eighth Army had joined battle at **El Alamein**, the first **British** troops entered **Tripoli**. At the same time **RAF** advanced parties took over **Castel Benito** airfield outside the city. Together, our land and air forces had now advanced over the desert for 1400 miles—a distance roughly equal to that from **Moscow** to **Berlin**. It was a remarkable achievement and one of which both soldiers and airmen, their clothes and bodies alike stained with the desert dust, could be justly proud. Their ordeals, as they were well aware, were far from ended but the **Western Desert** over which they had fought so long lay behind them and a country of green mountains lay ahead. And now as they prepared to move forward

¹ Flight Lieutenant J. H. Norman, DFC; born Tuatapere, 19 Oct 1919; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** 4 May 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant C. M. Gibbs, DFC; born **Wellington**, 11 Jun 1921; engineering student; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant J. P. Ford, DFC, AFC; born Ohakune, 16 Jun 1921; customs officer; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant S. G. Culliford, DSO, *Virtuti Militari* (Pol); born **Napier**, 18 Mar 1920; student; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

⁵ Operations Record, No. 216 Group, April 1943: letter from Colonel F. P. Furkert, NZ **Medical Corps**.

into **Tunisia**, they carried with them memories of battles fought and won, of the hardships and comradeship of desert life and also, perhaps, of smaller things—a dispersal of tents in the brightness of the moon, men's voices singing, the sandy flavour of bully beef and hot tea, the sudden roar of engines warming up at dawn, the kicked-back wakes of sand from spinning airscrews, the lift and climb into the desert air.

For the capture of **Tripoli** marked the end of a definite phase in the

African campaign. Eighth Army and Desert Air Force now became one jaw of an enormous pincers that was closing on Rommel's forces; the other was provided by the Allied forces under General Eisenhower which had landed in the western Mediterranean and were now moving forward across Algeria.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 5 – ALGERIA AND TUNISIA

CHAPTER 5

Algeria and Tunisia

THE landings in French North Africa took place on 8 November 1942, just sixteen days after the launching of the British offensive at **El Alamein**. Both American and British forces were employed in this great amphibious adventure, known as Operation **TORCH**, the aim of which was to occupy bases in North-west **Africa** and then advance on **Tunisia** to take Rommel's forces in the rear. For political reasons—the attitude of the local French leaders towards the British was anything but friendly—an American, Lieutenant-General Eisenhower, had been chosen to command the expedition and **United States** forces were sent ashore at **Casablanca** and **Oran** and initially at **Algiers**; but since British commanders and troops had had fighting experience, the British component was sent to the most easterly sector at **Algiers** in order to make the first advance into **Tunisia**. Strategically it would have been desirable to make the initial landings farther east but shortage of shipping and concern for the security of communications precluded this; the **Royal Navy**, which was providing surface escort, was also opposed to any landings being made east of **Algiers** because of the danger from German bombers in **Sardinia** and **Sicily**.

The huge convoys—in all some 500 merchant vessels and 350 war ships were involved—that sailed from the **United Kingdom** and the **United States** towards the end of October reached the Straits of **Gibraltar** unscathed, thanks to the unfailing efforts of the **Royal Navy** and **Coastal Command** and to the amazing success of our deception measures. The latter misled the enemy more completely than we had dared to hope. When the expedition was being assembled the Germans thought we were preparing to invade **Norway**, and when it entered the **Mediterranean** they assumed, as we intended, that it was bound for **Malta**. But we could not count on this happening so elaborate measures had been taken to safeguard the convoys during their passage. Indeed, all our resources were at full strain. Far to the north aircraft and warships watched the Denmark Strait and the exits from the North Sea to guard against

intervention by enemy surface ships. Others covered the American approach from the Azores. Anglo-American bombers attacked the U-boat bases along the French Atlantic coast and **Coastal Command** aircraft patrolled to seaward.

Good fortune continued to favour the operation and convoys reached the assault areas with the loss of only one ship. Aircraft from **Gibraltar** did particularly valuable work by protecting them from air and U-boat attack. Indeed, our air base at **Gibraltar** was the key to the success of the whole enterprise. For without it our fighter squadrons could not have been quickly established in North Africa to provide the vital air cover. Moreover, in the early days of the invasion, 'Gib' airfield had necessarily to serve both as an operational base and as a staging point for aircraft making the passage from England to the African mainland. Several weeks before the actual assault it was crowded with fighter aircraft; and now every inch was taken up by either a Spitfire or a can of petrol. Fortunately the need had been foreseen, and during the previous months devoted efforts of the Royal Engineers had not only transformed the landing strip into a fully-tarmacked runway 100 yards wide and 1400 yards long—nearly a third of it protruding into the sea—but had also enlarged and resurfaced the dispersal areas alongside until they could take some six hundred aircraft. The airfield at **Gibraltar**, however, had one great disadvantage in that it lay on the Spanish border. Enemy agents could thus clearly see and report all this activity in the early days of November 1942; but fortunately, as already indicated, they failed to discern its true import.

The opposition to the landings proved less formidable than was expected. **Algiers** capitulated first; the port installations were found intact, the authorities readily co-operated and labour was soon available; and within a few hours **RAF** fighters were operating from the airfields at **Maison Blanche** and **Blida**. During the succeeding days further ports and bases in eastern **Algeria** were occupied by our troops without serious opposition and the building up of the British First Army was at once initiated in the Bone area. Stronger resistance was encountered by the

assault forces at **Oran** and **Casablanca** but in a short time these ports, too, had been captured. Prompt action by General Eisenhower led to a pact with the French political leader, Admiral Darlan, and by 13 November all French resistance in **Morocco** and **Algeria** had ceased,¹ Thus the expedition's first objective, a secure North African base, was quickly achieved.

But the Germans, although completely surprised by our descent upon North Africa, reacted swiftly. On the very morrow of the Allied landings German fighters, bombers and transports, the latter loaded with troops, began putting down at El Aouina, the airport of **Tunis**. Here they received an official welcome; for representatives of Marshal Pétain's French Government, which had tried hard to keep the Allies out of **Morocco** and **Algeria**, now let the Germans into **Tunisia** unopposed. On 10 November our reconnaissance detected 115 enemy air craft on the ground at **Tunis**, while at the airfield of **Bizerta** air trans-

¹ The delicate and difficult moves in the political game are described by General Eisenhower in his *Crusade in Europe*, Chap. XI.

ports

were beginning to arrive at the rate of fifty a day; and to this traffic was soon added a continuous and much heavier stream of reinforcement by sea. By the 16th, the enemy already had approximately 5000 troops available to provide a protective screen for his Tunisian bridgehead, and detachments were soon pushed out to cover the approaches to **Bizerta** and **Tunis**. During the next few days, the ports and airfields at **Sousse**, **Sfax** and **Gabes** were occupied; by the end of the month the enemy force in **Tunisia** amounted to some 15,000 fighting troops with 100 tanks, 60 field guns and 30 anti-tank guns.

Meanwhile, practically the entire German Mediterranean Air Force

had been concentrated in **Sardinia** and **Sicily** and fighters and dive-bombers quickly established on **Tunis** airfields. Italian reinforcements of fighters and torpedo-bombers were also sent to **Sardinia** and some fighters joined the German contingent at **Tunis**. Thus, in spite of our air and sea attacks on his shipping and the bombing of his ports, the enemy rapidly succeeded in building a formidable force in northern **Tunisia** and in occupying the entire eastern coast. It was clear that **Hitler** had at last decided to give serious attention to **Africa**. All that he had denied to **Rommel** when the latter stood some chance of success, the German leader was now to pour into **Tunisia**. Far, far too late he had seen the red light. If he failed to hold a bridgehead in North Africa the Anglo-American armies might well walk into his 'Fortress Europe' by the back door.

Following the capture of **Algiers**, leading elements of the **British First Army** under Lieutenant-General Anderson had pushed eastwards in a desperate endeavour to overrun **Tunisia** before the enemy could transport sufficient troops to the scene to defend it. The distance from **Algiers** to **Tunis** is 560 miles; almost the whole of this region is very mountainous and it was then served by only two winding roads and an indifferent railway. Yet the **First Army** succeeded in advancing, by 28 November, to within sixteen miles of **Tunis**. But the race was already lost. At this point the Germans counter-attacked strongly with their tanks and dive-bombers; the latter were able to operate from good airfields only a short distance in the rear while our own fighter bases were as yet out of range. After a very gallant effort General Anderson's forces were therefore compelled to withdraw to Medjez el Bab, where they proceeded to build up their strength and improve their communications.

American troops and armour now gradually moved up from the west and French forces, which had thrown in their lot with the Allies, took up positions on the southern flank. But the military and political problems involved in the deployment of this Allied army with its diverse elements were acute; moreover, the appalling winter weather which now set in,

and the continuing supply difficulties, combined to prevent the mounting of a new offensive. Indeed, for the next two months, the Allied troops were to be kept fully occupied in consolidating the northern sector and in beating off enemy attempts to get round their southern flank.

Both British and American squadrons—the former organised in an **Eastern Air Command** and the latter as Twelfth Air Force—were now operating in North-west **Africa**. Fighters protected the supply ports and patrolled over the forward areas; fighter-bombers helped the advancing ground forces and both medium and heavy bombers attacked enemy airfields and landing grounds in **Tunisia**. Transport, maritime reconnaissance and photographic aircraft also played their part. But, as with the Army, there were many difficulties during the initial stages which prevented full-scale operation of all the available units. The build-up of equipment, stores, services and maintenance facilities was slow, since almost everything had to be brought in by sea. More particularly, the absence of good airfields, the poor communications and the lack of any real integration of the different national forces, all tended to reduce the efficiency of the air effort. Most of the landing grounds did not have hard runways and they were soon turned to quagmires by the heavy winter rains. Efforts were made to lay steel matting but some 2000 tons of this—or two days' carrying capacity of the entire railway system in the forward area—were required for a single runway, and even when laid the steel matting tended simply to disappear into the mud.

The lack of airfields soon proved the greatest handicap to providing adequate support for the forward troops. Our advanced lines might be only a score of miles outside **Tunis** but our nearest airfield was still at Souk el Arba, sixty miles farther back. On it were soon crowded—apart from American aircraft which followed later—five squadrons of Spitfires; and maintenance facilities were such that, among them, the five squadrons could rarely muster more than forty-five serviceable aircraft. The small **RAF** bomber force, consisting of four squadrons of Bisleys, had

to operate until the early days of December from as far back as Blida, outside **Algiers**. The enemy, on the other hand, had the advantage of concrete-surfaced airfields close to the battle area, and to which reinforcements could be flown from **Sicily** in thirty minutes in any weather. Consequently, in the first weeks of the campaign, our advanced troops were exposed to attacks from enemy dive-bombers which our fighters, with their bases so far back, were unable to prevent; indeed, up to mid-December, the Spitfires could only spend five or ten minutes of their patrol over our forward lines. Fortunately the enemy air attack, as General Alexander has recorded, was not on a serious scale when judged by the standards of later campaigns. But to inexperienced troops, it seemed terrific when there were no friendly fighters close at hand to be whistled up to drive off the offenders, and when there was also a shortage of light anti-aircraft ground weapons.

At the time there was criticism of the lack of air support. Some of it was perhaps justified, but many of the critics failed to appreciate the very great difficulties under which the air forces were labouring and the valiant efforts which were, in fact, being made to help the ground forces. For example, one day early in December, No. 18 Squadron, **RAF**, was ordered to bomb the enemy landing ground at Chouigui. Eleven Bisleys duly prepared to take off. One was held back by a burst tyre and another crash-landed after a few minutes' flight, but the remaining nine got under way successfully. Their task, the crews knew, would be far from enviable; the landing ground would be hotly defended, but since our Spitfires were fully occupied trying to protect our troops, the mission would have to be flown without escort; they would have no support other than a fighter sweep over the general area of the operation. As the Bisleys approached the target area their pilots saw a few of our Spitfires engaged high up with a swarm of Messerschmitts. Then the Germans dived down—some fifty or sixty of them—and within a few seconds our crews were fighting for their lives. One by one the Bisleys were hacked down until only four remained; these four, still maintaining formation, managed to reach our lines only to be shot down within sight of our troops. ¹

During the second month of the campaign things gradually began to improve. New landing grounds were under construction in the forward area and others were being provided with hard all-weather runways. The United States Twelfth Air Force, handicapped by its initial deployment so far west, was now playing a major part in the Tunisian battle. Some American fighters were based at Souk el Arba behind the main battlefront in the north, while others were supporting their troops moving forward in the centre and south. And American long-range bombers were stepping up their attacks on Tunisian ports and airfields. The effort of **Eastern Air Command** also increased steadily. During the first half of January, its RAF Spitfires averaged over one hundred sorties a day and thereafter, with the arrival of reinforcements, this figure was doubled. And with this mounting Allied air effort the co-operation between Army and **Air Force** grew closer and more satisfactory. 'Good-will there was in plenty,' writes General Anderson, 'and with increasing experience and, above all, improved

¹ Almost the last to survive was the aircraft of Wing Commander H. G. Malcolm, who led the raid. For his determination in trying to fight his squadron through to its objective he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. His name is commemorated in the Royal Air Force Malcolm Clubs, the first of which was opened some months later in **Algiers**.

means of inter-communication, the situation improved. By mid-March 1943, liaison was excellent; we were working as one team and the air support given to **First Army** in the last stages was intimate, immediate and intensely powerful.'

The failure to capture **Tunis** in the first rush was a serious setback to Allied hopes and plans. All the same, the situation developing in North Africa at the end of 1942 gave the enemy little cause for satisfaction. For, in addition to the Allied invasion of **Tunisia** from the west, British land and air forces under Montgomery and Coningham, following their victorious advance from Egypt, were now closing in from the east. With

their capture of **Tripoli**, Rommel had been forced back to the **Mareth Line**, a belt of fortifications built by the French to protect the Tunisian frontier; by mid-February 1943, advanced troops of Montgomery's **Eighth Army** had come up with the enemy rearguard at **Ben Gardane**. Bitterly contested battles might remain to be fought but the eventual link-up of the two Allied armies and their final conquest of **Tunisia** seemed reasonably certain.

For the better co-ordination of the Allied effort, General Eisenhower now assumed overall command in North Africa; General Alexander became his deputy and took charge of all the land forces. At the same time a new **Mediterranean Air Command** embracing all the Allied air forces in **Tunisia**, **Malta** and **Tripolitania** was established under Air Chief Marshal Tedder; and within this command there was created, under the leadership of Air Vice-Marshal Coningham, a single North-west African **Tactical Air Force** to lend close support to both the Army and Navy. Like other subordinate air commands, this was a genuine Anglo-American entity since it comprised not only the British Desert **Air Force** and **RAF** units from **Eastern Air Command**, but also the tactical squadrons from the United States Twelfth Air Force. Similarly, British and American maintenance units were now combined to form an **Air Service Command**. This mingling of British and American units and of their officers and men at all levels was a novel and remarkable feature at this period of the war; but it soon proved wholly beneficial. Indeed, it was here in North Africa that British and American servicemen first came to know each other, and by their mutual understanding and respect to lay the foundations for Anglo-American co-operation in the later campaigns.

With the air forces the effect of the reorganisation was immediate and profound. Besides putting at the top men with the requisite ability and experience, it made possible that high degree of flexibility which characterises correctly organised air power. Under Tedder's direction the air forces in the **Mediterranean** could now be concentrated to the confusion of the enemy at decisive points—whether at the fronts or along

the lines of land and sea communications, or far back among the



THE CAMPAIGN IN TUNISIA, MARCH - MAY 1943

airfields, ports and bases of **Italy**. In all circumstances the total force, no longer tied down to particular geographical sectors, could be directed without argument or delay according to a single coherent plan.

The fight for **Tunisia** began in earnest during February 1943. And as might be expected, it was Rommel who struck first—against the American forces that had moved into central **Tunisia** and, by occupying **Gafsa**, threatened his link with von Arnim's army in the north. Employing his formidable **21 Panzer Division**, he drove the Americans back and broke through the **Kasserine Pass**. Succeeding wonderfully at first, this thrust looked like taking our whole northern front in the rear, but it soon met with such fierce opposition that Rommel was compelled to withdraw. Our tactical air forces under Coningham played an important part in forcing this withdrawal, but the decisive factors were the resolute action taken by General Alexander and the stubborn defence offered by our ground forces. Rommel then turned his armour south and, on 6 March, flung it against Montgomery's **Eighth Army** at Medenine; but in the face of solid resistance on the ground and persistent attack from the air, this assault met with instant failure and the enemy force retired, discomfited, leaving behind no fewer than fifty-two tanks. This battle of **Medenine** was Rommel's last throw and

shortly afterwards, a sick and disillusioned man, he flew back to **Germany**.

Meanwhile, on the northern sector in **Tunisia**, attacks by von Arnim's army had been frustrated after some hard fighting in which the tactical air forces played a prominent part. During the first five days of March one **RAF** group flew over 1000 sorties against ground targets; frequent attacks both by fighters and bombers on landing grounds ruthlessly cut down the activity of the German fighter force; constant raids behind the enemy front also played havoc with his transport and supplies.

The initiative on land now passed to the Allies and in mid-March their armies began to close the ring. Progress on the northern front was at first slow, but in the south a spectacular victory was achieved by turning the **Mareth Line**. This move, in which the New Zealand Division played a prominent part, was made possible by the fact that our domination of the skies was now almost complete. Both before and during the assault at **Mareth**, attacks on enemy airfields kept the *Luftwaffe* virtually grounded and our troops were able to move forward unmolested from the air. The desert squadrons also played an important part in the land battle. When the outflanking force was held up south of **El Hamma**—the crucial obstacle was the narrow gap between the **Djebel Tebaga** and the **Djebel Melab**, only four miles wide and bristling with enemy guns—a truly formidable air blitz was laid on against the enemy positions. Three squadrons of escorted bombers opened the attack, coming in very low by an unusual route and achieving complete surprise. From then on two and a half squadrons of Kitty-bombers, briefed first to bomb individual positions and then to shoot up the enemy gun teams, were directed to the area every fifteen minutes. Half an hour after the first bomb fell the New Zealand infantry went forward, preceded by a creeping barrage which gave pilots an unmistakable bomb line; and all the time Spitfires patrolling high above kept the air clear of the enemy. More than once the enemy attempted to mass his tanks, but on each sign of this Hurricane 'tank-busters' swept in and broke up the

concentration. 'The battlefield and the rear areas were covered with smoking and burning vehicles,' writes Montgomery's Chief of Staff. 'Never before had our **Desert Air Force** given us such superb, such gallant and such intimate support.' And so it was. Within just over two hours the supporting squadrons, at a cost of eleven pilots, had flown 412 sorties; and the enemy defenders, disorganised and demoralised, had yielded the key points to our troops. Our armour passed through the bottleneck virtually unscathed and the **Mareth Line** was turned.

The Eighth Army thereupon followed up rapidly to **Wadi Akarit**, another position of great natural strength, but here the enemy stay was brief. By the end of April his forces, fiercely attacked on the ground and mercilessly hammered from the air, were in full retreat. Not until they had covered the entire coastal plain and reached the high ground beyond **Enfidaville**, more than 150 miles to the north, did they stop. Important airfields now fell into our hands, notably the group near **Kairouan**, which brought the Allied tactical air forces in North Africa within striking distance of any target in that part of **Tunisia** which still remained to the enemy. At the same time the **Eighth Army** was able to join up on the left with the American troops, so linking the Allied ground forces in one continuous front.

All this while the medium and heavy bombers, including those now based at **Malta**, had continued to attack the ports and airfields of **Tunisia**, **Sardinia**, **Sicily** and southern **Italy**. In conjunction with the Coastal Air Force, they were also waging a determined campaign against enemy convoys. Until mid-February many enemy vessels were able to slip across the narrow seas between **Sicily** and **Tunisia** under cover of thick weather, but with clearer skies such attempts became increasingly hazardous. During March, in spite of fierce opposition in the air, British and American aircraft sank no fewer than twenty German and Italian ships making for **Tunisia**. At the same time our own vessels, protected by the vigilance of our air and naval forces, were able to carry supplies to **Bone** and **Tripoli** almost with impunity.

By the beginning of April, the bombing of **Tunis**, **Bizerta** and the

south Italian ports, coupled with increasing success against convoys at sea, had brought the enemy supply system to the verge of collapse. In these desperate straits he began to make still greater use of air transport, flying a daily average of something like 150 sorties on the routes to **Tunisia**. It availed him little since our air forces played havoc with this traffic. On 5 April, for example, twenty-six German aircraft were destroyed in the air and thirty-nine on the ground, besides damage to another sixty-seven; the Italian losses are unknown. A few days later, British and American fighters sweeping over the Narrows shot down twenty-four German Ju52s and fourteen escorts; many of the transports were carrying fuel and they blew up in spectacular fashion. There was further slaughter on 18 April when RAF Spitfires and American Warhawks intercepted about one hundred Ju52s under escort near **Cape Bon**. Within a few seconds the shore below was strewn with blazing wreckage, fifty-two German machines being destroyed for the loss on the Allied side of seven. The next day our fighters massacred yet another formation and thereafter the enemy confined his transports to minor operations by night. On 22 April, however, he rashly committed a consignment of petrol to Messerschmitt 323s—huge six-engined glider-type aircraft. Intercepted over the Gulf of **Tunis** by large forces of Spitfires and Kittyhawks, the enemy formation was mown down almost to the last aircraft. In less than three weeks, according to German records, well over one hundred German transport aircraft had been destroyed for the loss of thirty-five aircraft on our side. Coming hard on top of an equally prodigal expenditure at Stalingrad, this was a grievous blow to the enemy transport fleets as well as to their hopes of staving off defeat in **Tunisia**.

The last phase of the land campaign opened on 20 April with an attack by the **Eighth Army** at **Enfidaville**. The enemy positions were captured after hard fighting, but the mountains beyond proved a more difficult proposition and the advance slowed down. This mattered little, however, since General Alexander had already planned to deliver his main blow against **Tunis** on the northern sector, where the First Army along with the Americans and French had been steadily pressing forward

during the past month despite repeated counter-attacks. Here, on 5 May, the final advance began under close and heavy support from Coningham's tactical air force, which flew over one thousand sorties a day—bombers and fighter-bombers attacking troop positions and fighters maintaining complete mastery over the battlefield. British forces, including **Eighth Army** formations transferred to this sector, quickly broke through enemy defences in front of **Tunis** and then, after occupying the town, wheeled east and broke through strong positions at **Hammamet** to reach the **Cape Bon** peninsula. Meanwhile American forces had smashed their way into **Bizerta**. Within a week the enemy had no intact formations, except those facing the Eighth Army, and these were now taken in the rear. One by one units surrendered until, on 13 May, the whole force was ordered to lay down its arms.

In addition to vast quantities of arms and equipment, almost all the enemy troops remaining in **Tunisia**—just over 250,000—were now captured; for when the remnants of the German and Italian armies reached the beaches on the **Cape Bon** peninsula, they found no boats—nor any aircraft either. In the face of our air and naval control of the narrow seas, **Hitler** and Mussolini had wisely decided not to attempt a ‘**Dunkirk**’. Had they done so they would have immediately brought into operation an elaborate series of counter-measures already devised by our air and naval commanders under the rather appropriate code-name of **RETRIBUTION**. In the circumstances our air forces were able to turn their attention to targets in **Sicily**, **Italy** and Pantellaria in preparation for the next stage in Allied strategy.

So ended the war in **Africa**—a war which, though the numbers engaged were small compared with the vast armies on the Russian front, was yet of profound strategic significance. For the whole of the southern coast of the **Mediterranean** had been cleared of the enemy and its northern shores were now open to assault; Allied shipping, although still not entirely immune from air and U-boat attack, could now move more freely between **Gibraltar** and **Alexandria**. Moreover, the long years of fighting in North Africa had broken the spirit and power of **Italy**, and

although the effect on **Germany** was less severe, it was quite considerable; she had also lost some of her best fighting troops and her air force had been badly mauled. On the Allied side much had been learnt that was to be of the greatest value in the future, especially the technique and experience of co-operation between the two great nations and between their land, sea and air forces. There had also emerged not only skilled and seasoned Allied soldiers and airmen, but also highly competent Allied staffs and commanders, all of whom were soon destined to win a campaign of far greater import in **Europe**. Victory would certainly not have crowned that campaign so swiftly or at such little cost but for the lessons learned amid the rocks and sand of **North Africa**.

During the long campaign the **Royal Air Force**, including men and squadrons from the Dominion air forces, had played a vital, perhaps a decisive part. It had won the freedom of the skies against fierce opposition; it had kept the enemy short of supplies while safeguarding our own; it had preserved the **Eighth Army** in retreat and speeded it in advance. At every stage from the first attack on Italian landing grounds that morning in June 1940 to the last raid at **Bou Ficha** on 12 May 1943, the aircrews and ground staff of the **RAF** had shown indomitable spirit. And as Tedder told them in his final Order of the Day, they had now 'by magnificent team work together with their comrades on land and sea thrown the enemy out of **Africa**.' They had 'shown the world the unity and strength of air power' and after 'a grand job well finished they faced their next task with the knowledge that they had thrashed the enemy and were determined to thrash him again.'

* * * * *

Through these months when the enemy was being finally driven out of **Africa**, New Zealanders shared in all phases of the air activity; they flew as fighter pilots, as bomber captains and aircrew, with the maritime reconnaissance squadrons and as pilots of photographic, transport and air-sea rescue machines; they also flew some of the 'special duty' aircraft which, among other things, continued to supply the resistance

movements in southern **Europe**, especially the gallant band of patriots fighting under Marshal Tito in **Yugoslavia**. There was, moreover, a small group of men, about ninety in all, who did valuable work in various ground duties, notably as radar mechanics and fitter-armourers. By mid-1943 a total of 750 New Zealand airmen had seen service with the **RAF** in the **Middle East**, of whom 115 had lost their lives.

A relatively large number of men held positions of leadership during the North African campaign and it is particularly interesting to record that two of the main Allied operational commands were, in fact, held by Dominion airmen: Air Vice-Marshal Coningham directed the North-west African Tactical Air Forces and Air Vice-Marshal Park was in control of all **RAF** operations from **Malta**. During the battle for **Tunisia**, Coningham worked in close collaboration with General Alexander, commander of the Allied ground forces, and in his despatch Alexander pays high tribute to Coningham's handling of the tactical air operations and to the invaluable support that his formations gave to the Army. Sir Keith Park's conduct of air operations from **Malta**, both in support of the invasion of French North Africa and the advance of the **Eighth Army** into **Tunisia**, earned equal praise.

Nine of the fighter and bomber squadrons which fought in North **Africa** were commanded by New Zealanders. Experienced pilots also occupied senior posts in the various air commands, notably Group Captain H. D. McGregor at Headquarters Mediterranean Air Forces, Group Captain E. W. Whitley in charge of a fighter group, Group Captain Anderson ¹ commanding a wing in the **Coastal Air Forces**, and Group Captain Knight ² controlling fighter operations at
Head-

¹ Group Captain L. H. Anderson; born **Lower Hutt**, 5 Aug 1910; joined **RAF** 1930; permanent commission 1936; commanded No. **217 Sqn** 1940; commanded No. 1 EFTS, South Africa, 1941; CFI No. 4 SFTS, South Africa, 1941-42; commanded Wings in **Middle East**, 1942-43; SASO No. 201 Group, **Middle East**, 1943; commanded No. 247 Wing, **Middle**

East, 1943–44; RAF Station, Berka, 1944; No. 4 Combined Air Observation, Navigation and Bombing School, South Africa, 1941–44; SASO No. 25 Group, 1944–45.

² Group Captain M. W. B. Knight, DFC, Legion of Merit (US); RAF; born Dannevirke, 8 Jul 1916; joined RAF 1935; commanded No. 485 (NZ) Sqdn 1941; Operations Staff, HQ NWAAF, 1943; Planning Staff, HQ MAAF, 1944; commanded RAF Stations, Ismailia and Ramat David, 1945.

quarters

Eastern Air Command; and in the administrative and supply organisation there were men like Wing Commander Arnott, ¹ serving as Senior Equipment Officer for a fighter group; Wing Commander Willcox, ² a medical officer in Eastern Air Command, and Flight Lieutenant Heazlewood, ³ engineer officer at an important maintenance unit.

Dominion airmen were in action during the initial stages of the invasion of French North Africa. Flying Hudsons on anti-submarine patrols from Gibraltar and subsequently from Blida in North Africa, Squadron Leader Patterson, ⁴ Flight Lieutenant Holmes ⁵ and Flying Officers Ensor, ⁶ Mitchell ⁷ and Poole ⁸ had particularly good hunting. Just before the actual landings, Poole attacked two U-boats in the course of a single patrol; Patterson shared in the destruction of another and Ensor blew one to pieces off Algiers in what has been described as the most spectacular U-boat attack of the whole war. Holmes made five damaging attacks in thirteen days. Indeed, the effort and achievement of these men during the first month were truly remarkable and they resulted in Ensor and Patterson being made members of the Distinguished Service Order, and Holmes, Poole and Mitchell receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross. ⁹

Long-range Hurricane fighters also helped to escort convoys. One day Sergeant Ashworth ¹⁰ of No. 253 Squadron sighted a Ju88 attempting to attack some of our ships. He dived on to its tail and

opened fire, then had to break away as bits and pieces flew around him. Both engines of the bomber caught fire and it crashed into the sea. Ashworth's squadron was among the first to operate from North Africa; the Hurricanes actually flew into the airfield at Maison Blanche within an hour of its capture and at once continued their long-range fighter patrols over shipping in the approaches to **Algiers** and along the coast.

¹ Wing Commander A. E. Arnott, OBE; born **Palmerston North**, 19 Feb 1917; clerk, P & T Dept; joined **RAF** Aug 1939; permanent commission **RAF** Sep 1945.

² Wing Commander H. L. Willcox; born **Invercargill**, 7 Nov 1907; joined **RAF** 1935; permanent commission 1938; staff duties, DGMS, **Air Ministry**, 1940–42; SMO No. 153 Wing, 1942; SMO No. 17 Group, 1942; DPMO, AHQ North Africa, 1943–44; DPMO, HQ Med. and ME, 1944; DPMO, HQ Coastal Command, 1945.

³ Squadron Leader C. R. Heazlewood, MBE; born Dunedin, 19 Dec 1914; fitter and turner; joined **RAF** Dec 1939.

⁴ Squadron Leader I. C. Patterson, DSO, m.i.d.; born **Auckland**, 19 Aug 1917; farming and electrical engineering; joined **RAF** 15 Mar 1939; transferred **RNZAF** 1 Dec 1943; Atlantic Ferry 1940–41; Operations Staff, Azores, 1943–44.

⁵ Squadron Leader H. G. Holmes, DFC and bar; born Rangiora, 31 Aug 1916; farmer; joined **RAF** Jun 1939

⁶ Wing Commander M. A. Ensor, DSO and bar, DFC and bar; born Rangiora, 5 Jan 1922; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940; commanded No. 224 Sqdn 1945.

⁷ Wing Commander I. R. Mitchell, DFC; born **Napier**, 24 Jun 1916; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

⁸ Flight Lieutenant H. A. Poole, DFC; born **Invercargill**, 6 Mar

1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 13 Feb 1940.

⁹ Details of their exploits have already been recorded in Volume I, Chapter 14.

¹⁰ Flying Officer C. P. Ashworth; born Eketahuna, 25 Sep 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Aug 1944.

Squadron Leader Carlson ¹ led one of the first Spitfire squadrons that flew in from **Gibraltar** to operate in defence of bases and ports and subsequently in support of General Anderson's **First Army**. Carlson and his pilots had already done good work with Fighter Command in the **United Kingdom** and they set about their new duties with zeal and confidence; in their first fortnight's operations they claimed nineteen enemy bombers destroyed, three more probably destroyed and six damaged. It was during this period that Flying Officer 'Paddy' Chambers, ² who flew with Carlson, performed one of the outstanding individual feats of the campaign by shooting down four enemy bombers in a single sortie. This was on 28 November when he was patrolling over a convoy off **Algiers**. Five Italian Savoia 79s approached to bomb the ships, but Chambers came in from above and behind and attacked four of them in turn before his aircraft was damaged and ammunition exhausted; the fifth Italian bomber was last seen scurrying out to sea.

Two other Spitfire pilots prominent in the early weeks of the campaign were Flight Lieutenant Henry ³ and Flying Officer Porteous ⁴ with No. 93 Squadron; Henry served as flight commander. The work of Flight Lieutenant Buchanan ⁵ who flew a photographic Spitfire also deserves mention. His highly successful flights over North Africa won him the United States Air Medal, the first such award made to a British pilot in this theatre.

Squadron Leader Player ⁶ achieved a fine record of service with No. 255 Squadron. This was one of the two squadrons of twin-engined

Beaufighters that arrived from England a few days after the landings to provide night defence of our ports and bases in **Algeria**. Shortly after No. 255 Squadron's arrival, Player took a detachment to operate from the landing ground at Souk el Arba, just over the Tunisian border and close to our front line. The detachment had practically no ground staff at first and a large amount of the normal maintenance work had to be done by the pilots and observers themselves. Yet Player kept his Beaufighters flying and in the first fortnight they claimed the destruction of sixteen enemy aircraft. Player himself had an exceptional sortie one

¹ Wing Commander D. C. Carlson, DFC; **RAF**; born Owhango, 4 Oct 1912; joined **RAF** 1937; commanded No. **154 Sqdn** 1942; **RAF Station, Bone, MAAF**, 1944; staff duty, Operations, AHQ Levant, **Middle East**, 1945.

² Flight Lieutenant H. W. Chambers, DFC; born **Opotiki**, 24 Feb 1915; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940.

³ Squadron Leader D. J. V. Henry, DFC; born **Invercargill**, 5 Feb 1916; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1940; prisoner of war, 10 Feb 1945.

⁴ Squadron Leader J. K. Porteous, DFC; born **Auckland**, 4 Nov 1916; salesman; joined **RNZAF** 9 Apr 1940; commanded No. 122 Sqdn 1944.

⁵ Wing Commander R. C. Buchanan, DFC, Air Medal (US); born **Mataura**, 15 May 1921; civil engineering cadet; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941; commanded No. 682 (PR) Sqdn 1944–45; Wing Leader No. 336 PR Wing, 1945.

⁶ Wing Commander J. H. Player, DSO, DFC; born **Auckland**, 13 Jul 1914; joined **RAF** 1937; commanded No. **255 Sqdn** 1942–43; Personal Staff Officer, AOC-in-C, AEF, 1944–45; staff duties, DG of P, **Air Ministry**, 1945; died of injuries received in flying accident, 8 Aug 1947.

night early in December when he shot down three bombers within an hour; one of them was a Heinkel and the other two were **Savoia 79s**. With the advent of winter—and it was particularly bitter in North **Africa** that year—the night flying tended to become a long, cold, unrewarding task, and the Beaufighters, each weighing ten tons, were not easy to fly from the short bumpy runways where the flare-paths— flickering oil lamps shielded by petrol tins—were virtually invisible from 500 feet. Moreover, the mountains rising steeply inland did not allow for much inaccuracy in navigation, but the squadron continued to exploit its advantage of surprise and the ports of **Algiers** and Bone were soon safe by night.

Among the fighter pilots who flew tactical reconnaissance in support of the **First Army's** advance into **Tunisia** were Flying Officers Neill ¹ and Short ² of No. 225 Hurricane Squadron. Apart from the difficulties of operating from bases far to the rear, the pilots had to face sharp enemy opposition in the air. Their Hurricanes were not only heavily outnumbered but were also outmatched in performance by most of the fighters the enemy was operating. Early in December Short was shot down in an encounter with six Messerschmitts, but although wounded managed to get back to his base, seventy miles away, the same day. Two months later he was again shot down, this time well behind the enemy lines, where he was promptly captured and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp at **Modena** in **Italy**. But there his stay was brief. Early in September 1943 he escaped in company with two other New Zealanders, Lieutenant D. W. Hodge, **2 NZEF**, ³ and Flying Officer Duncan. ⁴ Italian civilians gave them clothes and bicycles on which they got away to the hills. Here they spent the winter in precarious circumstances— some partisans with whom they made contact were ambushed by the Germans and lost half their number—but eventually, in the spring of 1944 when travelling conditions improved, Short and Duncan were able to move north and, after a hazardous crossing of the Alps, reached **Switzerland** and freedom. Hodge was recaptured.

¹ Flight Lieutenant K. P. F. Neill, DFC; born **Christchurch**, 17 Nov 1920; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** 3 Jan 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant S. A. H. Short, DFC; born **Auckland**, 17 Jun 1916; railway porter; joined **RNZAF** 23 Mar 1941; prisoner of war 2 Feb 1943; escaped and reached neutral territory 4 Apr 1944.

³ Capt D. W. Hodge; **Timaru**; born **Wanganui**, 30 Jul 1920; salesman; prisoner of war, 15 Jul 1942.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant W.R. Duncan; born **Stirling**, 19 Nov 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 19 Jan 1941; prisoner of war 13 Sep 1942; safe in neutral territory 5 Apr 1944. Duncan had been captured just before the Battle of **El Alamein**. Returning from a bombing raid, engine failure had compelled his aircraft to force-land some sixty miles south of **Mersa Matruh**. He had walked for six days with very little food and water before he was captured.

As the campaign in **Tunisia** progressed, fighter pilots were kept busy in patrol and attack against enemy formations and in support of our ground forces. Flying Officer Hardy ¹ had a particularly successful career with No. 72 Spitfire Squadron, winning both the Distinguished Flying Cross and bar. He not only destroyed several enemy aircraft but also took part in many attacks on ground targets, particularly during the battles at Tebourba and Djedeida.

Flight Lieutenants Mackie ² and J. K. Porteous were frequently in action with No. 243 Spitfire Squadron. On patrol over the **First Army** front near Medjez el Bab early in April, the squadron intercepted fifteen Junkers 87 dive-bombers escorted by Messerschmitt fighters; the bombers jettisoned their bombs and fled for cloud cover, but the Spitfires closed in and shot down at least five of them and attacked most of the others. That day Mackie destroyed two Ju87s. Three days later he blew up a Messerschmitt in mid-air and it exploded so close to his Spitfire

that oil sprayed the windscreen. The following week Porteous and Mackie were both leading flights when the squadron met a formation of Messerschmitt fighter-bombers; a running air battle followed in which Mackie shot down one enemy fighter while Porteous destroyed a second and damaged two more. Another New Zealander with the squadron, Sergeant Towgood,³ accounted for a Ju88 fighter during an attack on an enemy road convoy retreating towards **Tunis**.

The exploits of Squadron Leader Colin Gray⁴ during the campaign are of particular interest. Veteran of the Battle of **Britain** and early fighter operations over **France**, Gray came to **Tunis** in January 1943 to command No. 81 Spitfire Squadron. A few days after his arrival, he was leading a flight on patrol off Cap Rosa when four Me109s were sighted and in the ensuing battle Gray and his pilots shot down three of the enemy without loss. A few weeks later Gray shot down a Macchi 202, then towards the end of March he brought down the German ace, von Muller, who was credited with over one hundred victories. This action took place during a dogfight west of **Beja**, Gray surprising Muller while he was intent on attacking another Spitfire. Coming in from above and behind, Gray saw his cannon shells strike the port wing-root of Muller's Messerschmitt; one leg of the undercarriage dropped and then the tell-tale glycol began to spurt. As his Messerschmitt started to go down Muller baled out and was captured.

¹ Flight Lieutenant O. L. Hardy, DFC and bar; born **Auckland**, 31 Jul 1922; mechanical engineer; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941.

² Wing Commander E. D. Mackie, DSO, DFC and bar, DFC (US); born **Waihi**, 31 Oct 1917; electrician; joined **RNZAF** 19 Jan 1941; commanded No. **92 Sqdn, Middle East**, 1943-44; commanded No. **80 Sqdn** and Wing Leader, No. 122 Wing, 1945.

³ Warrant Officer D. J. Towgood; born **Wanganui**, 27 Apr 1923; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 26 Sep 1941.

⁴ Wing Commander C. F. Gray, DSO, DFC and 2 bars; **RAF**; born **Christchurch**, 9 Nov 1914; joined **RAF** Jan 1939; commanded Nos. 403, 616, 64 and 81 Sqdns, 1941–43; Wing Leader, **Malta, Sicily, Europe**, 1943–45; commanded RAF Station, Skeabrae, 1945; Directorate of Air Foreign Liaison, 1947–49; British Joint Services Mission, **Washington**, 1949–52.

Gray shot down four more enemy aircraft over **Tunisia**. One of these victories came after an eventful flight. He had just taken off to lead the squadron on a sweep when he noticed that his engine was running rather roughly; he was about to call up and report the situation before landing to check the trouble when he saw bombs bursting on the airfield he had just left. Gray immediately forgot all about the engine trouble in his determination to attack the eight FW190s which had dropped the bombs and he set off after them. But the Germans were above the Spitfires and their greater height enabled them to draw away by diving in the direction of their base at **Bizerta**. Returning from the hopeless pursuit, Gray suddenly sighted two Messerschmitt 109s flying low over the hills. He turned towards them and was soon engaged in a fight with one. Several minutes of crazy flying followed with both pilots skimming low over the hills, each seeking a favourable position from which to fire at the other. Several times Gray opened fire and saw his cannon shells hitting the hilltops and kicking up spurts of dust. Eventually a burst found its mark and a trail of white smoke indicated that the Messerschmitt was leaking glycol. Thereupon the German pilot manoeuvred to gain height and, at about 1500 feet, he baled out. Gray then landed back at base and had his engine inspected.

During April, Gray frequently led his squadron as cover to American Warhawks engaged on intercepting the German transport aircraft that flew over from **Sicily** in great aerial trains. The biggest day was on 18 April when about 100 Ju52s, heavily escorted by both single and twin-engined fighters, were intercepted and over fifty of them are reported to have been shot down. Pilot Officer Montgomerie, ¹ Flight Sergeant Peart, ² and Sergeants Plummer ³ and Robinson ⁴ all flew with Gray's No. 81

Squadron during the Tunisian campaign.

Five more Spitfire pilots who saw a good deal of action in the later stages were Flight Lieutenants D. J. V. Henry and Pilot Officer S. F. Browne ⁵ of No. 93 Squadron, Flying Officers Fowler ⁶ and Hogan ⁷ of No. 111 Squadron, and Pilot Officer Shaw ⁸ of No. 72 Squadron.

¹ Flight Lieutenant L. J. Montgomerie, DFC; born Opunake, [New Plymouth](#) 13 May 1922; farmer; joined [RNZAF](#) 12 Apr 1941; died of injuries received on air operations, 27 Aug 1944.

² Flight Lieutenant A. McG. Peart, DFC; born [Nelson](#), 25 Jul 1942; draughtsman; joined [RNZAF](#) 7 May 1941.

³ Sergeant N. A. Plummer; born Tokomaru Bay, [Auckland](#), 21 Aug 1918; farmer; joined [RNZAF](#) 3 May 1941; killed on air operations, 2 Jan 1943.

⁴ Flying Officer W. J. Robinson; born [Taihape](#), 28 Nov 1921; apprentice fitter; joined [RNZAF](#) 24 May 1941.

⁵ Squadron Leader S. F. Browne, DFC and bar; born [Wellington](#), 29 Oct 1919; medical student; joined [RNZAF](#) Mar 1941; commanded No. [485 \(NZ\) Sqdn](#), 1945.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant J. A. C. Fowler; born Marton, 4 Jan 1923; student; joined [RNZAF](#) Sep 1941; killed on air operations, 31 Dec 1944.

⁷ Squadron Leader D. E. Hogan, DFC; born [Auckland](#), 30 Jun 1920; clerk; joined [RNZAF](#) Mar 1941.

⁸ Flight Lieutenant E. J. Shaw, DFC; born [Frankton](#), 4 May 1912; meat inspector; joined [RNZAF](#) 1 Mar 1941.

Between them they destroyed at least six enemy machines in the air and also did good work in attacks on grounded aircraft and enemy transport. One April sortie in which Fowler and Hogan took part had an unusual sequel. Flying a long-range sweep off the coast in search of enemy shipping, the Spitfires saw a formation of Ju52 air transports below them escorted, so it appeared, by only a few fighters; but as the squadron swooped to the attack about twenty German and Italian fighters came down on them from above and a sharp engagement followed. Hogan managed to shoot down one Macchi 202 and hit three others; Fowler dived on another fighter and shot it down into the sea but was promptly shot down himself from behind. Although slightly injured and dazed by the shock, he managed to crash-land his Spitfire on the beach, but when he scrambled out he found an Arab covering him with a gun. Shortly afterwards a German officer appeared and Fowler soon found himself in hospital at **Tunis**, where his head was stitched and his legs bandaged. A few days later when he was able to sit up he discovered that nearly all the other wounded were German, but warned by a French nurse, he feigned delirium and so avoided being sent to **Italy**. Fifteen days later when the British entered **Tunis** he was able to slip away and return to his squadron. There, as often happened, he found that he had been given up for lost, his belongings packed and sent away and letters of condolence written to his people; but the squadron made amends with a good party.

Among the bomber crews, Flying Officer Dumont ¹ and Flight Sergeant McCullum ² both distinguished themselves in operations with the Bisley squadrons that supported the **First Army** in northern Tunisia. The Bisley, a development of the **Blenheim** night bomber, had neither the speed nor the armament for daylight sorties, but as the episode of Wing Commander Malcolm already related makes clear, the crews showed great gallantry in their attacks. During Rommel's thrust north through the **Kasserine Pass** Dumont made an exceptionally good attack against enemy transport in the actual pass. With heavy clouds covering both sides of the valley and the mountains above, he had to approach his target almost at ground level, but he succeeded in dropping his

bombs among vehicles on the road and returned safely. Flight Sergeant McCullum was invariably chosen for all special sorties involving bombing near friendly troops and for night intruder work, since 'his accurate navigation had made his crew the most outstanding in the squadron.'

Flying Boston light bombers, Sergeant Baker ³ made frequent sorties

¹ Squadron Leader N. Dumont, DFC; born Junee, Aust, 20 Oct 1913; shipping clerk; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

² Warrant Officer H. S. McCullum, DFC; born Manaia, 30 Jun 1916; linotype operator; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

³ Pilot Officer C. G. Baker, DFC; born **Timaru**, 30 Jun 1915; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941; killed on air operations, 8 Jul 1943.

against enemy positions. One day his bomber was hit in an engine when enemy fighters attacked the formation; Baker was unable to keep up with the other aircraft but he flew on and attacked his target—an enemy strongpoint on high ground near Bir Mergha. A few minutes later the damaged engine caught fire and Baker had to force-land in enemy territory. He and his crew hid in a cornfield while German soldiers stood watching the aircraft burn, only a short distance away. Then they crawled through the corn and, with shellfire passing over them from both lines, surmounted barbed-wire entanglements and crawled through a wadi strewn with mines and booby traps, until eventually they were able to make contact with a British patrol. Information they were able to supply proved most useful on a local raid by our own troops that same night.

Two squadrons of Wellington bombers had joined Eastern Air Command in December 1942 to operate against enemy ports and airfields both in **Tunisia** and **Italy**; at periods of heavy land fighting they

also gave close support to General Anderson's **First Army**. Squadron Leader Holmes, ¹ Flight Lieutenant Hanlon ² and Sergeant P. G. F. Smith ³ of No. 150 Squadron, and Flying Officer Allen ⁴ of No. 142 Squadron, each captained Wellingtons on many such missions. In one April raid on **El Aouina airfield** at **Tunis**, the weather was particularly foul and Sergeant Smith was the only pilot to locate the target; his incendiaries enabled seventeen other crews to find and bomb this important air base on which was parked the main strength of the enemy air forces remaining in **Tunisia**.

* * * * *

New Zealanders also continued to operate with the squadrons that supported Montgomery's **Eighth Army** as it advanced into **Tunisia**. Squadron Leader L. J. Joel, for example, was with No. **232 Wing**, flying **Baltimore** light bombers. During the battle of the **Mareth Line**, these versatile machines made nine attacks on a single afternoon. Flying Officer P. N. McGregor and Pilot Officer J. B. Paton flew Hurricane tank-busters which operated with outstanding success during the same battle and, indeed, throughout the campaign.

Prominent in fighter patrol and attack were Flight Lieutenant D. F. Westenra with No. 601 Spitfire Squadron, Flight Lieutenant G.

¹ Squadron Leader C. L. G. Holmes, DFC; born **Hamilton**, 26 Feb 1918; clerk; joined **RAF** Aug 1939.

² Flight Lieutenant R. E. Hanlon, DFC; born Tokomaru Bay, 30 May 1917; painter; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jan 1940.

³ Flight Lieutenant P. G. F. Smith, DFM; born Dunedin, 11 Nov 1918; salesman; joined **RNZAF** 9 Nov 1941.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant T. W. Allen, DSO, DFC; born **Auckland**, 11 Mar 1922; construction engineer; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

Fallows and Pilot Officer B. H. Thomas of No. 260 Kittyhawk Squadron, and Flight Sergeant McConnochie ¹ and Sergeant Day ² of No. 450 Squadron, also flying Kittyhawks. Combats with German fighters were now less frequent for the constant raids on his landing grounds had seriously reduced enemy activity in the air; fighter pilots were therefore able to concentrate more and more on attacking transport and troop concentrations. In the course of one day's operations towards the end of March 1943, the fighters and fighter-bombers of Western Desert Air Force claimed fifty vehicles destroyed and some 250 damaged. But such ground-strafting operations had their hazards, as Flight Lieutenant Fallows discovered when pieces of an exploding enemy truck hit his machine and forced him to land in enemy territory, where he was quickly captured. Describing this incident Fallows writes:

I was leading Kittyhawk dive bombers against the German positions at **El Hamma** in **Tunisia**. We had been instructed to dive bomb the 88 mm gun flashes and then strafe anything moving. I strafed a moving truck which, unfortunately for me, blew up and damaged the engine of my aircraft. Flames started to appear, so I throttled back and carried on for some time before belly landing among small sand dunes. The impact badly damaged the aircraft and also broke the safety straps, causing me to knock myself out on the gun sight. The next thing I recall was having two menacing Arabs standing over me with an old-fashioned gun. I was taken to their camp nearby and in a few minutes a German truck arrived and an officer immediately applied first aid, and I was treated with the utmost consideration.

A few days later I was placed in a cattle truck at **Sfax** with forty others, and during the night I produced a small saw from my shoe, and taking turns we managed to saw the door down. Grouping ourselves in fours we jumped off the moving train and proceeded westwards towards the **First Army**.

After walking all night and all the next day, we finally came to a main road carrying fairly heavy enemy transport. We waited for a gap in

the traffic and then dashed across, but unfortunately we were sighted by Arabs working in the fields. About thirty or forty of them joined in the chase, armed with hoes and other implements, and we were finally surrounded and knocked down. A German truck stopped very shortly afterwards and four German soldiers bashed six of the Arabs with their rifle butts, and we were once again in captivity on the way to **Tunis**, where no other occasion presented itself for escape.

A less spectacular but equally effective contribution was made by the men who flew heavy bombers. These squadrons had moved forward from Egypt in the wake of the **Eighth Army** and by mid-February 1943 most of them were installed at Gardabia, about 120 miles east of **Tripoli**. From this base they intensified their attacks on the enemy supply ports in **Tunisia** and on his landing grounds, transport and

¹ Flying Officer W. G. McConnochie, DFC; born Dunedin, 20 Nov 1914; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

² Flying Officer A. E. W. Day; born **Pukekohe**, 21 Oct 1920; student teacher; joined **RNZAF** May 1941; prisoner of war, 7 Aug 1944.

troop concentrations behind the battlefront. The Wellingtons also did some good close-support bombing in the opening stages of the **Mareth** battle and again at **Enfidaville**.

Three New Zealand pilots, Wing Commanders J. J. McKay, J. E. S. Morton and D. R. Bagnall, were each in control of heavy bombers during the final campaign in North Africa. McKay commanded the only **RAF** squadron yet equipped with American Liberator aircraft and his fine leadership of this unit won him admission to the Distinguished Service Order. He had taken over at a time when the Liberators were operating from a desert base where maintenance and servicing facilities were anything but adequate; replacement crews and aircraft spares were also scarce, 'but despite these difficulties,' says the record, 'by determined

effort he built up the squadron and obtained the maximum operational flying, at one period undertaking several consecutive sorties himself.' Morton and Bagnall did similar good work in command of No. 40 Squadron, which flew Wellington bombers. Morton, who had already completed a tour of operations over **Germany**, joined as flight commander in August 1942. He operated over the **Western Desert** and then, for a time, from **Malta**, where he led attacks on **Bizerta**, **Tunis** and targets in **Italy**. He was promoted to command the squadron when it moved to North Africa and by the end of March 1943 he had flown over sixty bombing missions. Bagnall then took over and led the squadron for the remainder of the campaign. He soon proved himself a highly efficient commander and during April his crews made no fewer than 195 sorties—a remarkable effort since the squadron was still equipped with an obsolescent type of Wellington that was difficult to keep flying and was also inferior in performance to the types flown by other units.

Squadron Leaders H. H. Beale and W. R. Kofoed both did fine work as flight commanders in bomber units, Beale flying a Wellington of No. 37 Squadron and Kofoed a **Halifax** with No. 462. Flying Officer B. M. O'Connor, Sergeants Davidson ¹ and Gustofson ² of No. 37 Wellington Squadron, Warrant Officer Halley ³ with No. 462 **Halifax** Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Towsey ⁴ with No. 40 Squadron, and Sergeants Cullinane ⁵ and Stowers ⁶ of No. 70 Wellington Squadron

¹ Flying Officer L. V. Davidson; born Waipawa, 24 Sep 1914; taxi proprietor; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941; killed on air operations, 8 Jun 1944.

² Flying Officer N. Gustofson; born **Wellington**, 6 Jul 1914; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant G. S. Halley, DFC; born **Shannon**, 21 Dec 1916; timber machinist; joined **RNZAF** 26 Oct 1939.

⁴ Squadron Leader C. P. Towsey, DFC; born **Hamilton**, 2 May

1918; musician; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant B. Cullinane, DFM; born **Wanganui**, 18 Apr 1914; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941.

⁶ Flying Officer R. E. Stowers, DFM; born **Rotorua**, 10 Aug 1922; carpenter; joined **RNZAF** 19 Oct 1941.

all did good work as captains of bomber aircraft during the Tunisian campaign. Flight Lieutenant Austin, ¹ who was navigation officer with No. 40 Squadron, deserves special mention. He had been with this unit for over two years and had navigated Wellingtons, first over **Germany**, then over the **Western Desert**, and finally from **Malta** and North Africa.

With the Coastal Air Force, Wing Commander R. M. Mackenzie led a squadron of Beaufighters which had notable success in attacks on supply ships. Squadron Leader R. E. Bary was in command of Hurricanes which operated from a **Western Desert** base in the less spectacular but very important role of protecting convoys sailing between Egypt and **Malta**.

Transport crews also continued to play their part, bringing forward supplies and evacuating casualties. As the advance into **Tunisia** reached its climax, over 200 casualties a day were being flown back to the newly established hospitals in North Africa and in the Delta area. The work of the pilots in landing all types of transport aircraft on improvised airfields, often under extremely difficult conditions, was most praiseworthy; and by substituting swift air travel for long journeys over desert tracks they undoubtedly saved many lives and spared the wounded a great deal of suffering.

Thus, in their various roles, did pilots and aircrews play their part during the final months of the North African campaign. And now as their squadrons moved northwards through **Tunisia**, through the soft and green countryside, with its olive plantations that were such a pleasure to the eye, they found themselves members of a large and

purposeful Allied organisation, bent on carrying the war across the narrow seas to the enemy. Just what lay ahead the squadrons did not know. But there were great things obviously, for Prime Minister Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt had already met at **Casablanca** and their plans must now be taking shape in the higher command.

* * * * *

Looking back over the long campaign in the **Western Desert** and in **Tunisia**, it is clear that air power had played an increasingly important part. Even in the early years when the tide of battle ebbed and flowed across **Africa**, control of the desert landing grounds had frequently transformed the situation. When the **RAF** held Berka and **Benina** it was able to sustain the advance of the land forces farther west and to strike at **Tripoli**; from the airfields of eastern **Cyrenaica** it could still strike at **Benghazi** and at the same time protect our shipping in the

¹ Squadron Leader W. S. Austin, DFC; born **Greymouth**, 14 Jul 1915; law clerk; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1939.

eastern **Mediterranean**; but when it receded into Egypt the whole range of its activity was limited as, for example, when the landing grounds within range of **Tobruk** were lost in the retreat to **Alamein**, leaving the enemy to bring the weight of his bomber force to bear, and the fortress fell.

Fortunately, however, while the airfields in the **Western Desert** changed hands many times, there was one air base which the British never lost, one which had an enormous influence upon the whole course of the **Mediterranean** campaign on land and sea. This was the island of **Malta**.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 6 – MALTA

CHAPTER 6

Malta

A PPROACHING it from the air, **Malta** first appears like a leaf, green or brown according to the season, floating upon the blue sea. The whole of the island is visible for quite a time with its terraced fields and villages, its churches and small farms all close and compact; then can be seen the port of **Valetta** and the enclosed waters of the Grand Harbour, where tiers of little houses look down across stone terraces and green palms to the blue beneath. It is a memorable view, but at the same time it all looks so very small, such a simple, rather fragile and easy target—especially for hostile bombers based only seventy miles away on the spacious airfields of **Sicily**. Yet for well over two years this small island, whose long history had seen it as a military fortress of the Knights of St. John and as **Nelson's** ‘important outwork to **India**’, withstood the worst that the enemy could cast upon it and by its persistence played a vital part in **Mediterranean** strategy.

Malta's indomitable resistance under the enemy attack, the heroism of its defenders and the endurance of its people, won high praise at the time, and rightly so, but a good deal less was said of its achievements as a base for striking at the enemy. Yet this is the true significance of the **Malta** story. For the island was essentially an aerodrome and its retention meant that air power could be applied in offensive operations over all areas of the **Mediterranean** within range of its aircraft; it could also serve as an air staging post and a reconnaissance base. Above all, because of its position athwart the enemy's supply routes to North Africa, **Malta** could, and did, exercise a profound effect on the land campaigns in that area. But for **Malta**, Rommel might well have pressed on to **Alexandria** and beyond; without it, the invasion of **Sicily** and **Italy** would have been well-nigh impossible.

The battle of **Malta** began a few hours after **Italy's** declaration of war with the appearance of the first raiders over the island at dawn on 11 June 1940. From that day until the middle of 1943, by which time the

island had been relieved and the Allies were preparing to invade **Sicily**, the battle was waged continuously. Periods of intensive attack alternated with times of relative quiet but **Malta**'s activity never ceased. As one of its air commanders remarked, 'We remained open day and



MALTA THE TARGET

night, like Waterloo Station.' And in those eventful years, during which the **RAF** both defended the island and demonstrated its special value in the **Mediterranean** campaigns, its airmen achieved lasting fame. They came from all parts of the Commonwealth, with Canadians, Australians, Rhodesians and New Zealanders playing a conspicuous part alongside their comrades from the **British Isles**. The New Zealand contingent of some 198 airmen—66 of them fighter pilots—was indeed substantial considering the size of the force engaged in **Malta** during this period.

It is also interesting to record that two of the three air commanders were New Zealanders—Air Vice-Marshal F. H. M. Maynard and Air Vice-Marshal K. R. Park.

Maynard was there at the outset. A fighter pilot of the First World War who had already spent two periods in the **Middle East** during the intervening years, he had been appointed Air Officer Commanding at **Malta** six months before **Italy** declared war. At that time the island's

chances of survival were considered slender owing to its close proximity to Italian bomber bases; moreover, although three airfields had been built and a radar station was ready to operate, there were no fighters, only a few reconnaissance machines. Maynard, however, was convinced that the island could be held against the Italians. Casting about for some means of defence he discovered four Gladiator biplane fighters—spares for an aircraft carrier—still in their packing cases. They were soon assembled, volunteers to fly them were at once forthcoming from his staff and by the time the first Italian air raids came, the improvised flight was ready for action. Unfortunately one of the Gladiators was soon damaged beyond repair but the remaining three— now dubbed 'Faith, Hope and Charity'—continued to defy the Italian **Air Force** for some weeks. At the end of June 1940 they were joined by four Hurricanes ¹ and for the next month the seven fighters, together with the anti-aircraft guns, were **Malta's** entire defence against over two hundred Italian aircraft in **Sicily**.

Almost every day Italian bombers raided the island and every time all the serviceable Hurricanes and Gladiators went up to meet them; some indication of the effect they caused is shown by contemporary Italian estimates of **Malta's** fighter strength as twenty-five aircraft. And not only did **Malta** survive but a marked lack of aggressiveness on the part of the enemy led him first into bombing from great height, then into operating under escort and finally, for a while, into attacking by night. Only two of our fighters were lost in combat and no serious damage was suffered on the ground.

Once Maynard had shown what **Malta** could do, it was decided to reinforce the fighter defence and to increase the small reconnaissance force of Swordfish aircraft and Sunderland flying-boats that watched the **Italian Fleet** and sought targets for the **Royal Navy**. By mid- November sixteen more Hurricanes had arrived, flown off the aircraft carrier *Argus*. That same month reconnaissance sorties by Marylands and Sunderlands made possible a highly successful **Fleet Air Arm** attack on the **Italian Fleet** at **Taranto** in which three battleships were crippled.

Meanwhile, Wellington bombers en route to Egypt had, at Maynard's instigation, paused at **Malta** to make a few visits to Italian

¹ These were really destined for Egypt but Maynard secured permission to retain them in **Malta**.

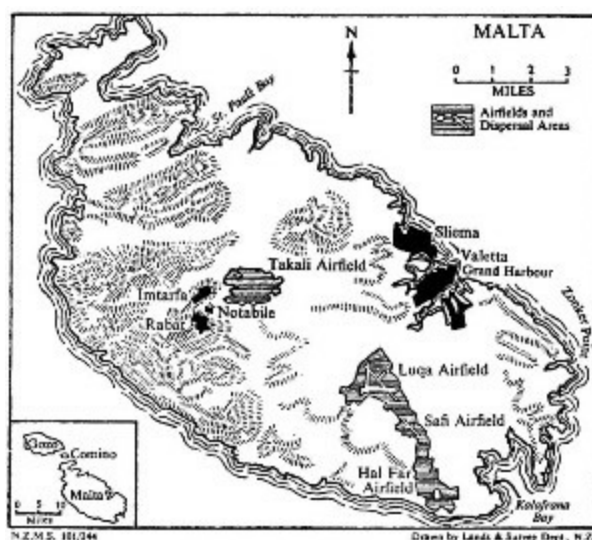
ports in the neighbourhood; and in December he secured permission to form a whole squadron of Wellingtons for attack on the enemy's supply lines. Thus, at the end of 1940, far from being overwhelmed as had been expected, **Malta** stood forth to challenge the enemy— shield in one hand, sword in the other.

But now a new danger threatened. For German air units had begun to arrive in **Sicily** with Ju87 dive-bombers, twin-engined Messerschmitt fighters, reconnaissance machines and long-range Heinkel bombers. They soon made their presence felt. Attacking a **Malta**-bound convoy in the Sicilian Narrows on 10 January 1941, they sank one of the two escorting cruisers, crippled the other and severely damaged the carrier *Illustrious*. On reaching **Malta** the carrier became a target for further attack and the next fortnight saw what came to be known as the ‘*Illustrious* Blitz’; a serious attempt was now made to wreck the island's airfields and above Grand Harbour dive-bombers ‘came screeching through a sky that was three parts flying steel and drifting smoke and one part spray or falling water’ in a determined effort to destroy HMS *Illustrious*. But **Malta** and the *Illustrious* came through. Twelve aircraft were lost—six of them destroyed on the ground—but our fighters and guns between them accounted for eleven German machines and an unspecified number of Italian, while our Wellington bombers destroyed nine more in raids on **Sicily**. And after a miracle of effort by the repairers the *Illustrious* slipped out of harbour under her own steam and reached **Alexandria** safely.

The departure of the *Illustrious*, however, brought no respite; for the Germans were determined to neutralise **Malta** and control the supply routes to Rommel's forces, now active in North Africa. By early March

their bombers had wrought such havoc on the island's airfields that the Wellington bombers and Sunderland flying-boats had to be withdrawn to Egypt. **Malta's** shipping offensive practically ceased. But its small Hurricane force continued to resist, although at times the pilots were too weary and exhausted to climb the stairs to their rooms; the continual night raids were a severe trial; and it was April before reinforcements—including some Hurricanes of a later type—reached them. Eventually, after five months of constant attack, came welcome relief with the transfer of the German squadrons from **Sicily** to the **Balkans**; there they replaced other units moving east, for **Hitler's** attack on **Russia** was impending.

Operations against **Malta** were now left to the *Regia Aeronautica* and the island, faced once more only by the Italians, prepared to resume the offensive. The Wellingtons and Sunderlands returned; Blenheims from Bomber Command's No. 2 Group, already experienced in attacking enemy shipping in the North Sea, arrived to continue this task in the **Mediterranean**; a squadron of Marylands made possible a more
am-



THE AIRFIELDS OF MALTA

bitious

programme of reconnaissance; and more Hurricanes came to defend

the airfields.

At this stage Maynard handed over to his successor, Air Vice-Marshal Hugh Lloyd.¹ His sixteen months at **Malta** had certainly been a remarkable record of achievement. In the face of formidable enemy superiority and all manner of supply difficulties, he had built up the island's defence and shown it could be held. He had inspired all by his cool judgment and fine leadership; and his handful of fighters had been credited with fifty enemy aircraft destroyed and as many damaged. He had also prepared for the coming offensive, in particular by persisting with the building of a bomber airfield, with a 1200-yard tarmac runway, at Luqa in the centre of the island. Its construction was really a triumph of ingenuity, since the whole area had to be levelled from stony ground, hills and quarries; there were no proper tools for construction, and the work was done by the most primitive Maltese labour methods with horse and cart.

¹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh P. Lloyd; GBE, KCB, MC, DFC, Croix de Guerre (Fr), Legion of Merit (US), Order of Nicham-Iftikhar (Fr), Legion of Honour (Fr); **RAF** (retd); born Leigh, Worcester, 12 Dec 1894; joined RFC 1917; commanded No. 9 Sqdn 1939; **RAF** Station, Marham, 1939; SASO No. 2 Group, 1940–41; AOC **Malta**, 1941–42; SASO, HQ Middle East, 1942–43; AOC NWACAF 1943–44; AOC Tiger Force, 1945.

Several New Zealand pilots operated from **Malta** during those remarkable months when Maynard was in command. Flight Sergeant Hyde,¹ who had joined the **RAF** a year before the war, flew Hurricane fighters; arriving in August 1940, he took part in the first phase of the island's defence against the Italians and remained to serve for the next nine months with No. 261 Squadron—the first complete fighter squadron formed at **Malta**. Another fighter pilot, Pilot Officer Langdon,² who joined this same unit a few months later, was lost in action during the time of the heavy German attacks. Flight Lieutenant L. W. Coleman and Flying Officer C. A. Pownall each captained Wellington bombers flying

from **Malta** during the early months of 1941; their chief target at that time was the enemy's North African supply port of **Tripoli**, but they also bombed the airfield at **Catania** in **Sicily**.

Flight Lieutenant Bloxam ³ did fine work as pilot of one of the first Maryland aircraft based on **Malta**; these machines, which were fast and reliable, provided the chief means of sea reconnaissance and they ranged far and wide over the waters between **Tripoli**, **Sardinia**, **Naples** and **Greece**. Even when the Germans maintained standing patrols around **Malta** to intercept them on their inward and outward flights, they still continued to carry out their missions. In mid-April 1941, Bloxam found and shadowed a convoy of five merchant ships escorted by three destroyers off the island of Pantellaria, north-west of **Malta**; as a result of his reports a destroyer force, led by Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten, was directed to the target and Bloxam subsequently reported all the merchant vessels and two destroyers lying beached on the Tunisian coast. A few weeks later he found a convoy near **Tripoli** which had eluded naval attack; subsequent bombing by Marylands from **Malta** set at least one 15,000-ton troopship on fire. On another occasion, Bloxam shadowed and reported the **Italian Fleet** off Cape Matapan. By the end of 1941 he had flown over seventy reconnaissance missions and he then remained at **Malta** for a further period as operations officer at Luqa airfield.

Good work was also done by Flight Lieutenants H. L. M. Glover, H. W. Lamond, D. N. Milligan and A. Frame, who captained Sunderland flying-boats on reconnaissance, supply and transport missions to and from **Malta**—Glover, a former pilot of Imperial Airways, finding his previous experience no little value in these new duties. Long-range reconnaissances over the enemy shipping lanes between **Italy** and North **Africa** and in the Ionian Sea provided targets for both aircraft and warships, and the Sunderland could always be relied upon to guide

¹ Squadron Leader R. J. Hyde, AFC; born Islington, **Canterbury**, 21 Dec 1913; electrician; joined **RAF** Jul 1938;

transferred **RNZAF** Feb 1945.

² Pilot Officer C. E. Langdon; born **Hawera**, 21 Aug 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 20 Sep 1939; transferred **RAF** Jun 1940; killed on air operations, 26 Feb 1941.

³ Wing Commander J. R. Bloxam, OBE, DFC; **RAF**; born **Dunedin**, 11 Feb 1913; joined **RAF** 1937; transferred **RNZAF** Dec 1943.

Hurricane fighters safely in to **Malta** from a carrier or to find and cover a crippled ship. Indeed, no praise is too high for the **Sunderland** crews who faithfully performed the role of 'maids of all work' at this difficult time.

Their long-range transport and reconnaissance missions were not without hazard. One night when Milligan was flying a heavily laden **Sunderland** on the thousand-mile flight to **Aboukir**, the starboard outer engine threw off its propeller and then caught fire; it was only with great difficulty that he kept control and then, with the fire extinguished, flew back to make an emergency landing in darkness at **Kalafrana Bay** without the aid of a flare-path.

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With the departure of the *Luftwaffe* from **Sicily** in May 1941, enemy air activity against **Malta** was considerably reduced. There was some night bombing but, by day, only an occasional bomber or low-flying fighter attack and intermittent reconnaissance. The Hurricane Is were able to deal with the **Macchi 200** fighters which comprised the main Italian force and reinforcement by some Hurricane IIs was a further discouragement to the enemy.

Notable developments occurred at **Malta** during the next few months. In the first place, devoted efforts by the **Merchant Navy** and the crews of escorting ships and aircraft brought in several convoys from

the west, so restocking the island with food, bombs, ammunition, aviation fuel and many other vital commodities. At the same time Air Vice- Marshal Lloyd and his construction teams, helped unsparingly by the Army, pressed on with the development of the island's air facilities; despite an almost complete absence of all those devices which make modern building so fascinating a spectacle, they succeeded in building new airfields, taxi tracks, dispersals, radar stations and operations rooms. The provision of adequate aircraft dispersal space was a major problem since every yard of the island's poor soil was needed for crops, but **Malta's** stone-walled roads were put to good use in forming the celebrated Safi strip which linked Luqa and Hal Far airfields in a unique dispersal area.

Meanwhile, with the Italian bombers showing a marked disinclination to visit the island, **Malta** struck out boldly at enemy ports and shipping. And she struck with such effect that Admiral Raeder was soon reporting to **Hitler** that 'German shipments to North Africa are suffering heavy losses of ships, material and personnel as a result of enemy air attacks by bombs and torpedoes and through submarine attacks', while Mussolini bemoaned the loss of nearly three-quarters of **Italy's** shipping employed on the African supply routes. It is now known that the enemy lost at least 220,000 tons of shipping on his North African convoy routes as a result of our naval and air operations between 1 June and 31 October 1941. Of this total 94,000 tons were sunk by our naval vessels—mainly submarines—and 115,000 by aircraft of the **Royal Air Force** and the **Fleet Air Arm**. Ninety per cent of the sinkings were of loaded southbound traffic, and at least three-quarters of those attributed to aircraft were the work of the squadrons at **Malta**. This destruction of enemy cargoes undoubtedly helped Auchinleck outpace Rommel in the build-up of supplies and so launch the CRUSADER campaign that took the Allied armies forward to **Benghazi** at the end of 1941.

British submarines and Swordfish torpedo-bombers of the Fleet Air Arm, whose pilots won a high reputation for the courage and accuracy with which they operated their obsolete 'String Bags', continued to play

a major part in the shipping strikes from **Malta** during this period. But the RAF Blenheim bombers now operating from the island soon established a fine record with their low-level attacks; and **RAF** reconnaissance planes continued to locate and report suitable targets.

The Blenheims each carried four 250 lb. bombs, fused for eleven seconds' delay, and flying in at mast height they released them in a closely spaced stick. These tactics were at first highly successful; but as the enemy began to arm his ships and to provide escorts, the low-flying Blenheims found their operations more and more hazardous. Frequently they were shot down on the run in to attack, for in the clear **Mediterranean** skies surprise was almost impossible; fire would be opened long before aircraft were within range and huge sheets of water would be splashed up from the falling shells. 'Under such conditions,' Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd remarks, 'the attacks required incalculable courage, determination and leadership on the part of our young men.'

Flight Lieutenants Edmunds ¹ and Allport, ² Flight Sergeant O. W. Thompson ³ and Pilot Officer Buckley ⁴ each captained Blenheims in these operations, while Pilot Officer Knight ⁵ and Flight Sergeants Brooking, ⁶ Duignan ⁷ and McKenzie ⁸ flew as navigators. Edmunds

¹ Flight Lieutenant E. G. Edmunds, DFC; born **Wellington**, 29 Nov 1915; sports goods maker; joined **RNZAF** 3 Sep 1940; killed on air operations, 11 Dec 1941.

² Squadron Leader V. Allport, DFC; born **Nelson**, 18 Feb 1916; insurance agent; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1940; killed in flying accident, 26 Mar 1944.

³ Flying Officer O. W. Thompson, DFM; born **Auckland**, 10 Nov 1916; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 2 Jul 1940; killed on air operations, 1 May 1943.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant J. Buckley, DFC; born **Wanganui**, 29 Nov 1915; joined **RAF** Mar 1940; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant O. W. Knight; born **Auckland**, 12 Sep 1912; master butcher; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1940.

⁶ Warrant Officer E. Brooking; born **Auckland**, 31 Jan 1922; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** 4 Jun 1940.

⁷ Flying Officer W. H. Duignan; born **Cambridge**, 30 Jan 1920; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1940.

⁸ Warrant Officer J. B. J. McKenzie; born **Auckland**, 23 Oct 1919; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Apr 1940.

led several attacks by formations from his No. 18 Squadron—notably an assault on shipping at Navarino Bay in **Greece** where, in the face of intense flak, a merchant ship and a 6000-ton tanker were bombed and set on fire, the tanker being reported to have received six hits. On another occasion when his formation became separated in thick weather, Edmunds flew on with one accompanying aircraft to his allotted patrol area near **Tripoli**, where he located and attacked a troopship and an escorting destroyer, scoring hits on both vessels.

Allport flew many sorties with the same squadron; on one patrol he sank a large Italian transport and on another scored hits on a tanker. Thompson had notable success with his No. 107 Squadron; he led the attack on the 10,000-ton *Iridio-Mantovani* which was afterwards abandoned; he sank another smaller transport and also made several effective attacks on land targets. These three pilots were decorated for their part in these hazardous operations; only a few days after receiving his DFC, Edmunds was shot down while leading a low-level attack.

An interesting episode in which Buckley and Knight took part was the bombing of a 9000-ton transport off the island of Lampedusa in mid-August. The ship had run ashore as a result of damage suffered earlier; a destroyer and torpedo-boats stood by and a swarm of lighters were busy

salvaging the deck cargo of motor vehicles. During their approach the two Blenheims were an easy target for the anti-aircraft guns—especially those which the Italians had quickly placed on the cliffs above the ship. Buckley was wounded twice, first by a bullet which shattered his windscreen and hit him in the hand, then when a cannon shell went through his navigator's map case to explode on the Very pistol, bits of which were blown back into his legs. But his bombs hit the transport squarely, set her on fire and, as her main cargo was oil, she continued to burn for eight whole days. Bombs from Knight's aircraft sank a 700-ton schooner lying alongside.

Wellington bombers—some of them detached from squadrons in Egypt—continued the assault by night. Ships and port facilities in places as far apart as **Naples**, **Benghazi**, **Tripoli** and **Taranto** were their main targets, but when Auchinleck began his CRUSADER offensive, they also flew over to bomb the main enemy airfields in **Cyrenaica** at Berka and **Benina** and the air depot at **Castel Benito** near **Tripoli**. In the six months ending December 1941, the Wellingtons at **Malta** flew well over one thousand sorties. 'It was an incredible achievement,' says Lloyd. 'The crews never asked for a rest but continued to go out night after night despite the weather. In the autumn heavy rains played havoc with the taxi tracks and dispersal points at Luqa and it became impossible to move aircraft at night so that on their return the Wellingtons had to remain on the airfield until it was light enough to taxi away; this was an added strain on the pilots.'

Flying Officer Ashworth,¹ Pilot Officers Easton² and Munro³ and Flight Sergeants Walsh,⁴ Thornton⁵ and Lewthwaite⁶ all piloted Wellingtons from **Malta** during this period, while Pilot Officer Ball⁷ was a navigator and Flight Sergeant Holford⁸ a gunner.

In the circumstances of the time, casualties and crashes were not infrequent. Lewthwaite and his crew were lost during an attack on the airfield at Castelvetro in **Sicily**; after one October raid on **Naples**, Flight Sergeant Thornton's Wellington crashed on landing: the front gunner was killed, three other members of the crew were injured and

Thornton himself seriously hurt. And Flying Officer Ashworth relates how: 'Returning from Tripoli one night it wasn't until touching down that I discovered we had no brakes. They had been put out of action by anti-aircraft fire and we just ran on and on until stopped by a stone wall. On the far side of that wall was a quarry about one hundred feet deep.'

While the Blenheims and Wellingtons thus maintained their attack on the enemy's supply routes, the Sunderland flying-boats continued to do yeoman service, transporting supplies and personnel to the island as well as providing sea reconnaissance. These were usually uneventful missions but, towards the end of December 1941, Flight Lieutenant S. W. R. Hughes and his crew were involved in a remarkable episode. They had taken off from Aboukir in Egypt shortly after midnight, bound for Malta with supplies. On board as passengers were Pilot Officer Easton and his crew, whose Wellington bomber had crashed in North Africa and who were returning to Malta. Here is the story of what happened.

The Sunderland flew on, hugging the friendly coast of North Cyrenaica, but when approximately fifty miles north-east of Benghazi it was attacked by two Messerschmitt 110 fighters. The encounter was brief: one of the

¹ Squadron Leader A. Ashworth, DSO, DFC and bar, AFC; RAF; born Gisborne, 3 May 1920; draughtsman; joined RNZAF Sep 1939; transferred RAF Jun 1940; Air Staff, Pathfinder Force, 1942–43.

² Flight Lieutenant G. H. Easton; born Christchurch, 7 Nov 1921; clerk; joined RNZAF 4 Jun 1940.

³ Flight Lieutenant R. C. Munro, DFC; born Wellington, 21 Mar 1918; clerk; joined RNZAF 4 Jun 1940.

⁴ Warrant Officer J. A. E. Walsh; born Stratford, 6 Nov 1915; warehouseman; joined RNZAF 7 May 1940; killed on air

operations, 9 Apr 1943.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant P. S. G. Thornton; born Tolaga Bay, 1 Sep 1915; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** 28 Sep 1940.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant J. F. Lewthwaite; born **Christchurch**, 2 Nov 1918; student teacher; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940; killed on air operations, 5 Jan 1942.

⁷ Squadron Leader W. A. C. Ball, DFC; born **Palmerston North**, 14 Sep 1916; insurance clerk; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939; killed on air operations, 9 Mar 1943.

⁸ Warrant Officer R. G. Holford; born **Christchurch**, 30 Oct 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939; killed in aircraft accident, 22 May 1945.

Messerschmitts was probably destroyed and the other retired; but two **Royal Air Force** gunners were wounded, one seriously, and a passenger was killed, while the two starboard engines of the Sunderland were put out of action and the starboard aileron shot away. Land was just in sight, and as the aircraft rapidly lost height, Flight Lieutenant Hughes, exercising all his experience, succeeded in turning it into the wind and made a safe landing on the water. A heavy sea was running, and the Sunderland ricocheted twice before it finally came to rest. The starboard wing-tip float was smashed, but the crew kept the flying boat from capsizing by ranging their weight along the port wing and ensuring that the good float remained in the water. In this fashion, behind a strong north-east wind, the Sunderland 'sailed' stern first into land. It struck a reef, and two hours later was still firmly lodged and beginning to break up. An attempt had to be made to reach the shore. The wounded man was given morphia, put into the only serviceable dinghy and towed through the surf. In all, there were twenty men on board the aircraft, and two at a time they slid down the wing into the sea. The second-pilot was nearly drowned as a strong undertow carried him away, but Flight

Lieutenant Hughes, who was a strong swimmer, eventually dragged him ashore after a struggle lasting nearly half an hour.

By mid-day the party found themselves on a rocky beach, which they estimated, accurately, to be approximately 100 miles east of [Benghazi](#). Italian soldiers suddenly appeared from behind a wall of rocks, and Flight Lieutenant Hughes decided to go forward and surrender as his exhausted party was without arms. To his astonishment the nearest Italian raised his rifle above his head, threw it away ostentatiously, and advanced with outstretched hands. The British party had not quite recovered from seeing the soldiers behave as friends when another group of about eighty Italians arrived. This group was more aggressive and formally declared the British party to be their prisoners. Hughes, however, had one duty to fulfil, and with the pretext of searching for the wounded gunner's flying boots he returned to the wreck and jettisoned into the sea a bag of one hundred pounds' weight of gold sovereigns, which had been destined for the [Malta](#) Exchequer. Back on shore, a stretcher made of oars from the dinghy was improvised for the wounded man, and in a long procession the mixed band started off along the coast. It was raining and streaks of lightning lit up a leaden sky. Night came, and with it small comfort. There were no blankets, rations, or water, and no fires were allowed as the Italians feared Arab sharpshooters. The second-pilot and the gunner were both suffering from shock, and the party huddled around them, massaging them constantly in an effort to keep them warm. At dawn another start was made. Suddenly twenty Italian officers ran forward from a cluster of bushes. Highly agitated, they indicated to Flight Lieutenant Hughes that the Germans had taken their vehicles and told them to get to safety as best they could. They offered to help the party in exchange for favoured treatment should they be captured by the British. Again, for the fourth time, the party was increased in number, on this occasion by an Italian major with about one hundred men. The major was a unique personage, middle-aged, with a heavily tanned and deeply lined face. He carried a cat-o'-nine-tails at his belt, presumably as a fly-whisk, but he used it for its original purpose later when one of the British party indignantly

announced that an Italian soldier had stolen the wounded man's flying boots. The thief was flogged in front of his comrades. Later that day the wounded air-gunner died and the major conducted a form of military burial.

In due course the party arrived at the **Senussi** village of El Hania. Here they were given macaroni and coffee; three eggs were bartered for a wrist watch and a two-shilling piece, and a bag of dates cost one Egyptian pound. The major sent for Flight Lieutenant Hughes and told him that he proposed to leave for **Benghazi**. The question arose as to who actually held the town and finally bets were made on it. The Italian decided that he would leave with his men, allowing the British to remain with the Arabs, and he offered to leave rifles for their protection. Once the Italians had gone, the **Senussi** freely disclosed an abundance of food and sent a messenger towards the advancing British lines. Hughes and his party decided to follow, hoping to reach an Indian Army unit which the Arabs reported to be some fifteen miles away.

The end of this incident was equally remarkable. After walking for an hour the **Royal Air Force** party overtook some of the Italian major's men. One of these ran over to the group, drew his bayonet, propped it against a rock, and jumped on it until it snapped. There were some two dozen Italians, each of whom threw away his rifle or handed it over and cheerfully joined the procession. Similar incidents happened on four occasions, and after three hours the company was more than a hundred and fifty strong. The British lines were soon reached, for the **Eighth Army** was making a bid to take **Benghazi** by Christmas, and Flight Lieutenant Hughes, who had successfully led his men through the whole grim yet whimsical adventure, added his prisoners to those of the Army.

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Malta's offensive against enemy supplies to North Africa proved so successful that **Hitler** was compelled to take action against it. Accordingly, in November 1941, he ordered Field Marshal Kesselring, the soldier turned air commander, who was then conducting operations in

front of **Moscow**, to move with the whole of his *Luftflotte 2* to the **Mediterranean**, where he was to 'suppress' **Malta**, 'obtain air and sea supremacy in the area' and 'establish safe shipping routes to **Libya**.' Kesselring wasted no time and by the middle of December the enemy air forces in **Sicily** had grown to some 250 long-range bombers and reconnaissance aircraft and nearly two hundred fighters. Against them Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd could muster only sixty serviceable bombers and seventy serviceable fighters, the latter still Hurricanes whose performance was not equal to that of the latest German Messerschmitts. Not until another three months had passed were a first fifteen Spitfires—our best contemporary fighters—to be spared from the many hundreds in Fighter Command.

Malta now faced its longest and sternest test. It began in the last week of December when over two hundred aircraft attacked the island. Kesselring's first objective was plainly the **RAF**, for the raids were concentrated almost entirely against the fighter grounds of Hal Far and Takali, the bomber airfield at Luqa and the flying-boat base at Kalafrana. At first the Hurricanes, although outclassed by the German fighters, broke up some of their formations and kept the damage within tolerable limits. But with the opening days of January 1942 came heavier attacks and the defence of the island grew increasingly arduous for the small force of Hurricane fighters; then heavy rains turned the battered fighter airfields into quagmires so that for a time all squadrons had to be concentrated on the equally battered but better drained Luqa. Yet **Malta** still continued to hit back; in an attack on Castelvetro airfield Blenheims destroyed eleven and damaged twenty-eight of a large force of transport aircraft on the ground; then Wellingtons followed up with a night raid which left another sixteen aircraft ablaze and blew up a petrol dump. But as the enemy bombing of **Malta** continued with increasing strength and ferocity, our offensive slackened and February saw only sixty sorties by bombers and only one enemy ship sunk.

In March only one day passed without the wail of the air-raid siren and over 2000 tons of bombs fell on **Malta**. Very heavy damage was

caused in the harbour area and at the island's airfields; soldiers and airmen worked day and night clearing the rubble, filling craters, repairing the runways, building protective pens and servicing aircraft; and the guns and fighters succeeded in shooting down sixty of the enemy raiders. Yet under the strain of continual attack, **Malta's** offensive power and even her capacity for self-defence were now diminishing. The arrival of the first few Spitfires at odd intervals during the month was heartening, but although their pilots took them straight into action and fought gallantly they could not work miracles; moreover, with limited spares and an almost complete lack of the special equipment designed for maintaining Spitfire fighters (they were not just super-Hurricanes but an altogether different machine), it proved exceedingly difficult to keep them repaired and in action. By the end of March Lloyd had only nine Spitfires and four Hurricanes serviceable and the anti-aircraft guns were short of ammunition. Food and other essential supplies were also running out. The February convoy had failed to get through and in March all three of the ships that reached **Malta** were sunk at their berths before much of their cargo had been unloaded.

April brought the severest ordeal. That month the enemy cast down no less than 6728 tons of bombs on **Malta**, which may well be compared with the 186 tons dropped on Coventry at the height of the blitz on **Britain**. Moreover, most of these bombs were directed against the few square miles at the western end of the island, where lay the main airfields and the port of **Valetta**. Soon the airfields were a wilderness of craters, the docks and their surrounding districts a shambles and **Valetta** itself a mass of broken limestone. At the height of the assault, on 20 April, forty-seven Spitfires flew in from the **United States** carrier *Wasp*; but the hopes they raised were soon crushed for the Germans observed their arrival and, within twenty minutes of the last Spitfire touching down at Takali, they launched a series of violent attacks on the airfield. The following morning only twenty-seven fighters were fit for action and, after the day's fighting, only seventeen. By the end of the month, Lloyd was down to seven serviceable Spitfires and 'it was a continual struggle to hold it at that modest figure.' Over a hundred fighters were

now awaiting repair. Spares were being used at a far quicker rate than they were being delivered by air. Men would rob parts from every unserviceable Spitfire to make others fly, but there was a limit to that, particularly with engines.

Yet, battered and blasted though it was, **Malta** refused to admit defeat. Amazing spirit and powers of endurance were displayed by the Maltese people; the fighter pilots continued to take off against fantastic odds; the ground crews, the army gunners and repair teams fought and worked on under the incessant attack, badly equipped, badly accommodated and often hungry though most of them were. Most remarkable was the way in which, night after night, reinforcement aircraft were passed through to Egypt—over three hundred were landed, refuelled and sent on their way during March and April. This was a nerve-racking business for, apart from the battered airfields and lack of equipment, there were intruder bombers overhead on most nights. Often there would be a mad scramble and rush to repair the holes so that these transit aircraft could be landed; sometimes they would arrive when the guns were firing, but then the guns would close down and they would accept the bombs in order to give the aircraft all the illumination they required for their landing, rather than see one of them get lost or crash. Thus did **Malta**, in its extremity, continue to serve the **RAF** in Egypt—and the **Eighth Army**.

Towards the end of April, reconnaissance aircraft brought back disturbing news from **Sicily**. Their photographs showed that the enemy was preparing airfields for launching gliders and that railway sidings were being laid alongside them. The Germans and Italians were, in fact, now well advanced with their plans for Operation HERCULES—the airborne invasion of **Malta**.

But the prospect of invasion, alarming though it was, was not the only danger that threatened. For with the passing weeks the island's last stocks of fuel and food were ebbing relentlessly away. Both the February and March convoys had succumbed to German aircraft; no convoy had sailed in April and the chances of one sailing in May were remote; **Malta**

was now existing on what could be brought in by submarines, aircraft and fast minelayers like the gallant *Welshman*. 'Conditions had become extremely difficult,' writes Lloyd. 'The poor quality of the food had not been noticed at first, then suddenly it began to take effect. In March it had been clear enough but in April most belts had to be taken in by two holes and in May by another hole Our diet was a slice and a half of bread with jam for breakfast, bully beef for lunch with one slice of bread, and except for an additional slice of bread it was the same fare for dinner. There was sugar but margarine appeared only every two or three days; even drinking water, lighting and heating were all rationed. And things which had been taken for granted closed down. The making of beer required coal so none had been made for months. Officers and men slept in shelters, in caverns and dugouts in quarries Three hundred slept in one underground cabin as tight as sardines in a tin and two hundred slept in a disused tunnel. None had any comfort or warmth. Soon, too, we should want hundreds of tons of fuel and ammunition'

Meanwhile the enemy pilots were showing greater determination in their attacks. Our fighters were invariably outnumbered, often by as many as ten to one.

'We were fighting a stern, uphill battle, and were coming off second best,' writes one New Zealand Spitfire pilot. 'We were also feeling the strain, not only of the continuous air fighting but also of the bombing and the general living conditions of [Malta](#). Our barrage was also falling away. The gunners were growing tired and many of the gun barrels were becoming worn. All of us were getting less sleep for the enemy bombers were coming over in greater numbers at night when the moon was favourable. They were pressing home these attacks with more determination than previously and were coming down much lower. We had insufficient night fighters to hold them all back. With the lengthening days, we were doing longer periods of readiness and the night bombing prevented us from obtaining proper sleep. We were becoming irritable and on edge.'

‘The civilian population were showing the effects of the strain in somewhat similar fashion. The Maltese appeared to have aged and looked more haggard and nervous. Less and less of Valetta was standing, half the streets were blocked with debris and the interiors of the houses were everywhere spewing out of the doorways. Practically every civilian was living in one of the rock shelters. Food distribution was becoming more difficult than ever and the authorities had been forced to set up communal feeding centres.’¹

As April gave place to May, Malta's plight had thus become extremely serious. Indeed, it seemed that her epic of defiance might well end, not in a last glorious if unavailing fight against the invader, but in the humiliation of surrender, with the guns silent for need of ammunition, the aircraft idle for lack of fuel and the defenders weakened for want of food. But this was the ‘darkest hour before the dawn’ and with the next few weeks there came new hope for Malta's survival.

¹ Brennan, Hesselyn and Bateson, *Spitfires over Malta*.

Strangely enough, it was the enemy who provided the first relief. A new campaign in Russia was making heavy demands on German resources; Hitler was also anxious to take reprisals against Britain for Bomber Command's mounting offensive, and since Malta appeared to have been subdued, with substantial supplies reaching Rommel, he decided to transfer the greater part of Kesselring's bombers to Russia and France; others would go to Cyrenaica where Rommel was about to attack. The German calculation at this stage was that, if the Italians played their part, enough aircraft would still remain in Sicily to keep Malta ‘neutralised’ until Operation HERCULES could be launched—somewhere about the end of July. The Italians were not so sure and with good reason. For only a year earlier the departure of a German bomber force from Sicily had been the signal for renewed activity on the part of Malta.

Meantime the aircraft carriers *Eagle* and *Wasp*, loaded with Spitfires, had passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and were ploughing their way across the Mediterranean towards Malta. On 9 May, somewhere to the south of Sardinia, they flew off sixty-four fighters. All but two of them reached the island safely.

This time most elaborate preparations had been made for their reception; a gun barrage was concentrated to protect the airfields while servicing parties, soldiers as well as airmen, stood ready to receive the precious Spitfires; in every aircraft pen there was petrol, oil, ammunition and food, and in most a fighter pilot waiting to take over. As the Spitfires came in runners sprang to guide them to the right spot; and within five minutes of their touching down on Malta the first arrivals were refuelled and ready for action. Many times that day German and Italian aircraft strove to repeat their success of the previous month but they were met and defeated by the very fighters they had come to destroy. Further reinforcements followed during the next few weeks, bringing the total number of Spitfires on the island to over a hundred. Then, early in June—after a series of most bitter air and sea battles in which we lost a cruiser, five destroyers, two minesweepers, six merchant ships and over twenty aircraft—two supply ships reached Valetta and were safely unloaded.

With the arrival of the Spitfires and these dearly bought supplies, the task of the defenders was, for the time being, greatly eased. Enemy fighters and bombers continued to come over regularly but their assault was on a reduced scale and, under cover of stronger fighter defence, Malta began to renew her offensive. Wellington bombers struck out again to good effect and they were soon joined by some torpedo-carrying Beauforts; the faithful Marylands increased their reconnaissance sorties, a duty they had never ceased to carry out even at the height of the enemy attack.

Thus did Malta continue to exist and, as far as her impoverished state allowed, to hit back at the enemy. But her position was still

precarious and, with Rommel now sweeping forward towards Egypt, it might well be only a matter of weeks before she was isolated and invaded. Such indeed was still the enemy intention.

During these critical months the exploits and adventures of the New Zealand airmen were many; and the contribution they made to **Malta's** continued survival was quite substantial. Three fighter pilots, Squadron Leader Lawrence, ¹ Flight Sergeants Hesselyn ² and Rae, ³ deserve special mention, for between them they shot down at least twenty enemy aircraft, probably destroyed another twelve and damaged something like fourteen more.

Lawrence led Hurricanes through more than four months of the heaviest fighting, and won recognition as 'a very fine leader whose example when the odds were great was of the very best'; he destroyed four enemy aircraft, damaged seven and probably destroyed two, which was a very fine achievement in view of the odds at which the Hurricanes fought in the early stages.

Hesselyn was one of the first Spitfire pilots to reach **Malta**; he flew off the carrier *Eagle* early in March and was soon in action. Within the next few months he shot down no fewer than twelve enemy machines—in one active period he destroyed five in as many days—and by the end of May he had won the immediate award of both the Distinguished Flying Medal and bar.

Rae flew his Spitfire to **Malta** from the **United States** carrier *Wasp* towards the end of April; a few days after his arrival he was shot down and wounded; but he returned to flying before the shrapnel wound in his arm was properly healed and was soon ranked as one of **Malta's** finest section leaders; within a matter of weeks he had destroyed five enemy machines, with another three probables.

Other fighter pilots who flew and fought over **Malta** during these months were Flying Officer M. R. B. Ingram, who shot down a Ju88 bomber and shared in the destruction of two more, Flight Sergeants Sim

⁴ and Sole ⁵ and Pilot Officer West, ⁶ who flew Hurricanes, and

¹ Squadron Leader K. A. Lawrence, DFC; born Waitara, 25 Nov 1919; clerk; joined **RAF** 13 Mar 1939; transferred **RNZAF** 15 Jul 1945; commanded No. **185 Sqdn, Malta**, 1942.

² Flight Lieutenant R. B. Hesselyn, MBE, DFC, DFM and bar; born Dunedin, 13 Mar 1920; apprentice machinist; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940; prisoner of war, 3 Oct 1943.

³ Flight Lieutenant J. D. Rae, DFC and bar; born **Auckland**, 15 Jan 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940; prisoner of war, 22 Aug 1943.

⁴ Flying Officer R. J. Sim; born **Gisborne**, 28 Jun 1919; cost clerk; joined **RNZAF** 26 Oct 1940; killed on air operations, 15 Jun 1943.

⁵ Warrant Officer G. Sole; born **Whakatane**, 7 Apr 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940; killed on air operations, 20 Jan 1944.

⁶ Squadron Leader J. G. West, DFM; born **Palmerston North**, 30 Oct 1912; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** 7 May 1940.

Pilot Officer Mitchell ¹ and Sergeant Dickson, ² who had flown their Spitfires off the *Wasp* towards the end of April.

Here is an episode related by Hesselyn which may recapture for the reader some of the atmosphere of the air battles in which these men took part. It was an afternoon in mid-April and heavy raids were falling on the airfields. Pilots on their way to dispersal at Takali had to leap into a crater as bombs screamed down to crash nearby. The raiders passed over and the pilots reached their machines. A few moments later they were ordered off to meet another attack.

We scrambled at three o'clock, climbing south of the island getting to 26,000 feet with the sun behind us. Wood called up and said: 'Hello Mac. There's a big plot building up but its taking time to come south. Keep your present angels and save your gravy. I will tell you when to come in.' We stooged around until he gave us the word. Then we sailed in

Suddenly, glancing behind, I saw four 109s coming down on me. Three of them overshot. The fourth made his turn too wide and I got inside him. I was slightly below when I attacked from 200 yards, firing perhaps 20 feet ahead of him in the hope that his aircraft and my bullets would arrive at that spot simultaneously. They did. I kept on firing as I was determined to make certain of him. He caught fire. Black smoke poured out, he rolled on his back and went into a vertical dive and straight into the drink.

As he crashed it struck me suddenly that there might be something on my tail. In my excitement I had forgotten to look but luckily none of the other 109s had dived down on me. Wood now reported that the 88s were diving on Takali, and I pulled up to 10,000 feet. The next instant the 88s were diving past my nose and the other boys were coming down from above to attack them. I picked out one and went for him and as I pressed my gun button his rear gunner opened fire. I had fired for about a second when my port cannon packed up. Luckily I was travelling fast. This prevented my aircraft from slewing from the recoil of my starboard cannon as I was able to correct with rudder. I concentrated on the 88's starboard motor and wing root and could see my shells hitting. Bits were flying off him and flames began spreading as he continued in his dive; he was well ablaze when he crashed.

Returning to land I had my first experience of being beaten up in the circuit. A great pall of smoke and dust from the bombing was hanging over Takali. I made a couple of dummy runs over the airfield and could see that the landing path was well cratered. Just then I sighted six 109s above at 5,000 feet, waiting to pounce. The other boys were kicking about the circuit waiting to try and get in. I beetled up Imtafa valley,

skipped round some windmills at the top and swung down a valley on the other side. Again and again the 109s dived down from above and attacked me. Again and again I thanked my stars that the 'Spit' was such a manoeuvrable aircraft. Each time I was attacked I turned violently and their shells and bullets whipped past behind me. It was a nerve-racking business. With all the violent turning

¹ Pilot Officer H. R. Mitchell; born Deep Creek, [Marlborough](#), 13 Mar 1917; stonemason; joined [RNZAF](#) 17 Dec 1939; killed on air operations, 12 May 1942.

² Flight Lieutenant G. R. Dickson; born [Riverton](#), 2 Mar 1920; salesman; joined [RNZAF](#) 22 Dec 1940.

and twisting I began to feel very sick. My neck ached from constantly twisting from side to side, looking back and from holding it up while doing tight turns against the extra gravity force. Eventually Mac said that we were to go in and he would cover us.

I started a normal circuit about 300 feet above the airfield, put my wheels and flaps down, did weaving approach and, as my wheels touched ground felt a sigh of relief. I taxied to my pen, forgetting to put up my flaps. All I could do when I got there was to lie back in the cockpit and gasp for breath. The ground crew had to help me out of my aircraft and, dazed and dizzy, I groped my way along the wing out of my pen.

I met Laddie as I was wandering over to dispersal. Both our tunics were soaked with perspiration. We looked up to see how Mac was getting on. He was making his approach about 50 feet up when suddenly two 109s darted out of the sun. Their shooting, however, was poor and whipping up his wheels Mac turned sharply into them. The 109s overshot him, carried on and beat up the aerodrome. Mac made a quick dart, put down his wheels and managed to get in. He landed with two gallons of petrol—at the pace we were using it, sufficient fuel for only another two minutes in the air. I had had five gallons; the others about

the same.

Night-fighter patrols, bombing and photographic reconnaissance missions were also flown by New Zealanders during these months. The battle in **Malta**'s night skies was less spectacular and usually less rewarding than that fought by day, but Flight Lieutenant Hayton ¹ showed remarkable skill as a night-fighter pilot; in just over three months he intercepted and shot down four enemy bombers and probably destroyed two more. In the field of reconnaissance Flying Officer Coldbeck ² did fine work as pilot of a photographic Spitfire; in June, when an attempt was made to run a convoy from **Alexandria** to **Malta**, he made frequent sorties over the main naval base at **Taranto**, keeping watch on the **Italian Fleet**; and that same month Squadron Leader A. H. Harding captained a radar-equipped aircraft which watched the ports of **Naples** and **Palermo** by night.

Squadron Leader F. J. Steele, Flight Lieutenant Blundell ³ and Flying Officer Grey ⁴ won special commendation for their work with the few Wellington bombers that remained at **Malta**. Steele, who had already completed a tour of operations over **Europe** as a bomber captain, now flew another twenty-six missions against targets in **Italy** and **Libya**; Blundell, likewise on his second tour—he was a veteran not only of **Germany** but also of **Crete** and the **Benghazi** 'mail-run'—was an outstanding navigator who, in addition to flying in raids on **Naples**, **Taranto**, **Cagliari** and **Messina**, did excellent work as navigation officer

¹ Flight Lieutenant G. McL. Hayton, DFC; born **Hawera**, 12 May 1917; farmhand; joined **RAF** Jun 1939; died of wounds as a result of enemy action at sea, 20 Oct 1942.

² Flight Lieutenant H. G. Coldbeck, DFC; born **Christchurch**, 27 Nov 1916; house decorator; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; prisoner of war, 10 Nov 1942.

³ Flight Lieutenant H. N. Blundell, DFC; born **Wellington**, 31

May 1911; newspaper editor; joined **RNZAF** 14 Jan 1940.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant J. G. Grey, DFC and bar; born Dunedin, 21 Dec 1917; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940.

and bombing leader with his No. 104 Squadron. Grey achieved a fine record as a pilot with the same unit; after one raid on **Naples**, he had the not uncommon experience of returning with one engine out of action to find his airfield being bombed by the enemy, but he landed safely although only the barest minimum of light was showing on the ground. On another mission to attack a supply dump near **Tripoli**, the weather in that area was appalling and his was one of the only three aircraft which found and successfully attacked the target; aircraft from another squadron which arrived some hours later when the weather had cleared found it a mass of flames. Such was the spirit shown by these bomber men who, night after night under most difficult conditions, continued to operate from the battered airfields.

There were other ways in which New Zealanders served **Malta** at this time. The Battle of **Britain** pilot, Wing Commander J. S. McLean, ¹ despatched the reinforcement Spitfires from the **United States** carrier *Wasp*, aboard which he was spending a period of duty as it shuttled between **Gibraltar** and the flying-off position south of **Sardinia**; previously some fighters had been lost, but by carefully reducing the aircraft weight and increasing the petrol tankage, McLean made the new arrangements work smoothly and successfully. On **Malta** itself Wing Commander Bloxam, as operations officer at Luqa, did much towards keeping the bomber airfield in action despite the incessant damage; it needs little imagination to realise what this meant in terms of rain and mud, bomb craters, unexploded bombs, bogged aircraft and inadequate equipment; and there were always the reinforcement aircraft to pass through to Egypt. Mention must also be made here of the work of Flight Lieutenant R. D. Daniell, who flew Dakota transport aircraft between Egypt and **Malta** carrying in supplies and taking out sick or injured civilians. In one month two Dakotas brought out more than a thousand

passengers, most of them women and children. To **Malta** they carried hundreds of pounds of supplies above their authorised load, including parcels from the **New Zealand Club** in **Cairo**, and such small comforts as were obtainable in **Egypt**—notably cigarettes, of which No. 117 Transport Squadron had given up their ration to a man for distribution by a padre in **Malta**.

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In the high summer of 1942, **Malta** daily expected invasion. But enemy operations against the island were always strongly influenced by events in North Africa, and towards the end of June, following

¹ Wing Commander J. S. McLean, OBE, DFC; **RAF**; born **Hawera**, 19 Feb 1912; law clerk; joined **RAF** Sep 1932; commanded No. **111 Sqdn** 1941; Wing Leader, North Weald, 1941; commanded **RAF Station**, **Hunsdon**, 1941–42; **RAF Station**, **Catterick**, 1943; staff duty, Organisation, No. 10 Fighter Group, 1944; commanded **RAF Station**, **Predannack**, 1945.

Rommel's rapid advance and swift capture of **Tobruk**, the enemy decided to change his plans—with far-reaching results.

The original design had been for Rommel to pause on the Egyptian frontier while **Malta** was invaded and captured; but Rommel was now eager to press on to **Alexandria**. **Hitler** supported him and **Mussolini**, although somewhat concerned at ' **Malta**'s active revival', agreed that 'the historic moment to conquer **Egypt** had now come and must be exploited.' Accordingly, the invasion of **Malta** was postponed and, instead, **Kesselring** was ordered to keep her subdued so that Rommel's supply lines would be safeguarded. **Kesselring** was alarmed at the change of plan and pointed out the dangers of Rommel's 'foolhardy enterprise', but Rommel had his way.

So it came about that, in the opening days of July 1942, **Malta** was spared from invasion only to come once more under very heavy air

attack. Kesselring now had some five hundred fighters and bombers at his disposal and in the first fortnight of July they flew about one thousand sorties against the island. Many times the attacks struck home against the airfields which were their main objective, but the enemy planes were given a hot reception by our anti-aircraft batteries, while the Spitfires by day and the Beaufighters by night shot down an increasing number. At the height of the attack six raiders were destroyed and nine damaged within an hour. That day the enemy control in **Sicily** was heard calling: 'Look after that bomber in the sea.' 'Which one?' answered one of their fighter pilots.

By 14 July the new assault on **Malta** had cost Kesselring forty-four aircraft, of which thirty-three were bombers. **Malta's** fighter losses for the same period were thirty-nine from which, thanks in large part to the fine work of the **Air-Sea Rescue Service**, twenty-six pilots survived to fight again. By mid-July the German attack had begun to weaken.

At this stage Air Vice-Marshal Park took over the air command at **Malta**. Thoroughly experienced in leading a vigorous fighter defence, he at once introduced a system of forward interception similar to that which he had employed so successfully in the Battle of **Britain**. Previously, because of the Hurricane's slow rate of climb, pilots had been compelled, when warned of the enemy's approach from the north, to gain height to the south of the island and then return to engage the attackers as they swept in across the coast. But Park felt that with the advent of the latest Spitfires in considerable numbers 'the time had come to put an end to the bombing of our airfields in daylight.' Accordingly he ordered his pilots to gain height while approaching the enemy and to intercept not over the island but as far north as possible. This scheme was an instant success, and in addition to continued slaughter of the enemy, there was a most welcome reduction in the proportion of bombs falling on **Malta**. Indeed, it was not long before the enemy was driven to adopt the same tactics as in the closing stages of the Battle of **Britain**—high-level fighter and fighter-bomber sweeps which kept the defences at full stretch but accomplished little else.

Having thus gained the initiative, Park was determined to hold it. At the beginning of August he told his fighter leaders: 'Because our Spitfires, using the forward plan of interception, have recently stopped daylight raids it does not mean that only fighter sweeps are likely to be encountered over or near **Malta** in the future. Any sign of defensive tactics by our fighters will encourage the enemy to reintroduce bombers or fighter-bombers. Therefore, the more aggressively our fighters are employed the better will **Malta** be defended against daylight bombing.' But Park's concern was not only for **Malta**'s defence. And as far as conditions allowed, he sent his Beauforts and Wellingtons out to attack with torpedo and bomb; their operations soon proved highly profitable.

But to sustain this offensive and, at the same time, maintain **Malta**'s hard-won air superiority, petrol was urgently needed. Indeed, despite deliveries by aircraft and submarine, the island was again in desperate need of supplies; food was still very scarce and bread strictly rationed. Accordingly, another convoy began to fight its way through from **Gibraltar** early in August. This time **Malta**'s aircraft were able to make a larger contribution to its passage, but before the convoy came within their range it suffered severely at the hands of enemy bombers and torpedo-bombers from **Sardinia** and **Sicily**. Of fourteen merchant ships only five, including the crippled tanker *Ohio*, which was towed in with decks awash, finally reached **Malta**. Forty-one enemy aircraft were shot down but, in addition to the cargo ships sunk, we lost the aircraft carrier *Eagle*, two cruisers, a destroyer and eighteen aircraft. At this high cost, **Malta** received a new lease of life.

With some three months' petrol now in hand, Park at once stepped up the attack on the enemy's ports and airfields and, more particularly, against his shipping; for with Rommel's armies now threatening Egypt at **El Alamein**, it was essential to do everything possible to disrupt their long and vulnerable supply lines.

The torpedo-carrying Beauforts had remarkable success with their gallant low-level attacks. In three weeks they hit four large cargo ships,

two of which were sunk, one left a blazing wreck and the fourth later beached; they also torpedoed two tankers, one of which blew up, throwing the superstructure high in the air, and the other was afterwards found beached and the surrounding sea covered with oil. In September over 120 sorties were flown from **Malta** against enemy ships, and these, in conjunction with others flown from Egypt and the patrols of our submarines, took increasing toll of the supply convoys.



ITALY

The enemy soon began to feel the effect of this onslaught. ‘Rommel is halted in Egypt because of lack of fuel,’ Ciano wrote in his diary. ‘Three of our tankers have been sunk in two days.’ And Admiral Weichold records: ‘The situation was becoming serious at the front the soldiers of the **Afrika Korps** fought and conquered but far from the decisive areas of the land fighting, the British were systematically throttling the supplies of the German-Italian Panzer Army. In September shipping losses were again very high, with 23,000 tons sunk and over 9,000 tons damaged.’ In October ‘practically every one of our convoys was spotted by the British air reconnaissance from **Malta** and successfully attacked. Of shipping proceeding to North **Africa**, 24,000 tons were lost and over 14,000 tons damaged—an enormous blow to the Italian Transport Fleet. Of the 32,000 tons of German cargo and 940 vehicles, only 19,000 tons and 580 vehicles reached North Africa. The

loss of fuel was even greater; of almost 10,000 tons, only 3,300 tons reached **Cyrenaica**.'

All this was undoubtedly a major contribution to Rommel's defeat at **El Alamein**.

Meanwhile, vigorous fighter action from **Malta** had led to a further decrease in enemy air activity. In September the number of alerts fell to thirty-eight and on ten days no enemy aircraft at all approached the island; at night few bombers got close enough to attack, the rest being forced to drop their bombs in the sea. But as **Malta**'s renewed striking power made itself felt, **Hitler** was compelled to order another blitz against the obstinate island and once again Kesselring assembled a large force of fighters and bombers in **Sicily**.

The new and, as it proved, final assault on **Malta** began on 10 October 1942. It met with little success. Time and again the enemy formations which, significantly enough, now consisted of a few bombers heavily escorted by fighters, were met and broken up well to the north of the island. After ten days of constant attacks, during which forty-six German aircraft were shot down, Kesselring withdrew his Ju88 bombers from the battle and thereafter the attacks gradually fell away. By the end of October, they had practically ceased.

At the height of the assault some bombs fell on **Malta**'s airfields every day, but they were never put out of action for long. Reconnaissance aircraft continued their sorties without interruption and there was only one night when the bombers failed to take off against enemy shipping; and that was a night on which there were no targets within range of **Malta**. Such was the measure of the enemy's failure. Far from knocking **Malta** out, he had suffered damaging losses and between five hundred and six hundred aircraft had been kept tied down in **Sicily** at a time when they might have helped him more on other fronts.

New Zealand fighter pilots continued to play their part in patrol and attack. Two of them, Flying Officer Stenborg ¹ and Sergeant Park, ² were

among **Malta**'s highest scoring pilots at this time. Stenborg landed on **Malta** from the carrier *Eagle* early in June, went into action immediately and within two months had destroyed six Messerschmitts. Twice he achieved the unusual feat of shooting down two enemy fighters in one flight. He was finally shot down himself but miraculously survived. Flung from his Spitfire at 13,000 feet while travelling at over 400 miles an hour, he landed in the sea five miles from **Malta** and was picked up by a rescue launch. Here is his account of that harrowing experience:

I was with an American sergeant flying at 31,000 feet. He saw Messerschmitts which I could not, so I told him to attack and I would follow, but as he went for six Huns, three more followed him up.

I shot down one from his tail at point-blank range, but the next minute a great chunk flew off my starboard wing. I heard explosions and the plane shook everywhere and black smoke poured into the cockpit. I began diving out of control at 27,000 feet.

I tried to get the hood off, but it would not budge. I tried all ways, while the Spitfire fell 14,000 feet at over 400 miles an hour, and the cockpit filled with smoke. I thought I had had it. It was a horrible feeling; I was expecting the plane to blow up at any moment. But fortunately the hood came off, and I suddenly found myself thrown out. I had seen a German pilot open his parachute at that speed and his harness was ripped off by the force of the sheer speed, so I waited for a while before pulling the ripcord in order to slow up, and then I pulled the cord and landed in the sea.

I spent five minutes trying to get free from the parachute and get the dinghy working. That trip shook me to the teeth.

Sergeant Park arrived in **Malta** in mid-July at the same time as his namesake and commanding officer, Sir Keith Park. In the air battles of the next three months, he shot down eight enemy aircraft, shared in the destruction of another and damaged two more. Park was frequently in

action during the heavy fighting in October. On the 12th, he reported three successful encounters. The first came shortly after dawn while he was on patrol with two other Spitfires from his squadron. Sighting a formation of seven Ju88 bombers, they made a head-on attack; Park shot one down and then, despite the efforts of the escorting German and Italian fighters, he turned and destroyed a second. On patrol again a few hours afterwards he attacked and damaged another bomber. And two days later he almost certainly destroyed a Messerschmitt and damaged a Ju88. That these successes were by no means easily won is shown by his report of a subsequent encounter:

¹ Flight Lieutenant G. Stenborg, DFC; born **Auckland**, 13 Oct 1921; joined **RNZAF** 9 Jul 1940; killed on air operations, 24 Sep 1943.

² Pilot Officer N. M. Park, DFM; born **Gisborne**, 6 Mar 1921; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** 3 May 1941; killed on air operations, 25 Oct 1942.

We were patrolling at 21,000 feet, 20 miles north-east of Grand Harbour, when we sighted nine Junkers 88 with a swarm of fighters heading south. We turned into the attack, Red I and myself going into the bombers. I got on one bomber's tail, but my guns had frozen so I broke away, and after shaking off two attacking Messerschmitt 109s, I dived away down to 10,000 feet. On hearing the Ground Controller broadcast the height and position of the bombers, I went east to Kalafrana Bay, where the bombers were seen heading back to the north-east. I tried to intercept them, but was jumped by two M.E. 109s. I turned quickly to avoid, and after a complete turn got on a Messerschmitt's tail. I closed in without opening fire to about 100 yards, when he changed his turn and I gave him a three-second burst from dead astern. He went into a steep dive straight into the sea.

Unhappily, Park was lost in battle with a large formation of enemy fighters towards the end of October.

Other Spitfire pilots prominent in the air fighting during these months were Flying Officer Lattimer, ¹ Flight Sergeant Brough ² and Sergeants Philp, ³ Hendry ⁴ and Yeatman. ⁵ During these months Lattimer was credited with the destruction of four enemy planes and damage to others; while taking part in the patrols that were flown to cover the arrival of the crippled tanker *Ohio*, Philp shot down one Ju87 dive-bomber and shared in the destruction of another. Hendry and Yeatman each reported successful combats during the October fighting. It is also interesting to record that the fighter airfield at Hal Far from which many of our pilots operated was commanded throughout the second half of 1942 by Wing Commander Dawson, ⁶ himself an experienced fighter pilot, who had led Hurricanes in sweeps over **France** and had also made special low-level reconnaissances over enemy territory from **Malta**.

Operating against enemy shipping with a Beaufort squadron, Pilot Officer Low ⁷ flew twenty-three sorties as wireless operator—air gunner during his tour of duty at **Malta**. On one occasion a flight of his squadron was sent against a convoy of four merchant vessels and eleven destroyers, escorted by Italian fighters. Three of the fighters attacked his Beaufort during its final approach to release the torpedo, but Low's fire-control orders from his vantage point in the mid-upper turret enabled the attacks to be beaten off and the torpedo hit a merchant

¹ Flight Lieutenant C. H. Lattimer, DFC; born South Shields, County Durham, 21 Feb 1915; electrical engineer; joined **RNZAF** 27 Oct 1940.

² Squadron Leader E. T. Brough, DFC; born Owaka, 20 Jun 1918; butcher; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941; commanded No. 137 Sqdn 1944.

³ Flying Officer G. Philp; born **Wellington**, 4 Apr 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941; killed on air operations, 14 Jan 1944.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant R. B. Hendry, DFC; born Masterton, 2 Aug 1920; clerk; joined RNZAF May 1941.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant J. F. P. Yeatman, DFC; born Brighton, England, 17 Feb 1919; clerk; joined RNZAF 23 Mar 1941.

⁶ Wing Commander H. L. Dawson, DFC; RAF (retd); born Ellerslie, Auckland, 19 Feb 1914; joined RAF 1934; commanded RAF Station, Hal Far, Malta, 1942–43; served with D of AT, Air Ministry, 1943–44.

⁷ Flying Officer J. H. Low, DFC; born Bluff, 6 Apr 1918; railway porter; joined RNZAF 24 Nov 1940; accidentally killed in New Zealand, 24 Mar 1944.

vessel. Sergeants A. R. Brown, ¹ Parker, ² Scullin ³ and Wilkinson ⁴ flew on similar operations with the Beauforts, while on reconnaissance for targets Flying Officer Coldbeck and Sergeant Gillions ⁵ did particularly good work as pilots of photographic Spitfires.

An amazing experience, unique in the air war, was shared by Brown and Wilkinson towards the end of July 1942. The Beaufort in which they were wireless operator-air gunners was hit during an attack on a convoy off the west coast of Greece and forced to land on the sea. It sank quickly but the crew managed to climb into their dinghy and began paddling towards the coast. Presently an Italian Cant float plane alighted on the sea near them. The Beaufort pilot, South African Lieutenant E. T. Strever, swam over to it and was received with brandy and cigarettes; shortly afterwards the rest of his crew were picked up and treated likewise, then the Cant taxied slowly to a harbour in the island of Corfu. Here the prisoners were taken to a camp, where the Italians again showed them every consideration, and an excellent dinner was followed by a lively party in the evening and comfortable beds in rooms vacated by Italian officers.

The next morning their captors informed them they would be taken to **Italy** by air. At this their hearts sank for this mode of transport offered no chance of escape. The only possibility, they decided, was to capture the plane; but how this was to be done no one knew.

Down at the harbour, their aircraft proved to be the same Cant with its crew of four, together with a corporal escort carrying a revolver. The plane took off and set course westwards; and for a while the flight proceeded uneventfully. Then suddenly Wilkinson saw an opportunity. Attracting the observer's attention, he hit him heavily on the jaw, jumped over his falling body and seized the astonished escort's revolver. Passing this to Strever he moved towards the pilot, using the corporal as shield. Strever followed close behind brandishing the revolver at the pilot, who attempted to draw his own gun and put the aircraft down on the water but, threatened again, he levelled out the aircraft and submitted to capture. Meanwhile Brown and his English navigator had disarmed and tied up the other Italians with their own belts; Strever now took over the controls.

¹ Warrant Officer A. R. Brown, DFC; born **Timaru**, 5 Sep 1915; labourer; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

² Warrant Officer C. L. Parker; born **New Plymouth**, 20 Dec 1918; carpenter; joined **RNZAF** 21 Dec 1940; prisoner of war, 20 Aug 1942.

³ Warrant Officer P. P. Scullin; born **Napier**, 9 May 1918; salesman; joined **RNZAF** 21 Dec 1940; prisoner of war, 20 Aug 1942.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant J. A. Wilkinson, DFM; born **Gisborne**, 8 Nov 1919; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

⁵ Warrant Officer F. R. S. Gillions; born **London**, 19 Jul 1916; stores clerk; joined **RNZAF** 18 Feb 1941; prisoner of war, 19 Sep

The next problem was how to fly a strange aircraft without knowledge of its instruments, so they put the Italian second-pilot at the controls and set a rough course for **Malta**. At length they recognised the toe of **Italy** and, taking a chance in the matter of petrol, ordered the pilot to turn south for **Malta**. Eventually the island was sighted, but as the float plane came in low, three Spitfires swept down upon it. All efforts to explain the situation, including the waving of the navigator's singlet, proved unavailing, and when a stream of bullets poured through the wing Strever decided that the time had come to put down on the water. As the Cant landed, its engines spluttered and stopped from lack of petrol. It remained only for the captives, now turned captors, to climb out and signal frantically to the Spitfires, and before long a launch appeared to tow them in.

The British crew, feeling a little conscience-stricken at the way they had repaid the Italians' hospitality, could only offer their apologies and do all they could for the comfort of their captives. The latter cheerfully accepted the situation although they had, in fact, been proceeding on leave to the mainland—one of them even produced a bottle of wine which he insisted on sharing with the men who had so neatly turned the tables on him and his comrades.

* * * * *

Malta now emerged triumphant from her long ordeal. For the victory of Park and his men in the October fighting had been decisive and the Germans, faced with a heavy Allied offensive from Egypt and a simultaneous attack from **Algeria**, could no longer spare forces to launch another assault. On 16 November 1942, a convoy sailed from Egypt to relieve the island. It was covered by aircraft of the **Desert Air Force** operating from their newly captured bases in **Cyrenaica**, and although attacked by torpedo-bombers during the passage across, it reached the approaches to **Malta** intact. Beaufighters and Spitfires flew out to cover

the last 135 miles of the convoy's voyage and Wellingtons bombed the Sicilian airfields during its approach. The long line of ships entering Grand Harbour presented an easy target for enemy bombers; but none came. On every vantage point and amid the debris of their bombed buildings, the people and garrison stood to watch and cheer these ships. Naval bands played on the escort vessels. And during the following days the unloading proceeded uninterrupted, save for the sound of the Spitfires patrolling above. The relief had arrived none too soon for Park's squadrons were reduced to about a week's supply of aviation petrol; apart from this, near-starvation, disease, infantile paralysis and all the after-effects of undernourishment were to be found in **Malta** in the autumn of 1942.

The advent of fresh supplies enabled Park to intensify the air offensive and give full support to the campaigns in **Cyrenaica** and in **Algeria**. More Wellingtons and Beaufighters arrived and Spitfires, adapted by local ingenuity to carry two 250 Ib. bombs beneath their wings, were now employed as fighter-bombers. On the night of 7 November, the Wellingtons struck at Cagliari airfield as a diversion for the initial landings in **Algeria**; thereafter they operated on every night except four in November and every night except seven in December, in spite of a good deal of bad weather towards the end of the year. Their principal targets were the enemy's ports and airfields in **Tunisia** and his air bases in **Sicily** and **Sardinia**, most of which were near enough for the bombers to make two sorties each on many nights. Substantial damage was done to port installations, railways, stores, petrol dumps and airfields—and photographic reconnaissance revealed that on several days in November the chief German air base at El Aouina in **Tunisia** was out of action because of the many craters in the landing area.

The Beaufighters operated with increasing success. Sweeping over the area bounded by **Tunis**, **Sirte** and **Tripoli**, they attacked shipping with bomb, cannon and machine gun; they also strafed aerodromes, shot up trains and transport columns and, in company with Spitfires, intercepted enemy air convoys on their way to and from **Africa**. One day

early in December six Beaufighters and eight Spitfires on a sweep off Pantellaria sighted two large formations of Ju52 transports escorted by Ju88s and Me110s. The Spitfires took on the escort and, having shot down four of them, overtook the transports and destroyed two, probably destroyed another and damaged two more. Meanwhile the Beaufighters had shot down no fewer than six Ju52s and damaged four more. An Me110 which came up to see what was happening was promptly shot down by the Spitfires; we lost only one Beaufighter, with two others and a Spitfire damaged. Altogether, during November and December, the Beaufighters and Spitfires destroyed over fifty transport aircraft in the air and many others on the ground.

Spitfire bombers, which had been prevented from operating by the shortage of fuel, began harassing attacks on Sicilian aerodromes towards the end of November; by the end of the following month they had flown a total of 133 sorties, bombing and strafing airfield buildings and grounded aircraft at Comiso, Gela and Lampedusa. And along with this mounting offensive both by bombers and fighters, the reconnaissance aircraft kept up their valuable sorties over enemy airfields, ports and naval bases, while the torpedo-bombers—Beauforts by day and Wellingtons by night—continued their highly effective attacks on enemy ships.

Malta's efforts to help others did not pass unnoticed. During November, Eisenhower was 'most grateful for splendid support afforded by air operations from **Malta**', and Montgomery later paid high tribute to Park and his men for 'the great assistance rendered to the Eighth Army during the advance along the African Desert.'

With the early months of 1943, **Malta** swung more and more over to the attack. Convoys were now arriving steadily with war material and enemy air activity had fallen away so much that it was quite an event when a few Messerschmitts flew high over the coast. Fighters, bombers and fighter-bombers ranged out in greater strength to strike at the enemy over a wide area; they bombed and machine-gunned his ports and airfields; they attacked his ships both in harbour and at sea; they strafed

his columns on the coast road between **Tripoli** and **Tunis**; and they shot up railways in **Sicily** and **Italy**.

This last activity grew in importance as the months passed for the enemy relied largely on the railways to run material down to **Sicily**, where it could be loaded on small craft bound for **Tunisia**. The railways which follow the coast southward from **Naples** and **Taranto** to meet opposite the Messina train ferry, and the railway leading westward along the north coast of **Sicily** to Palermo, became a happy hunting ground for Mosquitos, Beaufighters and Spitfires. And the results of their attacks were quite spectacular. In January, fourteen locomotives were reported destroyed or severely damaged; in February there were thirty; and in March the figure rose to seventy-four, permanently or temporarily out of action. Reconnaissance aircraft also maintained a high level of activity, keeping watch on all enemy movements, on his embarkation ports and the routes by which he attempted to run supplies to North **Africa**. For it was on the information brought back by the photographic Spitfires and Baltimores that the striking forces were briefed.

In the months of January, February and March, **Malta's** bombers and torpedo-bombers claimed nine vessels sunk, fourteen probably sunk and many others damaged. A typical strike was made in mid- March when a reconnaissance **Baltimore** sighted a southbound convoy, with a destroyer escort, in the Gulf of **Taranto**. Nine Beauforts, escorted by Beaufighters, were briefed to attack, and some five hours later found the convoy protected by about fifteen Me110s and Ju88s. While the Beaufighters engaged the air escort, the Beauforts went for the largest vessel, a tanker of about 8000 tons. Three hits were seen, a column of water and a cloud of smoke rose from the ship and more smoke poured from its decks. A **Baltimore** sent to photograph the results of the action could find nothing except a Ju88 and a twin-engined flying-boat circling a patch of oil, a quarter of a mile in diameter.

In all these various operations New Zealand airmen were well represented. With the Wellington bombers, Wing Commander J. E. S.

Morton, Flight Lieutenant McLachlan ¹ and Flying Officer A. B. Smith of No. 40 Squadron, together with Flight Lieutenant H. H. Beale, Flight Sergeant Sommerville ² and Sergeant Muggeridge ³ of No. 104 Squadron, all achieved a fine record as captains of aircraft.

Morton, who commanded his squadron at **Malta**, was described as 'one of the outstanding bomber pilots operating from **Malta** at this time.' On one occasion when **Bizerta** was covered with low cloud, he went in below it and, despite searchlights and intense anti-aircraft fire, hit the railway junction by the dockside; on another night he scored a direct hit on a merchant vessel in a small harbour near **Tunis**, his success being confirmed by other aircraft. McLachlan and Smith both made a series of good attacks in the offensive against **Tripoli, Sfax, Sousse, Tunis** and **Bizerta** and on the Sicilian supply ports. Beale, Sommerville and Muggeridge also flew consistently and effectively with their squadron against these targets.

All displayed those essential qualities of a good bomber pilot—careful flight planning, with reliable and steady flying. Nor did they lack courage when the occasion demanded. On the airfield one night Beale drove up to a crashed aircraft which was burning with a bomb load on board, and just before the machine blew up he got a lorry away—for transport of any kind was at a premium on **Malta**. Muggeridge bombed targets on three occasions when his Wellington had already been damaged and he was quite entitled to turn away for base; Sommerville made a particularly determined attack on the port of **Tripoli** in January 1943, despite an unusually intense and accurate barrage of anti-aircraft fire. Also with No. 104 Squadron were Flying Officers R. C. Earl and Parker, ⁴ both of whom captained bomber aircraft, and Flying Officer Peterson, ⁵ who did good work as air gunner and unit gunnery leader.

In the fighter and fighter-bomber missions, Squadron Leader R. M. Mackenzie and his navigator, Flying Officer A. L. Craig, formed a highly successful Beaufighter crew. They flew some of the first intruder sorties over **Sicily** and also carried out a number of shipping patrols. Mackenzie,

who had earlier pioneered Beaufighter operations from Egypt against **Crete** and **Cyrenaica**, commanded the first detachment

¹ Flight Lieutenant L. McLachlan; born Waimate, 30 Nov 1919; farm worker; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941; killed on air operations, 4 Mar 1943.

² Flying Officer R. L. Sommerville, DFM; born Torquay, England, 5 May 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant M. D. Muggeridge, DFM; born Manutahi, 27 Nov 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 24 May 1941.

⁴ Squadron Leader J. C. Parker, DFC and bar; born **Motueka**, 22 Apr 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 22 Dec 1940.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant R. J. Peterson, DFC; born Stratford, 11 Dec 1909; plasterer; joined **RNZAF** 22 Dec 1940.

of his squadron at **Malta**. Flying Officer McGregor ¹ also flew Beaufighters in sweeps over **Sicily** and **Tunisia** at this time.

Squadron Leader Crafts ² led a Spitfire squadron with notable success in attacks on enemy airfields and on Italian railway traffic; Sergeants Houlton, ³ Hendry, Mortimer ⁴ and Pilot Officer Piggott ⁵ also flew Spitfires on many such missions. On one occasion Houlton was returning from an attack on the airfield at Gela in **Sicily** when he sighted a formation of eight Ju52 transports flying about 1000 feet above the sea. He attacked three of the aircraft in turn. The first held its formation but the second was definitely hit and turned back towards **Sicily**; the troops in the third aircraft put up a barrage of small-arms fire from the windows, but Houlton saw his own guns register hits round the pilot's cockpit and when last seen the transport was losing height very close to the sea.

Hendry, Piggott and Mortimer each reported successful actions during a sweep over the **Sicily- Tunis** channel. North of **Cape Bon**, Hendry and Piggott caught an Italian Fiat Br20 bomber at sea level and made a simultaneous attack; both engines were hit and the aircraft immediately plunged into the sea, where it exploded in a sheet of flame. Fifteen minutes later the Spitfires intercepted an aerial train of some thirty transports flying at sea level, escorted by long-range Messerschmitts. Mortimer was engaged by one of the German fighters but he eventually drove it off with black smoke pouring from its starboard engine. Hendry saw a large four-engined Ju90 detach itself from the main body of the transports and climb slowly towards the safety of cloud cover; he overtook it and was able to fire a burst just as it disappeared. Climbing sharply, he picked out the ponderous shape of the Junkers passing below him through breaks in the cloud. He opened fire and scored strikes on the starboard wing, which began to trail black smoke; when he last saw it the transport was steadily losing height.

A less spectacular but most valuable contribution was made by the crews of the Wellington torpedo-bombers now based at **Malta**. These aircraft operated mainly at night against targets that were found and illuminated for them by other Wellingtons equipped with radar and

¹ Flight Lieutenant W. Y. McGregor, DFC; born **Dunedin**, 28 Nov 1916; carpenter; joined **RNZAF** May 1941; killed on air operations, 2 Sep 1943.

² Squadron Leader H. A. Crafts; born **Auckland**, 5 Sep 1917; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** 1 Dec 1940; commanded No. **185 Sqdn, Malta**, 1943.

³ Flight Lieutenant J. A. Houlton, DFC; born **Christchurch**, 23 Sep 1922; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1941.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant J. E. Mortimer, DFC; born **Auckland**, 12 Jul 1916; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941; shot down

over Somme Estuary, 3 Oct 1943; evaded capture for eleven months; reported safe 8 Sep 1944.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant D. A. Piggott; born **Auckland**, 31 May 1921; engineer cadet; joined **RNZAF** 25 May 1941.

carrying flares. Squadron Leader Harding won special commendation for his work as a search pilot and his skilful illumination of shipping, while Flight Sergeant W. Hornung and Sergeant W. A. Fraser did very good work as captains of attacking aircraft.

One night in January 1943, Hornung attacked an enemy cargo vessel of some 4000 tons, escorted by a destroyer; there was a barrage of light anti-aircraft fire from both ships during his attack and breakaway, but at least one of the two torpedoes struck the merchant vessel, which immediately burst into flames.

Fraser had an exceptional fortnight at the beginning of February. On the 2nd, he was despatched against a 6000-ton tanker which two search aircraft had picked up in a convoy off the south-east coast of **Italy**. When he reached the area the illuminating Wellington had only one flare left, and because of the position in which it fell, Fraser had to make a difficult head-on attack in order to silhouette the tanker and avoid the two escorting destroyers. But he managed to release his first torpedo at a range of 700 yards and get away before either destroyer could fire a shot. The tanker caught fire and was subsequently beached. Five days later Fraser shared in seriously damaging a 6000-ton merchant ship. Then, on 15 February, he attacked a second tanker of 5000 tons. It was escorted by two destroyers and intense anti-aircraft fire damaged the Wellington and wounded one of the crew, but Fraser had the satisfaction of seeing his torpedo strike the tanker amidships.

During the spring and early summer of 1943, Park's squadrons continued the offensive with increasing vigour. They played an important part in the short but fiercely contested campaign in **Tunisia**

which came in April as the **Eighth Army** advance from **Libya** linked up with that of the Anglo-American armies from **Algeria**. Simultaneously, they were making intensive preparations for the assault on **Sicily**. For **Malta** was soon to enjoy the sweet revenge of acting as a stepping-stone for the invasion of that island which had tormented her for so long; and she would also help with the landings in **Italy**.

By the end of May 1943, there were 600 first-line aircraft at **Malta** as against 200 only six months previously; among the new arrivals that month were four whole Spitfire wings and more Mosquito and Beaufighter squadrons. New landing grounds—one of them built in the record time of twenty-eight days—had been blasted out of rock and old airfields greatly enlarged to take the expanding air force. New operations room and additional signals facilities had been provided and the island restocked with technical spares, fuel and other equipment. Thus equipped and armed, **Malta** dominated the central **Mediterranean** and provided a forward striking base for the coming invasion of **Italy** by the Allied forces.

So the wheel turned full circle. And, in September 1943, by which time **Sicily** had been conquered and **Italy** invaded, they paused to remember. That month 'Faith', the sole survivor of the three original Gladiator fighters which had faced the first onslaught of the Italian **Air Force**, was brought from the bottom of a quarry where she had lain for nearly three years and, with appropriate ceremony, presented to the people of **Malta** by Air Marshal Sir Keith Park. And there, in honoured place, she stands today, a symbol of the courage and fortitude with which the long battle of **Malta** was fought.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 7 – SICILY

CHAPTER 7

Sicily

LESS than two months after the Allied triumph in **Tunisia** came the first full-scale assault against European soil with the invasion of **Sicily**. This great enterprise was the culmination of preparations which had gone ahead since the Casablanca Conference of January 1943. Confident of an early conclusion to the North African campaign, the Combined Chiefs of Staff had then agreed that **Sicily**, the stepping-stone between **Tunisia** and **Italy**, should be invaded during 'the favourable period of the July moon.' There was little chance that the Allies would be ready to invade the Continent from the **United Kingdom** before 1944 and operations against **Sicily** offered an opportunity of using the forces concentrated in North Africa to the best advantage. The main prize to be won was the complete reopening of the Mediterranean sea routes to Allied shipping. In addition, new air bases would be secured from which to attack the southern flank of **Europe**, the threat to **Italy** would be increased and a proportion of enemy strength drawn away from the Russian front.

In planning the invasion of **Sicily**, the Combined Allied Staff at **Algiers** had to consider matters of geography before deciding on the strength of the attack, its timing and its exact location. The island itself has been compared to a 'jagged arrow-head with the broken point to the West.' Its terrain is favourable to defence. There are many peaks of over 3000 feet which dominate a series of plains, of which the largest, to the south and west of **Catania**, is overlooked by the volcano of **Etna**. Around the coast, except for a short strip in the north, there runs a narrow belt of low country through which passes a highway which encircles the island. There are four main ports, Messina in the north-east, Palermo in the north-west, **Catania** and Syracuse in the east. Early in 1943 there were nineteen airfields on the island; by July this number had risen to thirty. They were in three main groups: the eastern group between **Catania** and Gerbini, the south-east group at Comiso-Biscari-Ponte Olivo, and the western group at and about Castelvetro. The best-equipped was that at **Catania-Gerbini**, where most of the *Luftwaffe*

was located. Occupation of this group would allow Allied aircraft to cover the **Messina Straits** and would prevent the enemy air forces from maintaining themselves on the island. They would then be driven back to the nearest large airfields in **Italy**, at **Naples** and **Brindisi**.

How to achieve the early capture of ports and at the same time secure some of the main airfields was the question upon which all else depended. Messina, the largest port, was quickly ruled out for it was beyond the range of fighters stationed in **Malta** and **Tunisia**, was difficult to approach from the sea and, moreover, was heavily defended. **Catania** was at extreme fighter range, but its early capture would provide the key to the eastern group of airfields. However, its unloading facilities were only sufficient to maintain a maximum of six divisions, so it was considered necessary to secure Palermo as well. Montgomery disliked the dispersion this involved and urged that the assault should fall entirely on the east coast of **Sicily**. But this suggestion conflicted with the need to secure as many airfields as possible at an early stage. Eventually General Alexander, who regarded the air situation as of first importance, decided that the **Eighth Army** under General Montgomery and the Seventh Army under General Patton should assault side by side in the south-east of the island along a front of one hundred miles between Syracuse and Licata. The important airfield centre at Ponte Olivo would thus soon be captured, and once the ports of Syracuse and Augusta were taken they could be used to maintain the **Eighth Army**; the Americans, however, would be dependent on what could be brought in over open beaches, except for the limited capacity of the small port of Licata. Two things in favour of the Allies in this undertaking were the expectation of good weather for beach maintenance and the possession of an amphibious vehicle, the DUKW, better known as 'The Duck'. The great faith placed in this new invention was quickly justified for it was to revolutionise the problems of beach maintenance.

The final plan for Operation HUSKY, as the invasion was known, was approved by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 13 May, the day which brought the end of hostilities in **Tunisia**. The operation was to be divided

into five phases. First of all there would be the preparatory measures to gain air supremacy and counter enemy naval effort. Then would follow the seaborne assault, assisted by airborne landings to seize adjacent airfields and the ports of Syracuse and Licata. The third phase would be the establishing of a firm base from which to launch ground attacks against Augusta, Catania and the Gerbini group of airfields. The fourth phase was the capture of these objectives and the last the complete reduction of the island. The whole operation would be under the control of General Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander; General Alexander was to command the ground forces engaged, Air Chief Marshal Tedder would command the combined air forces and Admiral Cunningham the naval forces.

In Tedder's air command, Major-General Carl Spaatz was in charge of the North-west African Air Force, taking a direct part in the invasion, and Air Vice-Marshal Sir Keith Park was in command at Malta. The North-west African Tactical Air Force was led by Sir Arthur Coningham, with a United States major-general as his deputy. Coningham's command comprised the Desert Air Force, Twelfth Support Command and the newly constituted Tactical Bombing Force. Thus he had under his control all those Allied air forces destined to appear over the Sicilian battlefields in immediate or close support of the armies. The North-west African Strategic Air Force, under General Doolittle, was made up of two United States bombardment wings and the Wellingtons of No. 205 Group, Royal Air Force. Allied sea communications were protected by the North-west African Coastal Air Force under Air Vice-Marshal Sir Hugh P. Lloyd. Finally there were the Dakotas of United States Troop Carrier Command and a photo-reconnaissance wing. Altogether a total of 267 squadrons were available to take part in the invasion, of which 146 were American and 121 British. The Americans had the preponderance of heavy and medium bombers and transport aircraft while the RAF was stronger in fighters and fighter bombers.

Malta was the base for a formidable part of this concentration of Allied air power. No longer a beleaguered fortress but an offensive base

packed with aircraft, the island was now capable of sustained fighter operations in preparation for the invasion, and subsequently in protection of the assault convoys and the landing beaches. Work had proceeded apace in improving the island's existing air facilities. Great quantities of stores had been brought in; a fighter operations room to handle thirty squadrons had been tunnelled underground, a new filter room built and an up-to-date radar system installed. This transformation at **Malta** was largely due to the energy and drive of Park, and by the time of the invasion he controlled over 600 aircraft, mostly fighters, based at **Malta**, Gozo and Pantellaria.

Opposing the total Allied strength of almost 5000 serviceable aircraft there was a mixed German and Italian force of some 1800 machines, of which approximately 1000 were serviceable at the beginning of July. They were based in **Italy**, **Sicily**, **Sardinia** and the south of **France**. The Germans had now reinforced their southern front in **Europe** by 440 aircraft, despite persistent demands for additional machines for the Russian front—and the fact that well over half the reinforcement aircraft were single-engined fighters reveals the importance that was attached to the new Allied threat. There were also important changes in the *Luftwaffe* organisation and leadership. The southern theatre, hitherto centralised under Kesselring, was now divided into two commands, Central Mediterranean and the **Balkans**, each of *Luftflotte* status; Kesselring even managed to obtain a number of very experienced officers from the Russian front. General Field-Marshal von Richthoven, the acknowledged German expert on ground attack, was transferred to command *Luftflotte 2* in the Central Mediterranean. The bomber units were commanded by General-Major Peltz, a rising young officer who, in the following year, was to command the German forces which launched the 'Baby Blitz' against **London**. Nevertheless the *Luftwaffe* in the **Mediterranean** was still unequal to the task which now confronted it. There had been heavy losses of aircraft, spares and experienced air and ground crews during the North African campaign. And there was an increasing lack of co-operation on the part of the Italians.

The British and American air forces had begun to prepare for the Sicily invasion even before the fighting in Tunisia was over. Medium and fighter-bombers struck at airfields and lines of communication in Sicily, Sardinia and southern Italy while the strategic bombers raided ports, submarine bases and targets at Naples and Bari. Fighters from Malta flew offensive sweeps by day and intruder missions by night against Sicilian airfields; they escorted bombers and protected convoys; they also paid particular attention to shipping running into Sicily and, together with coastal aircraft, maintained an aerial blockade of the island. Reconnaissance aircraft were busy taking photographs and by the time of the invasion had covered the entire island. To all this activity must be added the contribution of Royal Air Force Bomber Command which, from its bases in the United Kingdom, sent aircraft to make six attacks on targets in the north of Italy. Of particular strategic importance were the train ferries which plied across the Messina Straits and which could move 40,000 men or 7500 men and 750 vehicles in twenty-four hours. By the beginning of June, it was reported that only one of the five ferries was still running, and installations at the terminals were so badly damaged that the enemy was compelled to resort to the use of lighters and any other small craft he could find.

An essential part of the Allied plan for the preparatory period was the capture of the islands of Pantellaria and Lampedusa in the Sicilian Narrows. By virtue of their position the garrisons on these islands could give advance warning of the movement of the assault convoys, but once in Allied hands the airfield on Pantellaria would be a convenient base for fighter aircraft covering the more distant landing areas and would serve to relieve some of the congestion on the overcrowded airfields at Malta. The minor airfield and radar facilities at Lampedusa would also be of considerable value.

Pantellaria, a barren place of thirty-one square miles, described as the 'Italian Heligoland', had been strongly fortified since the late twenties and bristled with anti-aircraft guns, while Lampedusa, a smaller island of fourteen square miles, also possessed formidable defences. It

was proposed to take Pantellaria by seaborne assault, but in the event it was reduced by an air bombardment unprecedented in the **Mediterranean**. From 9 May, the island was bombed by aircraft and shelled by warships with increasing frequency and then, between 7 and 11 June, it was subjected to continuous day and night attack by heavy, medium, light and fighter-bombers. Altogether some 5600 sorties were flown against the island and more than 6500 tons of bombs were dropped. The determination of the garrison wilted under this concentrated assault and the island capitulated shortly after infantry landed on the morning of 12 June. As a result, over 11,000 Italian troops and a number of German technicians were captured. ¹

Lampedusa, which had already been bombed towards the end of May, now felt the weight of a combined air and sea attack. On the morning of 12 June, after a night of naval bombardment, bombers dropped 268 tons of explosives while more shells poured in from the sea. The same afternoon an air-sea rescue Swordfish, with its compass out of order and almost without fuel, was forced to land on the island. Its pilot, an **RAF** sergeant, accepted an offer of surrender from the Italian commander, refuelled with enemy petrol and took off again for **Sousse**. In the evening the captain of a British destroyer completed the formalities. The smaller islands of Linosa and Lampione offered no resistance and their surrender followed within a matter of hours.

By 1 July the first phase of air operations had been completed and the **North-west African Air Force** thereupon concentrated its effort on the invasion area in **Sicily**. The *Luftwaffe*, although it enjoyed the advantage of operating at short range and was under severe provocation with the threat to its bases, did not offer the intense opposition that had been expected. However, there was one notable exception on 5 July, when about a hundred enemy fighters attempted to intercept a formation of American Fortress bombers. In the action which ensued thirty-five enemy fighters were claimed destroyed for the loss of only two bombers. Throughout all the weeks of preparation the Germans struggled to keep their airfields in operation with but scant success. By D-day

seven of the Gerbini satellites were out of action, as were the important airfields at Comiso, Castelvetrano and Bocco di Falco, while the efficiency of many others was seriously impaired. Indeed, the airfield situation in **Sicily** had become so desperate that the *Luftwaffe* was almost paralysed and in no condition to offer serious resistance to the landings.

¹ The onslaught, which Coningham described as a 'test tube experiment on the effect of intense and prolonged bombing', had completely destroyed the town and harbour. However, the numerous galleries and tunnels constructed under the rocky surface of the island had provided a ready refuge and casualties among the inhabitants and members of the garrison were light.

In all these preparatory operations New Zealanders played their part. As Royal Air Force formations were reinforced for the Sicilian venture, there had been a corresponding influx of men from the Dominion, so that by the beginning of July 1943 over 530 were serving in Mediterranean Air Command. More than two-thirds were aircrew, many of them flying under their fellow countrymen, Coningham and Park; others faithfully performed the less spectacular but essential duties of servicing and repair which kept the aircraft in action. In addition a small group held responsible staff appointments or did good work in such posts as engineering, equipment, signal and medical officers.

With Headquarters, **Mediterranean Air Command**, Group Captain H. D. McGregor and Wing Commander M. W. B. Knight, both experts on fighter operations, were concerned in the planning of Operation HUSKY. On the eve of the assault, McGregor was appointed Deputy Chief of Air Staff, **Mediterranean Air Command**, and Knight joined the operations staff of North-west African Air Forces. Both men were subsequently to be closely associated with the planning and execution of air operations in **Italy**. Wing Commander A. E. Arnott as senior equipment officer, Headquarters North-west African Coastal **Air Force**, was responsible for the allocation and distribution of equipment throughout the area

covered by this force. He was to remain in this post for over two years and during this time made an important contribution to the planning and organisation of coastal operations for the landings in **Sicily**, **Corsica**, **Sardinia** and **Italy**. The diversity of his duties is illustrated by the fact that he was responsible for the supply and replacement of aircraft, vehicles, armament, photographic equipment and clothing for a force of some 25,000 men.

New Zealanders were among the leaders of Spitfires based at **Malta** during this period. Wing Commander C. F. Gray was in charge of No. **322 Wing**, the formation in which he had served as a squadron commander in **Tunisia**. Squadron Leader H. A. Crafts continued in command of No. 185 Squadron, now prominent in attacks on Sicilian airfields. Squadron Leader E. D. Mackie, formerly a flight commander of No. 243 Squadron, led this unit on offensive sweeps and as escort to American daylight bombers. Flight Lieutenant D. F. Westenra commanded a flight of No. 601 Squadron and there were experienced Spitfire pilots like Flying Officers Schrader,¹ E. J. Shaw, Symons,²

¹ Wing Commander W. E. Schrader, DFC and bar; born **Wellington**, 27 Mar 1921; accounts clerk; joined **RNZAF** 23 Mar 1941; commanded No. 486 (NZ) Sqdn and No. 616 Sqdn 1945.

² Flight Lieutenant G. W. Symons; born **New Plymouth**, 25 Jun 1920; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941.

White,¹ Pilot Officer Lissette² and Flight Sergeants Buchanan,³ Caldwell,⁴ De Turret⁵ and D. J. Towgood.

Flight Lieutenant E. L. Joyce continued as flight commander with the famous No. 73 Hurricane Squadron. A few days after the invasion began, he was appointed to command. Joyce had first joined No. 73 as a sergeant pilot in mid-1941 and had subsequently won distinction for his part in low-level attacks and his prowess as a night-fighter in defence of desert airfields. Flying with No. 23 Mosquito Squadron on night intruder

operations, Flight Lieutenant Rabone ⁶ was prominent in attacks on supply trains and railway stations in eastern **Sicily** and southern **Italy**. In a varied career, Rabone had flown Battle bombers in **France**, fought with a Hurricane squadron during the Battle of **Britain** and, flying Hurricanes and then Defiants, had taken part in the defeat of German night raiders in 1941. Subsequently he was one of the original flight commanders of No. 488 (NZ) Squadron, then equipped with Beaufighters.

New Zealand Spitfire pilots were frequently over **Sicily** during the six weeks before the invasion. Several successful combats were reported. On 4 July Mackie led his squadron to cover Fortresses attacking **Catania**, and just as the bombers had left the target six Messerschmitt 109s appeared. A 'free for all' soon developed during which, although his guns were not working properly, Mackie succeeded in setting one Messerschmitt on fire. He was then chased by other enemy aircraft but eluded them by diving out to sea. On the way back to **Malta** his cannon began working perfectly and he seized the opportunity to attack a two-masted schooner which he sighted ten miles south-east of Augusta. Although fired on by shore batteries he returned unscathed. The following day, while escorting Fortresses to bomb Gerbini airfield, the Spitfires were again in action and Mackie sent another Me109 down to crash-land north of Palazzolo. This same day Flight Sergeant De Turret of No. 229 Squadron destroyed one Focke- Wulf 190 and damaged another, but his own aircraft sustained such severe damage that he was forced to crash-land on Hal Far. On another occasion De Turret damaged a Macchi 402.

¹ Flight Lieutenant G. G. White, DFC; born Waipawa, 27 Feb 1920; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** 26 Jul 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant A. F. Lissette; born **Morrinsville**, 6 Nov 1919; stock clerk; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941; prisoner of war, 26 Nov 1943.

³ Flight Lieutenant G. M. Buchanan; born **Dannevirke**, 7 Oct

1921; labourer; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer R. A. Caldwell; born **Hamilton**, 25 Oct 1920; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer R. H. De Turret; born **Auckland**, 13 Nov 1920; laboratory assistant; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941; killed in accident, 6 Feb 1959.

⁶ Squadron Leader P. W. Rabone, DFC; born Salisbury, England, 2 Mar 1918; clerk; joined **RAF** 15 Mar 1939; transferred **RNZAF** 16 Mar 1944; killed on air operations, 24 Jul 1944.

Flying Officer White's No. 126 Squadron was kept busy on sweeps over the airfields in eastern **Sicily**. Within the first five days of July, White was to claim the destruction of two Messerschmitt 109s and a Macchi 202, together with one Macchi 202 and Messerschmitt 109 damaged—an outstanding achievement at this time. His most exciting combat occurred in the vicinity of Biscari airfield. Seeing several Messerschmitt 109s take off, he dived to take up a position behind one of them but was unable to overhaul the enemy machine. He then began chasing his Messerschmitt through valleys and up over hills, firing short bursts at every opportunity without any visible results. Just as his cannon ammunition ran out the enemy began to slacken speed, and rapidly overtaking his quarry, White got in several machine-gun bursts from short range. Immediately the hood flew off and the German machine began to climb steeply; the pilot baled out at the top of the climb and his aircraft went straight down to explode in a sheet of smoke and flame. White had earlier been prominent in attacks on enemy shipping.

With the **RAF** coastal squadrons based in North Africa, New Zealanders took part in convoy escort duties, sea reconnaissance, shipping strikes and air-sea rescue searches. In one week alone seventeen separate convoys were given air protection. So effective were

the patrols flown by Allied aircraft that, in the four weeks ending on 16 June, not one ship sailing in convoy in the central **Mediterranean** was lost or damaged by enemy air or submarine action. Pilot Officers Hunter ¹ and Finn ² of No. 39 Squadron and Flying Officer Hunt ³ and Flight Sergeant Kemp ⁴ of No. 47 Squadron were among those who flew on convoy patrol at this time. Later, as their obsolete Beauforts were replaced by torpedo-carrying Beaufighters, they were to turn from the defensive role to 'search-and-attack' missions. On 21 June Kemp flew one of the squadron's first Beaufighter sorties. He sighted an enemy cargo vessel and made a good attack, but during the run-in his aircraft was hit by flak from an escorting destroyer; one propeller was shot off and the oil lines burst, but Kemp flew his Beaufighter safely back to base at **Misurata**.

Also active on shipping reconnaissance were Warrant Officer McGregor, ⁵ Flight Sergeants R. G. Miles, N. D. Freeman and F. M.

¹ Flight Lieutenant D. M. Hunter; born Streatham, England, 7 Nov 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 18 Aug 1941; prisoner of war, 21 Jul 1943.

² Flying Officer J. O. Finn; born Te Rore, 2 Feb 1920; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant S. M. Hunt; born Hastings, 11 Apr 1919; painter; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; prisoner of war, 20 Jul 1943.

⁴ Warrant Officer A. E. Kemp; born Barry, Wales, 16 Jan 1920; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941; prisoner of war, 2 Aug 1943.

⁵ Pilot Officer D. S. McGregor; born Dunedin, 28 Mar 1919; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** May 1940; killed on air operations, 9 May 1944.

Spedding, as pilots of No. 14 Marauder Squadron, and Flying Officer Hoy, ¹ pilot, Flight Sergeant Jorgensen, ² wireless operator, and Flight Sergeants Bowsher ³ and Russell, ⁴ air gunners of No. 52 **Baltimore Squadron. Flying Officer Price ⁵ was prominent with torpedo-Wellingtons of No. 458 Australian Squadron operating at night.**

To protect shipping in Tunisian and Algerian ports from enemy air attack, British and American fighter squadrons of the Coastal Force flew more than four thousand sorties between 16 May and 30 June. By night RAF Beaufighters were particularly successful, claiming the destruction of twenty-six enemy machines. One of the squadrons— No. 255—was commanded by Wing Commander J. H. Player, who had led Beaufighters during the Tunisian campaign and organised intruder missions over **Sardinia with conspicuous success. Now, as the shipping concentrations in North African ports increased, Player and his pilots flew defensive patrols which were to add to their squadron's already impressive list of victories. One night in June, when on patrol near **Bizerta**, Player was vectored on to an unidentified aircraft. After a ten-minute chase the machine was sighted and identified as a tri-engined Cant Z1007. Player closed in and, after only a short burst with all guns, he and his navigator had the satisfaction of seeing the starboard engine explode. A second burst set the port engine ablaze and immediately the Cant began to disintegrate. It then spun down, a flaming mass, to continue burning on the sea. Player had taken over No. 255 Squadron early in March; in the next few months, squadron pilots claimed fifteen enemy aircraft destroyed, two probably destroyed and twelve damaged. For his own part in operations and his fine leadership, Player was admitted to the Distinguished Service Order.**

Night by night New Zealand aircrew with RAF Wellington squadrons flew out from their Tunisian bases and crossed the **Mediterranean to play their part in attacks against Pantellaria and enemy ports, communications and airfields in **Sardinia**, **Sicily** and southern **Italy**. Three outstanding pilots were Wing Commander D. R. Bagnall, who continued his successful command of No. 40 Squadron, Squadron Leader**

H. H. Beale of No. 37 Squadron and Squadron Leader C. L. G. Holmes of No. 150 Squadron, who flew as flight commanders. Captains of aircraft who flew many missions were Flight Lieutenant E. P. Towsey,

¹ Flying Officer W. J. Hoy; born Westport, 3 Sep 1916; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941; killed on air operations, 5 Aug 1943.

² Warrant Officer W. C. Jorgensen; born **Auckland**, 27 Sep 1919; timber machinist; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940; killed on air operations, 5 Aug 1943.

³ Flight Sergeant W. H. J. Bowsher; born **London**, 5 Jun 1912; packer; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; killed on air operations 5 Aug 1943.

⁴ Flying Officer L. A. C. Russell; born **Auckland**, 20 Jan 1917; transport driver; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940.

⁵ Squadron Leader C. W. Price; born **Christchurch**, 23 Jun 1912; factory manager; joined **RNZAF** 7 Sep 1941.

a veteran of bomber operations over **Germany** who had also served with **Coastal Command**, Flight Sergeants Pilet, ¹ Turvey ² and R. E. Stowers. Flying Officer Read ³ rendered good service as gunner and Flying Officer Masters ⁴ as bomb-aimer. Also operating at this time were Flight Sergeants N. Gustofson and Judd ⁵ as pilots, Warrant Officer B. Johnston ⁶ and Flight Sergeant McKay ⁷ as navigators, and Flight Sergeant McPhail, ⁸ wireless operator.

The fine offensive spirit displayed by the bomber crews is well illustrated by the action of the young Wellington pilot, Flight Sergeant Pilet, during one sortie to Milo airfield in **Sardinia**. On this night the weather was atrocious but Pilet flew on to find and bomb his target. On the way back to **Tunisia**, conditions became even worse but he succeeded in landing at base while most squadron crews were compelled

to find other airfields where the weather was better. Flying Officer Read displayed 'exceptional zeal and energy' in the performance of his duties as gunnery leader of No. 37 Squadron. On one occasion he flew in a Wellington captained by Squadron Leader Beale detailed to attack Gerbini airfield. On leaving the target the Wellington was singled out for attack by a Ju88. Read first sighted the enemy aircraft as it closed in from the port side, whereupon he raised the alarm and gave Beale directions for evasive action. As a result the enemy machine passed to the starboard quarter, its fire causing no damage to the Wellington. Read withheld his own fire until the Junkers was at point-blank range. He then opened up and scored hits on the enemy bomber; it rolled over on its back and fell away, apparently out of control.

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On the afternoon of 9 July a great mass of ships and landing craft, some two thousand in all, began to assemble in the area east and south of **Malta**. And soon this vast armada, which carried the British Eighth Army and the American Seventh, was moving steadily under strong air and naval escort towards the south-east corner of **Sicily**. During the evening the wind rose to gale force, and as the long lines of ships

¹ Flight Lieutenant W. H. Pilet, DFC; born **Christchurch**, 10 Jun 1914; dairy farmer; joined **RNZAF** 27 Jul 1941.

² Warrant Officer J. R. Turvey, DFM; born **Oamaru**, 9 Aug 1920; spinner; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1939.

³ Flight Lieutenant F. J. Read, DFC; born **Wellington**, 9 Jan 1921; apprentice carpenter; joined **RNZAF** 20 Oct 1939.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant C. H. Masters, DFC; born **Onga Onga**, Hawke's Bay, 15 Mar 1919; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** 18 Apr 1942; killed on air operations, 8 May 1944.

⁵ Flying Officer S. F. Judd; born **Masterton**, 30 Sep 1919; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 18 Jan 1941.

⁶ Warrant Officer B. Johnston; born **Invercargill**, 10 Mar 1915; salesman; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1940; died 1 Jan 1950.

⁷ Warrant Officer W. O. C. McKay, DFC; born **Wyndham**, 12 Feb 1919; clerk; joined **Fleet Air Arm** Dec 1940; transferred **RAF** 21 Jun 1941; **RNZAF** 15 Oct 1943.

⁸ Warrant Officer J.S.J. McPhail; born Gore, 28 May 1916; farm worker; joined **RNZAF** 31 Aug 1941; prisoner of war, 19 Sep 1943.

ploughed their way through heavy seas, British glider-borne troops and American paratroops, who were to land in advance of the seaborne forces, took off in swirling sand and dust from their bases at **Kairouan** in **Tunisia**. The gliders supporting the **Eighth Army** were routed across the south-east corner of **Malta**, and as they approached those anxiously watching from vantage points on the island saw 'the tandem-wise pairs of tow and glider flying low, now in twos and threes, now in larger groups, with the roar of their engines partly carried away by the gale and their veiled navigation lights showing fitfully in the half light of the moon.' The first invasion of European soil was under way.

The aircraft and gliders battling through the high wind towards **Sicily** carried 1200 men of 1 Air Landing Brigade of 1 British Airborne Division. Most of the gliders were of the light Hadrian, or Waco, type for which the maximum load was 14 men and a small cart; but there were ten larger Horsas, capable of carrying 30 men or a jeep and an anti-aircraft gun. To tow these gliders the Americans had provided 109 Dakotas and the **Royal Air Force** 7 Halifaxes and 21 Albemarle. Towing the Horsa gliders from England to Sale airfield near Casablanca, and thence via Froha to **Kairouan** in **Tunisia**, had been a hazardous

operation. Flying by night with a glider in tow over such great distances was considered too dangerous, so the slow and cumbersome combinations had flown by day, risking interception by German fighters as they crossed the Bay of Biscay. Through the skill and determination of aircraft and glider pilots 27 out of 30 Horsas had reached North Africa by 7 July. There was little time for training. British glider pilots were out of practice and found the Hadrian more difficult to fly than their training gliders, while the Dakota pilots did not have sufficient time to become accustomed to their tows. Furthermore, facilities in North Africa did not permit of suitable exercises to simulate the conditions of actual operations. All concerned did their best but the result was far from satisfactory.

The landing zone for the Air Landing Brigade was near Syracuse and its objective, the Ponte Grande, an important bridge south of the town. On the flight to **Sicily** things soon went wrong. In the high wind many machines were blown off course, navigators were unable to identify the first turning point at **Malta** and the timing of the operation was upset. Although the weather improved slightly as the force approached the island, the release of gliders in uncertain light brought many errors. Of the 137 gliders which set out, no fewer than 69 were released too soon and fell into the sea; a further 56 were scattered over a wide area along the south-eastern coast. Only twelve gliders, all towed by **RAF** aircraft, reached the landing zone, one Horsa descending within 300 yards of the Ponte Grande. By dawn eight officers and sixty-five other ranks were holding the bridge. Determined assaults by the enemy during the morning and early afternoon were of no avail until half past three, when the fifteen survivors of this gallant band were overrun. Fortunately by that time advanced troops of the **Eighth Army** were approaching and they were able to drive the enemy off before they could destroy the bridge. Aggressive action by the remainder of the British airborne force caused widespread alarm and confusion, particularly among the Italians. Meanwhile paratroops of the **United States 82 Airborne Division** had been dropped over an area of fifty square miles around Gela and Licata. Here, again, a small proportion of the force succeeded in gaining the road

junction and high ground which was their objective, while the sudden appearance of the remainder in other localities further increased the fear and despondency in the enemy ranks. But the margin between success and failure of the airborne operations had been slight.

In contrast, all went well for the seaborne forces from the beginning. The landings began at 4 a.m. and, covered by naval bombardment, were everywhere successful. There was negligible opposition from the Italians manning the coastal defences, beach-heads were quickly established and supplies and reinforcements poured in. Advanced troops pushed inland and by nightfall the whole of the Pachino peninsula was occupied, Syracuse had fallen and the Americans had captured Licata and were moving on to Vittoria.

Throughout the daylight hours of 10 July, Allied fighters operating from **Malta**, Gozo, Pantellaria and North Africa were on patrol over the beaches and the mass of shipping lying off shore. Attempts at interference by the *Luftwaffe* were far less than had been anticipated. In the first twenty-four hours only twelve ships were successfully attacked from the air whereas the invasion plans had anticipated heavier losses. As a result of the day's fighting over the beaches and their approaches, 13 enemy aircraft were claimed destroyed, with 14 more probably destroyed or damaged; our losses were 11 Spitfires shot down and missing.

The *Luftwaffe* was no more successful in its attempts to prevent Allied bombers and fighter-bombers attacking inland targets. During the day airfields, defensive positions and communications were attacked almost at will. Of the enemy fighters which tried to intercept, seventeen were shot down for the loss of only five Allied aircraft, which almost certainly fell victim to the intense flak. Night protection of the beaches was shared by RAF Beaufighters and Mosquitos based on **Malta**. Beaufighters destroyed two Ju88s and one Cant Z1007 and probably destroyed a Ju88 in the Augusta and Syracuse areas, while a Mosquito probably destroyed a Ju88 south-east of Castelvetro.

Within the next three days the Allied air offensive reduced the *Luftwaffe* in Sicily to a state of impotence, and thereafter no effective opposition was met in the skies over the island. Malta-based Spitfires and American Warhawks scored heavily during their patrols over the beaches and harbours. On 13 July, the last day on which the *Luftwaffe* appeared in strength, they shot down twenty-four enemy machines and probably destroyed three more for the loss of only one Spitfire. Royal Air Force Beaufighters and Mosquitos, now guided by a Ground Control Interception Station and a rapidly expanding warning system, also took a nightly toll of enemy bombers. Operating in clear moonlight on 12 July, they had an excellent night's hunting, claiming the destruction of nine German and two Italian aircraft without loss to themselves. By day and night RAF and American bombers and fighter-bombers were busy attacking communications, airfields, troop concentrations and ground positions; they also bombed marshalling yards and airfields in Italy. The trickle of supplies reaching the enemy forces was further reduced by the successful shipping strikes of coastal aircraft; in all, ten vessels were sunk or damaged in the first week of the invasion.

Meanwhile, with the aid of this air superiority, the land campaign continued to prosper. On 12 July Ponte Olivo landing ground was captured and elements of the Seventh and Eighth Armies made contact in the Ragusa area. The advance westwards from Syracuse went on and Augusta was occupied in the early hours of the 13th, with its port installations almost intact. British and American engineers followed close on the heels of the ground forces and quickly made captured airfields serviceable again. By 13 July Pachino, which had been ploughed up by the Germans, was ready for use and the first Spitfire squadrons of Desert Air Force flew in from Malta and began operations. During the next three days, more RAF Spitfire squadrons were installed on Comiso and United States Kittyhawk squadrons moved in to Licata and Ponte Olivo. Thereafter the transfer to Sicily of squadrons from Malta and North Africa continued at regular intervals without any interruption in the all-out support accorded to the land forces.

The airmen arriving in **Sicily** lived more or less as they had done in the desert but the countryside, with its olive and fruit trees, was very different. The ground was too rocky for digging slit trenches so tents were pitched and surrounded by a blast wall of earth; aircraft were dispersed among the almond groves. To those who had spent years in the desert the abundance of water for drinking and washing was a most pleasant change. Although the orange crop had largely been gathered, there was the luxury of ample supplies of almonds, grapes, melons, tomatoes and wine. The local population, who protested their detachment from the politics of the Italian mainland, with few exceptions made a great show of friendliness. But as the days went by the weather became more sultry and then malaria and dysentery took hold of many airmen. It is recorded that at one time no fewer than a quarter of the officers at the headquarters of the Tactical Air Force were suffering from either one or the other of these diseases.

To speed the **Eighth Army's** advance towards **Catania** and the Gerbini airfields, another airborne operation was launched over **Sicily** on the night of 13 July. ¹ Its objective was the bridge at Primo Sole which carried the main **Catania** road over the River Simeto. The operation was primarily a paratroop one. Three battalions of 1 British Parachute Brigade were carried in 107 US Dakotas and 11 RAF Albemarles and were supported by anti-tank units and Royal Engineers in seventeen gliders towed by Albemarles and Halifaxes. The force flew from North Africa by way of **Malta**. As they approached their objective many aircraft were off course and they were fired on by Allied naval vessels which failed to identify them. Overland, intense enemy anti-aircraft fire further disorganised the force. Altogether 27 Dakotas lost their way, 19 returned to base without dropping their passengers and 14 aircraft were shot down. In the event, less than half the aircraft succeeded in dropping their parachutists or releasing their gliders so that they landed on or near the selected area. When dawn came, some 200 paratroops and five anti-tank guns were installed on the bridge, approximately one-fifth of the force which had set out from **Kairouan**. Demolition charges were removed and thrown into the river and troops resisted heavy German

attacks until the evening, when they were forced back. They then covered the bridge from high ground to the south. Early on the 15th, infantry and tanks of the **Eighth Army** arrived and the bridge was finally retaken the next morning. The airborne operations had proved costly, largely because of the inexperience of the men and a shortage of suitable equipment; but they were of considerable assistance to both armies, whose commanders reported that the speed of the invasion and the initial advances had been materially increased. There was now general recognition of the importance of airborne assault and the experience gained and lessons learnt in **Sicily** were to be invaluable in subsequent operations in north-west **Europe**.

Now that enemy air power in **Sicily** was broken, Allied aircraft flew numerous missions without interference except from anti-aircraft guns. On 15 July, Spitfires flew 171 sorties on offensive patrols over the

¹ Previously on the night of 11 July troops of 82 US Airborne Division had been dropped in front of forward units in the Gela area. Unfortunately, out of the 144 Dakotas despatched, 23 failed to return. The unarmed transport aircraft encountered intense flak and were attacked by enemy aircraft. In addition, many ran foul of anti-aircraft fire from Allied naval vessels which, at this time, were being bombed by enemy aircraft.

Catania and Gerbini areas; not one enemy machine was seen. Similar reports were received from fighters escorting the bombers and fighter-bombers. The effort expended by fighters guarding the beaches dropped to 450 sorties on 14 July and three days later no beach patrols were needed at all. The fighter-bomber attacks against Sicilian targets, however, continued without respite and the strategic bombers began to strike increasingly heavy blows against enemy rail communications, supply bases and airfields in southern **Italy** to prevent the reinforcement of the island and any rebuilding of its air strength. Wellingtons attacked Neapolitan airfields and the docks at **Naples**, where they caused considerable destruction in the area west of the harbour. On 17 July,

American daylight bombers made two very heavy attacks on the marshalling yards, factories and the Royal Arsenal at Naples. Many fires were started and after the second attack in the afternoon a huge pall of smoke spread across the town. When night came the devastation was increased by the Wellingtons. It was reported that these and similar raids did much to dislocate the enemy's supply system; they also had their effect on Italian morale, already at a low ebb. Allied bombers dropped 4,500,000 leaflets over Rome, Naples and other towns in southern Italy, with a joint message from the British Prime Minister and the American President urging the Italians to abandon the destructive and hopeless struggle.

With the invasion a week old the position on land began to crystallise. It became obvious that the Germans were abandoning the western part of the island to concentrate their strength in the north-east to deny the Allies possession of the island's greatest prize—the airfields of the Catanian plain—and to keep open the escape route through Messina. While the United States Seventh Army advanced freely to take Palermo on 22 July, the Eighth Army encountered fierce resistance. Montgomery was forced to divert his forces from the east coast and move inland to come up behind the enemy between Mount Etna and the northern coast. The task of Coningham's Tactical Air Force was now the isolation of Catania by repeated attacks on rail targets and the ring of roads around the area, particularly the important road junction of Randazzo.

Meanwhile, United States Fortresses and Liberators by day and RAF Wellingtons by night made a series of attacks on Naples, Salerno and Foggia to block the roads and railways on both sides of the Apennines. But these raids were not enough to restrict the flow of supplies and, after full consideration of the military, political and religious implications involved, it was decided to bomb Rome. Accordingly, 270 American Fortresses and Liberator bombers attacked the Lorenzo and Littorio marshalling yards on the morning of 19 July; the same afternoon 320 Mitchells and Marauders, escorted by fighters, bombed Ciampino, the

city's largest airfield. The Lorenzo railway yards, engine houses and locomotive sheds were devastated and there was considerable damage to freight sheds, tracks and rolling stock; industrial plants and public services were also hard hit. At Littorio many hits were scored in the yards and sidings, including some fifty direct hits on rolling stock and tracks, while the locomotive depot and workshops were damaged. Ciampino airfield was the scene of widespread damage. Administrative buildings, hangars, barracks and ammunition dumps suffered heavily and approximately forty Italian aircraft were burnt out or damaged. These results were achieved at a cost of only two bombers.

Before the attacks, crews were carefully briefed for definite military targets to avoid destruction in the city unique for its religious and historical associations, and its population was warned that air attack was imminent. Inevitably, however, some bombs fell outside the target areas, and among the buildings damaged was the ancient basilica of Saint Lorenzo-without-the-Walls, with its twelfth century frescoes. Although these raids were made exclusively by American aircraft, they belonged to the combined **Mediterranean Air Command**. The British Government accepted equal responsibility and stood firm against the storm of controversy which broke out when it became known that 'the Eternal City' had been attacked. In addition to the material damage to enemy communications and air strength, the raids were a further blow to the sinking morale of the Italian people. Within a week Mussolini was deposed and the Fascist regime he controlled for twenty years was dissolved and replaced by a new government, with Marshal Badoglio at its head.

Meanwhile the battle for **Catania** went on, and in the July heat the **Eighth Army** advanced but slowly over what, after the desert, was strange and difficult terrain. The German commanders, under General Hube, had ruthlessly restored order among the panic-stricken Italians retreating towards Messina and managed to keep open the vital reinforcement and supply routes to the front. In an attempt to increase the flow of traffic to and from **Sicily**, Hube tried to make greater use of

the port of Milazzo, but was frustrated by the frequent medium, light and fighter-bomber attacks during the last seven days of July. Among other targets repeatedly attacked at this time were the marshalling yards and rail bridge at Centuripe, the town which barred the way to Adrano, 'the key to the **Etna** positions.' Nevertheless the German divisions, deprived of a large proportion of their supplies, without air support and themselves under pitiless air attack, continued to fight stubbornly for they were determined to make an orderly and protracted retreat to the Italian mainland.

Incapable of protecting its ground forces, the *Luftwaffe* did what it could to help them by flying in reinforcements, fuel, ammunition and equipment. But the enemy air transports did not escape the vigilance of the Allied fighter pilots and there was a repetition of the slaughter which had taken place in **Tunisia**. Then it had been largely the work of American Warhawks but now it was the turn of RAF Spitfires. The Junkers 52 supply trains were known to be landing on the beaches near Milazzo and on a day towards the end of July thirty-three Spitfires of No. **322 Wing** took off from their airfield at Lentini on a sweep of this area. Led by Wing Commander Colin Gray, the Spitfires flew northward, skimming low over the hills and descending to sea level as they approached Milazzo. Near the port they came upon a 'gaggle' of Ju52s circling to land on an improvised strip. Gray led his pilots into attack before the escorting Messerschmitts realised what was happening and within a few minutes twelve transports were shot down. Loaded with petrol, they exploded in spectacular fashion and many of our Spitfires were hit by fragments. The German fighters diving in a belated effort to intercept were met and routed by the British pilots. The slaughter then continued until twenty-one transports had crashed to burn on the sea or along the beaches, together with four of the escort machines. Gray himself destroyed two Ju52s, while Flight Sergeant Doherty ¹ was credited with the highest individual score of three aircraft destroyed.

The decisive days of the Sicilian campaign came early in August. On the 3rd of the month the **Eighth Army** took Centuripe, and **Catania** fell

two days later. Meanwhile the Seventh Army, with Palermo as its supply base, had closed in along the north coastal road and the parallel highway farther inland to Troina. This town fell to the Americans on the 6th, and with the entry of Montgomery's troops into Adrano the same evening, the north-east defence line was broken. With their divisions now in full retreat, the Germans began their evacuation across the **Messina Straits** in real earnest. The end in **Sicily** was in sight.

During their retreat the Germans were under continual attack from the air. Allied fighters and bombers caused such destruction on the roads in north-east **Sicily** that the enemy was forced to abandon much of his motor transport and resort to using mules taken from the local peasants. Before the 'last-ditch' town of Randazzo finally fell on 13 August, it was subjected to heavy attacks by both light and fighter-bombers. Thereafter the air effort was concentrated against Messina, the nearby evacuation beaches and the stream of small craft plying across the narrow straits. And all the time the heavy bombers

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¹ Flying Officer E. S. Doherty, DFM, DFC (US); born **Gisborne**, 29 Jul 1922; student; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941.

tinued

their offensive against rail and road targets, airfields, ports and the reception beaches in southern **Italy**. In contrast the *Luftwaffe* could only operate spasmodically and on a small scale. However, its bombers did score one success in the early hours of 1 August when twenty-five Ju88s and Dornier 217s raided Palermo and caused considerable damage to the main dock, destroyed ration and petrol supplies, blew up an ammunition train and sank a merchant ship.

After the fall of Randazzo, the Germans held but one road to Messina. This they grimly defended to enable the evacuation to continue for as long as possible, but on 16 August Allied troops finally fought

their way into Messina and by the following day the entire island was in our hands. The campaign had thus been completed in the short space of thirty-eight days.

Before the end came, however, the Germans had succeeded in getting a large number of men and a considerable mass of equipment back across the **Messina Straits** to **Italy**. The Allied air forces seriously hampered this withdrawal but it was never disorganised. For one thing the **Messina Straits** are less than three miles wide; they were heavily defended by anti-aircraft guns, 'probably the most concentrated anti-aircraft protection yet encountered'; and the Germans made good use of the short hours of darkness to make the few minutes' journey across the narrow strip of water. In the last ten days of the campaign 1170 sorties were flown, mainly by Kittyhawk and Warhawk fighter-bombers, against the ferries, barges and other craft making the crossing; the effort was particularly heavy in the last three days when over half the total number of sorties were flown. The fighter-bombers were forced to fly high to avoid the intense barrage but they claimed many successes. The enemy lost a good deal of equipment and approximately 194,000 men were left behind in **Sicily**, 32,000 of whom were either killed or wounded and 162,000 taken prisoner, the majority being Italians. These casualties were about five times the Allied losses on the island.

The wreckage of more than a thousand German and Italian aircraft that was found strewn over the island's airfields bore eloquent testimony to the part played by the Allied air forces. Their achievements had indeed been notable. They had driven the *Luftwaffe* from **Sicily** in the first ten days and by their assault on the bases in **Italy** had prevented it from making any serious intervention in the land fighting. Altogether during the campaign they had destroyed or captured 1850 machines for the loss of fewer than 400 aircraft. The bomber raids on communications and ports had upset the movement of supplies; the coastal squadrons, along with the Navy, had protected the assault shipping, assured the safe delivery of Allied reinforcements and equipment and at the same time reduced German and Italian seaborne

rein-forcements. In close support of the armies the British and American fighter-bombers had done much good work, though their efforts did not always meet with the success to which they had become accustomed in North Africa. In the difficult Sicilian countryside, ground targets were hard to locate and there were no means by which the troops on the ground could summon quick assistance from the aircraft patrolling overhead. The need for some system whereby air support could be provided to forward troops in a matter of minutes was obvious and the solution to this problem, which came within the next few months, was to have far-reaching effects on the success of future air support. Much that was new had been attempted during the Sicilian campaign and many lessons of invasion were learned. In particular there had been further development of that combined land-sea-air technique that was to be the keynote of all future operations for the Second World War. Meanwhile, the occupation of **Sicily** had cleared the way for landings on the Italian mainland which were soon to follow.

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The ubiquity of New Zealand airmen was well demonstrated during the Sicilian campaign. Among the **RAF** formations of **Mediterranean Air Command** there was now hardly a squadron without at least one or two men from the Dominion on its strength. The majority of those who had taken part in preparatory operations continued to serve with their units, while newcomers included a sprinkling of veterans from the **United Kingdom** and a number of men fresh from the training bases. Whether in attack or defence or in such duties as air transport or air-sea rescue, they acquitted themselves well during the short campaign.

In the airborne assault on **Sicily** Flight Sergeants Fulker ¹ and Bretherton ² flew Halifaxes of No. 295 Squadron that towed Horsa gliders; both men had previously made the long and difficult flight with them from England to North Africa. Flight Lieutenant Jamieson ³ and Flight Sergeants Brydon ⁴ and Nicholls ⁵ as pilots, Pilot Officer Burton, ⁶ navigator, and Pilot Officer Hall, ⁷ wireless operator, all flew with No. 296 Albemarle Squadron which towed Hadrian gliders in

¹ Flying Officer L. Fulker, DFC; born **Sydney, NSW**, 31 May 1921; labourer; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941; killed on air operations, 12 Sep 1944.

² Flight Lieutenant B. J. F. Bretherton, DFC; born **Cromwell**, 27 Dec 1920; radio mechanic; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1939.

³ Squadron Leader R. W. Jamieson, DFC; born **Nelson**, 4 Nov 1917; joined **RAF** 1937.

⁴ Flying Officer S. L. Brydon; born **Maromaku**, 12 Jan 1918; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer J. A. P. Nicholls, Air Medal (US); born **Martinborough**, 13 Mar 1920; radio serviceman; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1941; killed in aircraft accident, 16 Apr 1945.

⁶ Flying Officer N. L. Burton; born **Auckland**, 19 Jan 1915; baker; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941; killed on air operations, 2 Oct 1943.

⁷ Flying Officer I. W. Hall; born **Nelson**, 18 Oct 1911; painter; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940; killed on air operations, 2 Oct 1943.

the first stage of the invasion. In the operations against Primo Sole bridge, Brydon captained one of four Albemarles which, owing to unserviceability of **Halifax** aircraft, were called upon to tow Horsa gliders. These large gliders were really too heavy for the light Albemarles and it was only after a most difficult flight, with engines overheating alarmingly, that Brydon released his glider and saw it land about five miles south of the landing zone. He then found himself without sufficient fuel for the return flight to North Africa and, with the starboard wing damaged by flak, he had some anxious moments before

landing safely at **Malta**.

Fighter pilots did not get as many opportunities for combat over **Sicily** as they had expected and after the fourth day of the invasion only occasional encounters with the enemy were reported. For example, on 19 July a squadron diary records: 'One more day without any sign of enemy air activity. We carried out the usual patrol over the **Catania** area where our ground forces were meeting stiff opposition and later in the day gave top cover to three squadrons of Kittyhawks on armed reconnaissance, north of **Catania**. It is truly amazing the way in which the air battle has died down.' A fortnight later the diarist was plaintively inquiring: 'What has happened to the **Luftwaffe**?' During the early stages, however, there was considerable activity on the part of the **Luftwaffe** and Squadron Leader E. D. Mackie, Flying Officer S. F. Browne, Flight Sergeant Harrison ¹ and Flying Officer G. G. White were among those engaged in combat.

Squadron Leader Mackie, who led a Spitfire squadron on patrol over the beaches and shipping, continued a remarkable run of success. Within a matter of weeks he claimed five enemy aircraft destroyed, one probably destroyed and two damaged. On one morning when his squadron destroyed seven Ju87 dive-bombers, his own score was three. Flying Officer Browne of No. 93 Squadron shot down two Ju88 bombers within forty-eight hours. On the second occasion his squadron intercepted a force of these aircraft, escorted by Messerschmitts, attacking ships waiting to off-load and after the action Browne was himself forced down; he thus became one of the first pilots to land in **Sicily**, although not quite in the manner he had expected. However, he was soon back on operations and two days later he sent down a Messerschmitt 109 near Augusta.

Flight Sergeant Harrison of No. 1435 Squadron also saw more than his share of action. On patrol over the beaches on 11 July his squadron encountered over twenty Messerschmitt 109s. Harrison singled out a small formation near Augusta and in a hectic engagement destroyed two of them; a third eluded him, but it limped away badly damaged.

¹ Squadron Leader N. D. Harrison, DFC; born Dunedin, 18 Jul 1922; farmer; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

A week later, while on patrol over the Catanian plain and northwards along the coast, the squadron sighted a formation of four Me110 long-range fighters and Harrison was one of the pilots to intercept; enjoying the lion's share of the engagement, he claimed one fighter probably destroyed and two damaged. His own aircraft was badly damaged by return fire but he flew back to base.

Flying Officer White was again prominent in the fighting which came the way of his No. 126 Squadron. In one evening patrol, four Macchi 202s were seen diving out of the sun to attack a group of supply ships. The Spitfires turned in behind and quickly drove them off. No sooner had the British pilots re-formed than they saw more than twenty Messerschmitts 109s and Focke-Wulf 190s approaching to make a similar attack. The Spitfires at once swept in to cut the enemy raiders off from the shipping and then closed in to break up their formation. For fifteen minutes there was a fierce and confused battle in which White took on no fewer than eight different enemy machines before running out of ammunition. Afterwards No. 126 Squadron was credited with three aircraft destroyed or probably destroyed and six damaged, White's score being one Macchi 202 probably destroyed and two Messerschmitt 109s damaged. The next day when No. 126 Squadron intercepted enemy fighters attacking British motor transport to the west of Syracuse, White destroyed one Messerschmitt 109 and badly damaged another.

Other Spitfire pilots successful in combat were Flight Sergeant G. M. Buchanan of No. 185 Squadron who, on the eve of the invasion, shot down an FW190 and Flying Officer E. J. Shaw, No. 72 Squadron, who destroyed a Macchi 202 three days later.

Among those who flew consistently to protect shipping and the beach-head, on bomber escort and on offensive sweeps were Squadron

Leader Webb, ¹ Flight Lieutenant C. R. Hesketh, Flight Sergeants Austin, ² Meagher, ³ Moore, ⁴ W. J. Robinson, Stewart, ⁵ Swan ⁶ and G. R. Wilson. ⁷ Webb, who had previously led a Spitfire flight in

¹ Group Captain R. Webb, DSO, DFC, m.i.d.; born **London**, 10 Mar 1912; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** 17 Dec 1939; commanded No. **1435 Sqdn** 1943–44; Wing Leader, No. **323 Wing**, 1944; killed in aircraft accident, 27 May 1953.

² Flying Officer R. L. Austin; born **Christchurch**, 1 Dec 1921; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant G. H. Meagher; born Reefton, 15 Feb 1915; carrier; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1941; prisoner of war, 6 Sep 1944.

⁴ Flying Officer H. H. S. Moore, DFC; born **Gisborne**, 29 Oct 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 3 May 1941.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant T. D. Stewart; born **Palmerston North**, 7 Jul 1917; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** 16 Aug 1941.

⁶ Flying Officer A. F. Swan; born **Auckland**, 28 Aug 1920; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** 10 Oct 1940.

⁷ Flying Officer G. R. Wilson; born **Christchurch**, 7 Jan 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941.

defence of the Delta, now commanded No. 1435 Squadron; during the Sicilian campaign he flew twenty-five sorties, mainly in support of the ground forces.

New Zealand pilots were prominent with the fighter-bomber squadrons which did invaluable work in strafing and bombing German front-line positions, railways, roads and ports, and finally the evacuation

traffic across the **Messina Straits**. No. 239 Kittyhawk Wing—long the most active fighter-bomber wing of the **Desert Air Force**—was now led by Wing Commander R. E. Bary. After leading his squadrons in free-lance attacks on communication targets from **Malta**, Bary set up his Wing Headquarters at Pachino in **Sicily** on 17 July. Two days later the wing flew its first operation from Sicilian soil when he led an armed reconnaissance of the Paterno area. Among the pilots who flew under Bary's leadership were Flight Lieutenant B. H. Thomas, Flight Sergeants Batten,¹ Cross,² S. J. Fourneau, Gillard,³ Hamilton,⁴ Lory,⁵ W. G. McConnochie, Nordstrand,⁶ Rogers,⁷ Turner⁸ and Twiname.⁹ During an armed reconnaissance of the **Catania** area, No. 450 Australian Squadron's last operation from **Malta** while en route for **Sicily**, Flight Sergeant Fourneau was forced to 'ditch' in the sea when his Kittyhawk developed engine trouble. After spending two hours in the water he was fortunate to be picked up by an air-sea rescue launch and taken to **Malta**. He went to **Sicily** the next day by transport aircraft and reported to his squadron, none the worse for his experience.

The Kittyhawk wing soon made its presence felt in **Sicily**. On one occasion, after Bary had led his pilots against enemy positions southwest of **Catania**, the wing received signals from the Army reading: 'Much gratitude. Fields in front our troops alight' and 'Commanders signal Thanks very much. Twice a great success.' Top fighter cover for the operation had been provided by Spitfires of No. 243 Squadron led by Squadron Leader Mackie.

¹ Warrant Officer J. E. M. Batten; born **Wellington**, 20 Mar 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

² Flying Officer O. P. Cross; born Birkenhead, **Auckland**, 10 Mar 1920; salesman; joined **RNZAF** 27 Jul 1941.

³ Pilot Officer T. A. Gillard, DFC; born Otahuhu, 31 May 1922; surveyor's cadet; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941.

⁴ Flight Sergeant C. G. Hamilton; born **Christchurch**, 10 Jul 1912; radio engineer; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941; killed on air operations, 15 Aug 1943.

⁵ Flight Sergeant L. D. Lory; born **Dannevirke**, 7 Sep 1917; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1941; killed on air operations, 7 Aug 1943.

⁶ Warrant Officer G. S. Nordstrand; born **Whangarei**, 1 Apr 1919; labourer; joined **RNZAF** 14 Jan 1941.

⁷ Flying Officer A. J. C. Rogers; born **Dunedin**, 7 Jan 1920; engineering apprentice; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941.

⁸ Flight Sergeant J. G. G. Turner; born **Otahuhu**, 8 Mar 1923; ledger clerk; joined **RNZAF** 6 Jul 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Sep 1943.

⁹ Warrant Officer R. H. Twiname; born **Auckland**, 25 Feb 1922; typewriter mechanic; joined **RNZAF** 27 Jul 1941.

From the second week of August No. **239 Wing** made an all-out effort against the **Messina Straits**. During one attack by twelve Kittyhawks of No. 450 Squadron, the section of four aircraft in which Flight Sergeant Gillard and Flight Sergeant McConnochie flew scored hits on a Siebel ferry and several near misses on a string of barges; then on the way back to base they sighted and strafed enemy road transport. As the evacuation reached its peak, No. 239 alternated between raids on shipping in the straits and on motor transport steadily converging on the Messina beaches. In one raid, led by Bary, the Kittyhawks destroyed a complete convoy of twelve trucks running into Messina. In another mission a large barge and a launch that were singled out for attack disappeared under a cloud of spray. The hazardous nature of these fighter-bomber attacks is illustrated by the fact that, of the seven New Zealanders who served with No. 260 Squadron during 1943, up to this

time five had been killed, and only Flight Lieutenant Thomas and Flight Sergeant Twiname survived by the end of the fighting in **Sicily**.

Among the New Zealanders who flew light bombers was Wing Commander L. J. Joel, in command of No. 55 Baltimore Squadron. Now on his third tour of operations, Joel displayed 'outstanding qualities of leadership and determination' during the Sicilian campaign. In the first phase of the Sicilian invasion his squadron flew a novel type of operation for light bombers. Flying singly by night, the Baltimores ranged over western **Sicily** on armed reconnaissance of ports, railways and roads. Then in the third week of July the squadron moved by air to **Malta**, where it reverted to the daylight role with attacks on enemy strongpoints, on gun positions, the harbour at Milazzo and the towns of Paterno, Centuripe and Randazzo. Finally Joel took his squadron to **Sicily**, where during the peak period of the German evacuation the Baltimores attacked the embarkation points.

With No. 236 Boston Wing on night operations, Squadron Leader N. Dumont, who won commendation for his work in **Tunisia**, now commanded a flight of No. 18 Squadron. Other experienced New Zealand airmen with this unit were Flying Officer Edwards, ¹ pilot, Warrant Officer Petrie, ² wireless operator, and Flight Sergeant H. S. McCullum, navigator.

In night intruder operations against enemy supply lines and airfields in southern **Italy**, Squadron Leader P. W. Rabone, now a flight commander of his No. 23 Squadron, continued to display noteworthy enterprise and leadership. During one sortie to the **Rome** area, he

¹ Flight Lieutenant E. F. Edwards; born Bromsgrove, England, 11 Sep 1917; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941.

² Flying Officer M. W. F. Petrie; born **Ashburton**, 12 Jan 1920; baker; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940.

successfully attacked a road convoy and then went on to strafe and damage three Cant 506 float planes at their moorings on Lake Bracciano. In mid-August Rabone borrowed a Spitfire to fly spare parts from **Malta** to a squadron detachment at Palermo. On the return flight he met and destroyed a Junkers 88 over Trapani airfield. It is recorded that 'this action was considered a breach of good manners in robbing the Spitfire pilots of their lawful prey but it was not taken amiss.' Three weeks later while operating from **Sicily**, Rabone led an intruder raid on Grosseto airfield and succeeded in destroying a Junkers 88, a Heinkel 111 and damaging a second Heinkel.

New Zealand airmen also rendered excellent service with the coastal squadrons that were constantly on patrol to protect Allied convoys and to search for and attack enemy naval units and merchant vessels. During the North African campaign Wellington and Beaufort torpedo-bombers had borne the brunt of the assault against the enemy sea lanes, but now daylight strikes by the fast and manoeuvrable Beaufighters proved a most effective counter to the stream of supply vessels which hugged the coasts of southern **Italy**, **Corsica** and **Sardinia**, before running across to Sicilian ports. Flying Officer S. M. Hunt and Flight Sergeant A. E. Kemp of No. 47 Squadron and Pilot Officer D. M. Hunter of No. 39 Squadron distinguished themselves in a series of gallant and determined attacks off the Corsican coast before they were eventually shot down and taken prisoner. With No. 52 Squadron which carried out many of the reconnaissance flights for these strikes, Flying Officer W. J. Hoy, Warrant Officer W. C. Jorgensen and Flight Sergeant W. H. J. Bowsher continued to do good work until early in August, when their **Baltimore** failed to return from a reconnaissance of the **Naples** area. No. 14 Marauder Squadron also flew reconnaissance sorties, Warrant Officer D. S. McGregor, Flight Sergeants N. D. Freeman and F. M. Spedding making many sightings. On one occasion Freeman was sent out to search for a dinghy. He was jumped by two Messerschmitt 109s and a Regione 2000 which came at him out of the sun. Although thus heavily assailed, he shot down one Messerschmitt 109 and the other two aircraft were damaged and driven off.

From [Malta](#) a group of ten New Zealanders flew with No. 221 Wellington Squadron on shipping searches and anti-submarine patrols. An unusual and interesting sortie fell to Flying Officer Lewis ¹ and his crew, which included four other New Zealanders. One night in mid- July while off the Sicilian coast, a large Italian submarine, the *Romolo*, was sighted on the surface. Lewis flew in to attack along the moon path and dropped five depth-charges. The first four overshot slightly but the last exploded under the hull of the submarine, and as the
air-

¹ Flight Lieutenant W. Lewis, DFC; born [Wellington](#), 25 Feb 1922; salesman; joined [RNZAF](#) 25 May 1941.

craft

flew on, the rear-gunner scored strikes on the base of the conning tower. The *Romolo* remained surfaced, and as the Wellington went in again to drop sea markers its aft gun opened fire. Lewis then made landfall to verify the position and on returning to the scene of the attack found the submarine circling as if out of control, with fumes and smoke pouring from the conning tower. Lewis then left for base and the crippled submarine began to make slow headway, but some five hours later it was found and attacked by another Wellington of No. 221 Squadron. After remaining stationary for half an hour and losing large quantities of oil, the submarine managed to get under way once again and steer an erratic course towards the Italian coast. Within the next forty-eight hours, Baltimores twice sighted the *Romolo* making slow progress at periscope depth, but she never reached harbour and there were no survivors.

On convoy escort duties with No. 253 Hurricane Squadron, which was the first British squadron to be based on Lampedusa, there were nine New Zealand pilots. From its island base the squadron was responsible for protecting all convoys within a fifty-mile radius. Although pilots were not to see action during their stay on the former Italian stronghold, they

were constantly out on patrol and had the satisfaction of ensuring the safety of many convoys which passed through their sector. For instance, on the eve of the invasion the Hurricanes covered a huge convoy which stretched for over forty miles. This lack of action was in direct contrast to the pilots' experiences in North Africa, where they had been engaged on similar duties. They scored many successes. New Zealanders who did well in combat at this time were Pilot Officer Prentice,¹ Flight Sergeants Shorthouse,² Jackson³ and Cammock,⁴ who later was to be one of No. 486 Tempest Squadron's top-scoring pilots against the flying bomb, and Flight Sergeant C. P. Ashworth—brother of the veteran bomber pilot and pathfinder pioneer, Squadron Leader A. Ashworth. On one occasion Jackson and Cammock were among five squadron pilots who destroyed four Italian torpedo-bombers which they found about to attack a convoy. Shorthouse shared in the destruction of two Junkers 88 and Ashworth's score was three enemy aircraft destroyed.

The large group of New Zealand pilots, navigators, bomb-aimers, wireless operators and air gunners with the Royal Air Force Wellington,

¹ Flight Lieutenant J. S. Prentice; born Dunedin, 6 May 1920; law clerk; joined [RNZAF](#) 25 May 1941; prisoner of war, 15 Aug 1944.

² Flying Officer R. C. Shorthouse; born Portsmouth, England, 9 Aug 1922; clerk; joined [RNZAF](#) 4 May 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant D. Jackson; born [Christchurch](#), 28 Nov 1919; farm labourer; joined [RNZAF](#) Jul 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer R. J. Cammock, DFC; born [Christchurch](#), 4 Jul 1923; clerk; joined [RNZAF](#) 17 Aug 1941; killed on air operations, 6 Oct 1944.

[Halifax](#) and Liberator squadrons of the Strategic Air Force played a full part in the attacks on communications, ports and airfields and, as

the campaign drew to an end, in the bombing of embarkation points in **Sicily** and reception areas in the toe of **Italy**. The RAF effort was continuous and intense and, together with the American daylight operations, maintained a 'round-the-clock' assault. In attacks on what were usually heavily defended targets, casualties, particularly from flak, were inevitable. Warrant Officer Shepherd, ¹ pilot, Flying Officer W. G. Smith, ² navigator, and Flight Sergeant Wilkie, ³ air gunner, are representative of the men from the Dominion who lost their lives in bomber operations during this period.

Wing Commander J. J. McKay continued in command of No. 178 Liberator Squadron, which in spite of a shortage of aircraft and crews he had now built into an extremely efficient unit. New Zealanders operating with this squadron included Flight Sergeant Cooke, ⁴ as pilot, Flight Sergeant Orr, ⁵ navigator, and Flight Sergeant Kainamu, ⁶ air gunner, while Squadron Leader C. R. Heazlewood was the squadron's engineer officer. With No. 462 Australian Squadron, Squadron Leader W. R. Kofoed, Pilot Officer G. S. Halley and Flight Sergeant Browne ⁷ flew as captains of **Halifax** aircraft. Kofoed was now approaching the end of a long period of duty as flight commander with this squadron and in recognition of his services he was shortly to be awarded the Distinguished Service Order. On one mission to Palermo a photo-flash exploded in his aircraft. The fuselage was badly buckled but Kofoed managed to fly the crippled **Halifax** back to base.

Most of the airmen mentioned earlier in this chapter continued operating with their Wellington squadrons, notably Wing Commander D. R. Bagnall, who continued to lead No. 40 Squadron, and Squadron Leader H. H. Beale as flight commander of No. 37 Squadron. Both were to receive further distinction for their inspiring leadership: in November 1943, Bagnall was admitted to the Distinguished Service Order; two months later Beale received a bar to his Distinguished Flying Cross. Other aircrew with Wellingtons to gain commendation for their work

¹ Warrant Officer H. S. Shepherd; born **Onehunga**, 7 Oct

1914; cabinet maker; joined RNZAF 2 Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 12 Aug 1943.

² Flying Officer W. G. Smith; born Matakoho, 3 Aug 1907; sheep farmer; joined RNZAF 30 Nov 1941; killed on air operations, 5 Aug 1943.

³ Flight Sergeant G. H. B. Wilkie; born Marton, 14 Nov 1920; grocer; joined RNZAF 30 Nov 1941; killed on air operations, 5 Aug 1943.

⁴ Flight Sergeant R. W. Cooke; born Manaia, 1 Mar 1923; clerical cadet; joined RNZAF May 1941; killed on air operations, 4 Sep 1943.

⁵ Flying Officer A. I. Orr; born Oamaru, 20 Jun 1920; warehouseman; joined RNZAF 6 Jul 1941.

⁶ Flight Sergeant L. H. Kainamu; born Mohaka, Hawke's Bay, 28 Jul 1919; clerk; joined RNZAF 24 May 1941; killed on air operations, 4 Sep 1943.

⁷ Flying Officer D. R. Browne, DFM; born New Lynn, 1 Dec 1919; medical student; joined RNZAF Nov 1941.

were Pilot Officer B. Cullinane, Flying Officer Rogers ¹ and Flight Sergeant Rutherford ² as captains and Flight Sergeant Bailes ³ as air gunner. During night operations to cover the landings in Sicily, Cullinane captained one of two Wellingtons from No. 70 Squadron which were specially selected to attack the seaplane base at Syracuse. While other squadron aircraft bombed the harbour and provided illumination, Cullinane flew in at low level and, along with the accompanying Wellington, scored direct hits. It is recorded that the elimination of the seaplane base 'contributed materially to the success of the combined operation.' Rogers, a deputy flight commander of No. 150 Squadron, was

particularly prominent in low-level attacks against the Messina beaches. Other pilots with a fine record were Flight Lieutenant R. J. Taaffe, now on his second tour, Flying Officer Howell,⁴ Flight Sergeants Jeffares⁵ and Alexander,⁶ while Flying Officers Godby⁷ and Barney⁸ and Flight Sergeant Hedges⁹ also did good work as navigators.

¹ Flight Lieutenant K. B. Rogers, DFC; born **Auckland**, 11 Oct 1922; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** 28 Sep 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant S. Rutherford, DFM; born **Balclutha**, 31 Mar 1922; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 9 Nov 1941.

³ Flying Officer J. F. Bailes, DFM; born **Auckland**, 25 Mar 1915; lorry driver; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant L. R. W. Howell; born **Napier**, 21 Sep 1919; motor engineer; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939.

⁵ Pilot Officer B. C. Jeffares; born **Stratford**, 27 Oct 1922; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1941; killed on air operations, 21 Oct 1944.

⁶ Flying Officer G. McF. Alexander; born **Christchurch**, 16 Oct 1921; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1941.

⁷ Flying Officer I. M. Godby; born **Christchurch**, 19 Mar 1913; solicitor; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941; killed on air operations, 24 Oct 1943.

⁸ Squadron Leader W. D. Barney; born **Timaru**, 15 Jul 1920; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1941.

⁹ Warrant Officer E. A. W. Hedges; born **Wellington**, 17 Jun 1916; storeman; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 8 – ITALY

CHAPTER 8

Italy

THE Sicilian campaign had brought Italy to the verge of collapse. Mussolini was now deposed and Marshal Badoglio had formed a government with the object of seeking peace. But Italian hopes of negotiating a surrender independently of the Germans were slender because Mussolini had permitted, or had been forced to accept, the infiltration of many Germans, all of whom were ready to pounce at the first sign of defection and take over the country.

In spite of German watchfulness, however, the Italian Government did succeed in making contact with the Allies, whereupon, as General Eisenhower records, there began a series of negotiations, secret communications, clandestine journeys by secret agents and frequent meetings in hidden places that, if encountered in the fictional world, would have been scorned as incredible melodrama. Plots of various kinds were hatched, only to be abandoned because of changing circumstances. For instance, there was a plan to land a large airborne force in the vicinity of Rome but, at the last moment, the movement of German reserves forced cancellation of the project. Negotiations dragged on throughout August. They were very intricate since they involved the still strong Italian Fleet, the remnants of Italian air forces and the Italian troops throughout the peninsula and in the Balkans. Marshal Badoglio was also much concerned about the difficulty of making a surrender effective, unless sufficient Allied forces could arrive to support his Government. It was finally agreed to announce an armistice on the eve of the Allied invasion, but by that time the Germans had discovered what was happening; they closed in on Rome and quickly overawed and disarmed the Italian divisions throughout the country. Badoglio and the King had to flee from Rome but the Allies did gain possession of the Italian Fleet; it sailed from its bases at Genoa, Spezia, and Taranto to surrender at Malta.

It was thus in an atmosphere of considerable uncertainty that

General Eisenhower laid his plans for invading the Italian mainland. He had to take special account of the German dispositions; for at the time they had sixteen divisions in **Italy**—eight in the north under Rommel, two near **Rome** and six farther south under Kesselring—and these powerful forces might well be reinforced from **Germany**. The British and Americans on the other hand had command of the air and of the sea, which might enable them to avoid a long and difficult campaign in southern **Italy**. In the circumstances, Eisenhower decided to begin the assault with an attack across the **Messina Straits** by Montgomery's **Eighth Army**. This would be quickly followed by the landing of British and American units of the **Fifth Army** under Lieutenant- General Mark Clark in the Gulf of **Salerno**—the farthest point up the west coast of **Italy** which could be covered by our fighters now based in **Sicily**. It was hoped to gain the ports of **Naples** and **Taranto** quickly since their combined facilities would be needed to supply the forces it was intended to use. The early capture of airfields was also a prime aim, especially the important group at **Foggia**,¹ from which our heavy bombers would be able to attack targets in eastern **Germany** and in **Rumania**.

As soon as the Sicilian campaign ended the Allied forces began preparations for carrying out this plan. Units of the **Eighth Army** concentrated in the east of **Sicily** and those of the **Fifth Army** in the west, while other forces assembled in the North African ports. Simultaneously the air assault on the Italian mainland was intensified. Here the main targets were railways and airfields, the intention being to isolate the Germans in southern **Italy** and to drive what remained of the **Luftwaffe** from its landing grounds. During the last fortnight of August, 736 heavy bomber, 1696 medium, 88 light and 1009 fighter-bomber sorties were flown with this object. Most effective attacks on the **Foggia** marshalling yards were delivered on 19 and 25 August; they undid all the work of repair which had been laboriously completed after the heavy raids of the previous month. The weight of the air attacks increased during the last week of August when the marshalling yards at **Salerno**, **Bagnoli**, **Taranto**, **Aversa**, **Battipaglia** and the airfields at **Foggia**, **Capua** and **Grazzanise** were all heavily bombed. Altogether some 3000 tons of

explosives fell on railway targets as far north as [Pisa](#).

Royal Air Force Wellington bombers played a prominent part and it was during their operations that an act of cool and deliberate courage was performed by Flight Sergeant Simpson,² who captained a Wellington of No. 104 Squadron. Simpson was just taking off to bomb [Viterbo](#) airfield when a tyre burst. His aircraft, which was carrying a full load of petrol and bombs—some fitted with a particularly fragile type of fuse—at once swung violently off the runway, turned a complete circle

¹ Two miles outside the town lay the large Gino Lisa airfield and on the surrounding plain the Germans had laid out an extensive satellite system of twelve more landing grounds with runways of from 200 to 1700 yards. These could handle hundreds of aircraft, and through them Allied Tactical Air Forces would be able to reinforce the Italian front on a large scale before handing the bases over to the strategic bombers.

² Flying Officer R. M. F. Simpson, BEM; born Redcliffe, 8 Jan 1917; fire insurance inspector; joined [RNZAF](#) 27 Jul 1941.

and, on grinding to rest, caught fire. The crew managed to scramble from the blazing machine and had just got clear when Simpson noticed another Wellington bomber parked about 150 yards away. He immediately ran across and began to prime its engines in order to taxi it away to a safe distance. As he stood thus exposed beneath the engine cowling, his own Wellington suddenly exploded, scattering splinters and fragments in all directions. Simpson, however, persisted and while the burning Wellington nearby continued to erupt exploding ammunition and pyrotechnics, he succeeded in taxi-ing the second aircraft away undamaged. His action was recognised by the award of the British Empire Medal.

The fighter squadrons, among them No. [322 Wing](#) led by Wing Commander Colin Gray, continued to fly offensive sweeps and to escort light bombers to their targets. For the most part they met little

opposition from the *Luftwaffe*, but there were occasional air fights. On one day towards the end of August Spitfires of No. 81 Squadron were escorting Bostons to bomb a railway junction in south-west *Italy* when Messerschmitts attacked. Flight Sergeant W. J. Robinson went after one of them and kept up a stream of fire which ripped off large pieces; the German pilot baled out and his aircraft broke in half as it spiralled into the sea. Simultaneously Pilot Officer A. M. Peart engaged and shot down another Messerschmitt. Then Robinson saw one of the German fighters dive to sea level and turn inland. He set off in pursuit, firing bursts every now and then as the two fighters twisted and weaved their way inland among the hills; then suddenly, as hits began to register, the Messerschmitt pilot tried to turn steeply in a narrow valley; one wing tip touched the side of a hill and a second later the German fighter crashed in a cloud of smoke and flame.

Another New Zealander who saw action at this time was Flight Sergeant Simms; ¹ he was radio observer in a Beaufighter which shot down a Dornier 217 bomber over the straits. This was one of the few successes scored by the night-fighter pilots who maintained regular patrols over the assemblage of British troops and landing craft at Messina.

* * * * *

The invasion of *Italy* began in the early hours of 3 September 1943, when the clamour of 900 guns firing across the Straits of Messina announced the advent of the *Eighth Army*. Before dawn its advanced guard had landed on the Calabrian shore without opposition at Reggio, Gallico and Catona. *Royal Air Force* fighters and fighter-bombers

¹ Pilot Officer D. E. Simms; born West Melton, 8 May 1913; labourer; joined *RNZAF* 27 Oct 1940; killed on air operations, 28 Dec 1943.

covered its progress but on that day and on those which immediately

followed our pilots met little opposition; the *Luftwaffe* had, in fact, already been driven from all the airfields in the neighbourhood. The **Eighth Army** at once began to move steadily northwards, delayed only by demolitions and slight rearguard actions. For the Germans, realising their inability to hold the toe of **Italy**, had begun to withdraw their troops from that area and their retreat was now hastened by our fighters and light bombers.

At **Salerno**, where the landings began at dawn on 9 September, events took a very different course. Here the region to be assaulted was very strong, since the narrow coastal plain which borders the Gulf of **Salerno** is dominated by the hills and mountains which surround it on all sides but one. Moreover, strong and determined forces were available to dispute our landings. For Kesselring, despite the confusion caused by the Italian armistice, was determined to defend **Rome** and he had reacted to the threat of invasion in this area with speed and resolution; German troops had already taken over the coastal defences, and as the approach of the Allied armada became known, reinforcements began moving towards **Salerno**.

During the previous week the Allied air forces had done their utmost to make things as difficult as possible for the enemy. As well as attacking enemy-occupied airfields, they had bombed roads and railways leading to what was to be the battlefield—to the north at Aversa, Villa Literno, Grosseto, **Cancello** and **Salerno** itself; to the east of Battipaglia and Potenza, and to the south at Cosenza, Lauria and Sapri. At first these attacks met with some opposition from the *Luftwaffe*, as many as fifty fighters at a time seeking to intercept the daylight raids, but by the first week of September the enemy effort had lessened considerably; the bombing of his fighter fields had had its effect. Meanwhile our Tactical and Coastal squadrons, operating from bases in North Africa, **Malta** and **Sicily**, were covering the approach of the assault forces. The Coastal squadrons, had already, since the beginning of July, protected some 140 convoys, of which those moving to **Salerno** were the latest; and on patrol pilots and crews had sighted and attacked twenty-one enemy

submarines.

From the moment the first troops set foot ashore at **Salerno**, British and American fighters, including some from aircraft carriers, were on patrol overhead. The Lightnings, Mustangs and Spitfires, which came from airfields in **Sicily**, had to fly between 175 to 220 miles to the scene of action. They were enabled to do so by the use of long-range petrol tanks which could be jettisoned when empty; but even with this addition to their petrol supply, the RAF Spitfires could spend barely half an hour above the beaches, so that squadrons had to succeed each other throughout the day. Yet despite this great disadvantage our fighter pilots did, for the most part, keep the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs away from the landing areas. German bombers, however, managed to score a number of successes against our shipping off the coast, the most notable being the severe damage inflicted on HMS *Warspite* by two radio-controlled glider bombs. ¹ She was forced to withdraw from the scene and remained out of action for six months. Meanwhile our own light and fighter-bombers were active against enemy strongpoints by day while Beaufighters continued with patrols and attacks each night. And all the time our heavy and medium bombers continued to strike at roads, railway junctions and bridges in the area of **Naples** and in the neighbourhood of the **Volturno River** in order to restrict enemy movement towards the battle area. The most successful of these operations was that directed against the two bridges at **Capua** which were almost completely destroyed.

Thus supported by their comrades in the air, our ground forces quickly won a foothold at **Salerno** despite sharp opposition; and during the first few days they made good progress towards establishing a substantial bridgehead. But on the fourth day the Germans launched a fierce counter-attack, during which the numerically inferior Allied divisions came under heavy fire from well-sited long-range guns; within the next forty-eight hours the whole situation deteriorated seriously, the Germans driving forward at one point on the American front to within sight of the beaches. 'The outlook began to be somewhat gloomy,' writes

General Eisenhower, 'for it now seemed probable that the invasion forces might be divided and overwhelmed.' But at this critical moment Air Chief Marshal Tedder concentrated the full available strength of the Allied air forces, including both the medium and heavy bombers, against the oncoming enemy. In the next twenty-four hours, with nearly every crew flying double sorties, more than 1400 tons of bombs fell on German positions in the battle area and on targets in its immediate neighbourhood. Fighters and fighter-bombers swept over the whole region from dawn to dusk, attacking enemy columns and transport upon the roads. These efforts continued unabated throughout the next two days and on the 14th, which witnessed the crisis of the battle, our fighters and fighter-bombers flew a total of over 700 sorties.

The whole air assault was delivered with precision and effectiveness. So badly did it disrupt the enemy's communications, supplies and mobility that, with the aid of naval gunfire, our ground troops regained the initiative and thereafter, although there was further hard fighting,

¹ These novel and ingenious weapons were of two kinds—one was a modified type of armour-piercing bomb with stabilising fins forward and a box tail aft, while the other, the better known Hs293, was a jet-propelled missile, in the shape and form of a miniature monoplane. Both weapons were launched from Dornier 217s which carried them beneath their wings.

German counter-attacks were never in sufficient strength to threaten our general position. One military writer has since declared that 'it is not too much to say that air power saved the **Fifth Army**.' ¹ Certainly the Allied invasion was saved from disaster only by a narrow margin. But by 15 September the crisis was over and the enemy had begun to withdraw northwards. Our bridgehead at **Salerno** was secure.

The fierce fighting at **Salerno** had drawn off enemy forces in front of Montgomery's **Eighth Army**, enabling it to advance more rapidly from the south; and on 16 September its forward units made contact with General Clark's **Fifth Army** to the south of **Salerno** Bay. Meanwhile 1

British Airborne Division, which had been landed from warships at **Taranto**, had moved forward to link up with Montgomery's right. Pressing on, the **Eighth Army** captured the **Foggia** airfields on 27 September and four days later Allied forces moving forward from **Salerno** entered the port of **Naples**. And with this consolidation of our position in southern **Italy** the Germans quickly evacuated the islands of **Sardinia** and **Corsica**, both of which were in our hands by the beginning of October.

In support of these various movements the Allied air forces continued to operate in strength. Fighters maintained regular patrols over **Salerno** and made offensive sweeps ahead of our troops, while fighter-bombers kept up their attacks on enemy strongpoints and lines of communication in or near the battle areas. Medium and heavy bombers ranged farther afield, attacking road junctions, bridges, railways and air bases, especially those to the north and east of **Naples**. Towards the end of September, photo-reconnaissance showed that **Formia**, **Caserta** and **Benevento** had been badly hit; road bridges were seen to be down at **Lagonegro**, **Avellino**, and to the north of **Capua**, while railway bridges were impassable at **Formia** and **Pescara**; other bridges were seen to be blocked by craters at their approaches. A good deal of damage was also observed at enemy airfields in the **Rome** and **Viterbo** regions.

And while patrol and attack thus continued the Allied squadrons were steadily moving forward into **Italy** from **Malta**, **Sicily** and **North Africa**. First came **Cunningham's Tactical Air Force** with its fighters and fighter-bombers and then the light bombers; squadrons moved on to captured airfields as soon as they were serviceable or else, as at **Salerno**, operated from newly constructed landing strips so that contact could be maintained with the retreating enemy. Transport squadrons helped by making 'lifts' of ground staffs and equipment. Before the end of September, two **RAF Spitfire** wings were operating along with American units on the **Fifth Army** sector while a **Baltimore** light-bomber

¹ Major-General J. F. C. Fuller in *The Second World War—A Strategic and Tactical History*, p. 269.

wing, a Kittyhawk fighter and two more Spitfire wings were with the **Eighth Army**. British and American reconnaissance squadrons were also disposed at various points in the two sectors in order to extend their range of observation. And as the vanguard of fighters and fighter-bombers moved northwards, accommodation became available for the remaining units of the **Tactical Air Force**. Very soon it would be the turn of the squadrons of the Coastal and Strategic Air Forces.

The *Luftwaffe* was unable to prevent either this advance of our air units or the consolidation of our ground forces in **Italy**. The constant bombing of its airfields and their subsequent capture had forced the *Luftwaffe* farther and farther back and its relatively few fighters, operating at extreme range, were unable to provide appreciable support for Kesselring's troops. German bombers and fighters did make an all-out effort at **Salerno** but, as in **Sicily**, they were soon outnumbered and overwhelmed and could do little to check the determination of Tedder's combined air forces to help their hard-pressed comrades upon the ground. Thereupon, realising its impotence, the *Luftwaffe* had operated almost entirely at night, concentrating such strength as it still possessed against the beaches and the shipping lying off them; German army units were left to make their counter-attacks without any protection except that which anti-aircraft weapons could provide. These tactics on the part of the *Luftwaffe* gave our night fighters an opportunity to show their mettle and they took it in no uncertain manner.

But although harassed and driven back in **Italy**, the *Luftwaffe* did achieve a notable success in the Aegean. Here, simultaneously with the invasion of **Italy**, small Allied detachments had seized a number of islands, including Kos and **Leros**, preparatory to a possible seizure of Rhodes and an invasion of **Greece**. But neither sufficient ground troops

and equipment nor the strong air forces necessary to support them were made available to hold these gains. By the end of September the *Luftwaffe* had built up a force of over 350 fighters and bombers in the Aegean area and these formed the vanguard of the German counter-attack which, in a few short weeks, recaptured all the islands that the Allies, in their over-confidence, had previously taken. Here is an account of what happened at **Leros**:

A superior force of the *Luftwaffe* based on airfields in Rhodes, **Crete** and **Greece**, all most conveniently close at hand, bombed the island almost at their pleasure. No fighter cover could be given to its small garrison, for the nearest Allied airfields were some 390 miles away. The invasion began on 12th October and by the 16th all was over. As at Kos, it was carried out partly by seaborne troops and partly by airborne, whose standard of training and marksmanship was high. On more than one occasion the magazines of the Bren guns in the hands of the defenders were shot away as soon as they were inserted. The Germans also showed that the link between the *Luftwaffe* above and the troops below was strong and effective, the first instantly responding to all demands made on them by the second. ¹

The Aegean episode—a daring, if rash, venture—cost us the lives of some hundreds of troops and airmen, a large quantity of valuable stores and equipment, a number of naval vessels and 115 aircraft. It reflected the unfortunate differences of opinion which developed at this period of the war regarding Allied Mediterranean strategy. Winston Churchill had been strongly in favour of the expedition but American opinion was generally less enthusiastic, and when things became difficult in **Italy** it was found impossible to divert forces to the Aegean in time to save the situation. ‘The Prime Minister was anxious to provide support for the islands and my staff and I studied the problem with the greatest possible sympathy,’ writes General Eisenhower. ‘We came to the conclusion that aside from some temporary air support there was nothing we could give. To detach too much of our air force and particularly to dispatch land forces ... would be definitely detrimental—possibly fatal—to the battle in

which we were then engaged Those islands, in my judgment, while of considerable strategic importance, did not compare in military value to success in the Italian battle.’²

With the capture of **Naples** and the **Foggia** airfields, a pause was enforced upon our armies in **Italy**. North of **Naples** the **Fifth Army** met strong resistance along the **Volturno River**, which needed time and supplies to overcome. The **Eighth Army**, after its rapid advance up the toe of **Italy**, had almost reached the end of its tether, and its base had to be moved up from **Reggio** to **Taranto** and **Bari**. Similar problems of supply and reinforcements beset the Allied air forces. For the tactical squadrons were now taking positions as far forward as possible, and the transfer of the strategic bomber force from North **Africa** to the airfields around **Foggia** had begun. Apart from the movement of men and machines, a vast amount of supplies and equipment, including large quantities of steel matting for landing strips, was urgently needed. Repair shops and stores had to be established and pipelines and pumping stations, largely recovered from North Africa, had to be installed to permit the necessary flow of aviation fuel to the airfields. It was also necessary to provide a complicated system of communications for both army and air forces, along with all the administrative and ancillary services which form part of the modern military machine.

Meanwhile, two things happened that were to influence the whole of the subsequent campaign in **Italy**. Firstly the Allies, having decided

¹ *Royal Air Force, 1939–45*, Vol. II, pp. 343–4.

² Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, Chap. X. But see also Churchill, *Second World War*, Vol. V, Chap. XII.

that the **Mediterranean** must now become a secondary theatre of operations, began the withdrawal of some of their best divisions and several air squadrons from this region in order to prepare for the cross-Channel attack from **Britain** in the following year. Secondly **Hitler**, on

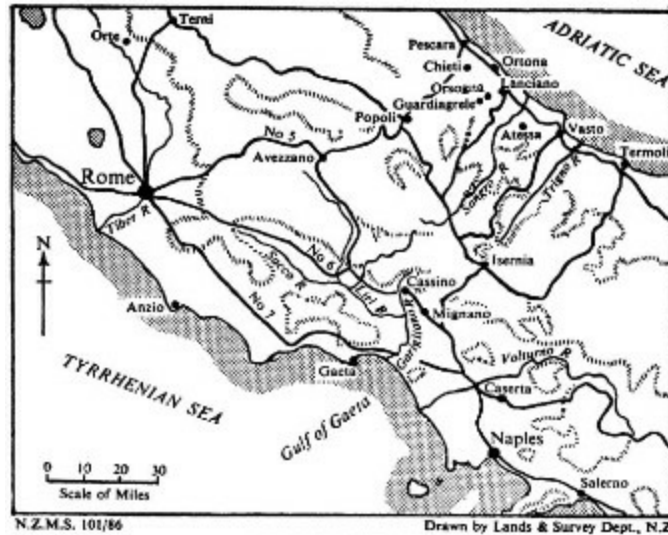
Kesselring's advice, changed his mind about his Italian strategy. Previously he had intended to withdraw his forces behind **Rome** and hold only northern **Italy**, but now he ordered them to fight as far south as possible. The line selected ran beyond the River Sangro, on the Adriatic side, across the mountainous spine of **Italy** to the mouth of the Garigliano on the west, a position which, several miles in depth, was made immensely strong by its river and mountain barriers.

Thus, in the autumn of 1943, the whole situation in **Italy** changed greatly to our disadvantage and the possibility of a rapid advance to the north became very remote. Henceforward our troops, in reduced strength, were to be faced by a determined and resourceful enemy, skilfully led and fighting a series of stubborn delaying actions in which the utmost use was made of the natural features of the country, its steep mountains and swift-flowing rivers.

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The early capture of **Rome** was now our immediate objective but its attainment proved anything but easy. Grimly the **Eighth Army** forced its way over the Trigno and then across the more formidable barrier of the **Sangro**. By the end of the year, after some of the bloodiest fighting of the campaign, British, Canadian, New Zealand and Indian troops had fought their way forward in terrible weather to the line **Ortona- Orsogna**, but then they were bogged down. Meanwhile, with great exertions, the **Fifth Army** had forced the difficult passage of the **Volturno** and pushed forward only to come up against the even more difficult Garigliano. These rivers and those which lay ahead were at all seasons serious obstacles, since the gorges in which they ran were immense by comparison with the flow of water; but when swollen by rain or snow they became much more difficult, especially as the approaches became similarly waterlogged. In the bed itself, the water would rise many feet in a few hours, often thus dislocating pontoon bridges and exposing troops who had secured a footing on the far bank to acute peril. With railroads wrecked, bridges destroyed and many sections of the roads

blown out, any advance was thus difficult enough even without opposition from the enemy. Moreover, wretched weather soon overtook our troops amid the Italian mountains and as they struggled forward there were frequent references, in terms of sarcastic disgust, to 'Sunny Italy'.



THE ROADS TO ROME

During these months of hard effort on the ground, our fighters and fighter-bombers ranged the sky above the battlefield. They were specially active during the crossing of the **Volturno** and Trigno rivers in the middle of October and of the **Sangro** a month later. The actual operations, however, tended to become repetitive; only the place-names changed. Sometimes it would be the turn of the Bostons and Baltimores, sometimes of the Kittyhawks and Spitfires. And their targets, the San Salvo batteries, the bridges across the **Sangro**, the road convoys by night, were almost invariably those requested by the Army.

Encounters with enemy fighters were rare but early in December Flight Sergeant Ross, ¹ who flew a Spitfire with No. 601 Squadron, had an eventful sortie. On patrol over the **Pescara** area his squadron sighted six Messerschmitts, which at once turned back north. During the pursuit, Ross was able to catch up with one of them and shoot it down, but while he was returning his long-range petrol tank was hit by flak. It burst into flames which soon enveloped the Spitfire. Ross baled out and

landed safely, only to find himself behind the enemy lines. Undaunted, however, he set off across country and, after a long and difficult trek, reached his squadron.

With the onset of winter the conditions under which squadrons operated were anything but pleasant. In the vicinity of the **Apennines**,

¹ Flying Officer T. H. Ross, DFC; born **Otorohanga**, 10 Sep 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 25 May 1941.

blue skies would quickly give way to scudding clouds and torrential rain; violent storms flooded camps and disrupted communications. On the airfields aircraft were crowded on to the new all-weather surfaces of steel mesh. But so precious was each sheet of perforated steel that there was usually enough for only one runway; pilots, therefore, had to land on a narrow strip, often with a strong cross wind and with the certainty of crashing into rough or muddy ground if they swung off the runway. Control of aircraft movements both on the fields and in the air above was very difficult. Indeed there were times when the air overhead became so congested that fighters and bombers were in danger of running out of petrol while waiting to land. To ease the situation, aircraft would sometimes be seen taking off in one direction and landing in another, even with a down wind of anything up to 25 miles an hour. Such a procedure would normally have invited mid-air collisions but pilots quickly learnt to pay the closest attention to orders from the ground.

As the weather grew colder new technical problems arose. In the **Western Desert** carburettor de-icing and oil dilution had not been necessary, but now, in **Italy**, the air filter on intakes tended to ice up rapidly, particularly at night. But these and other problems were quickly overcome in order that squadrons might continue to operate at full pressure. On 2 December 1943, as the first flakes of snow drifted down over the landing grounds on the **Foggia** plain, Coningham's **Tactical Air Force** established a record by flying 1200 sorties, more than had been

flown in any one day since the start of the campaign. Of that total **RAF** Spitfires, Kittyhawks and Warhawks contributed 340 in the Eighth Army area and a further 70 over **Yugoslavia**. Mitchell light bombers flew another 160 sorties in four missions against bridges over the Pescara River—this was to hinder the enemy from reinforcing the sector north of the **Sangro**, now threatened by the **Eighth Army**.

A notable advance in the system of co-operation with the ground forces was initiated by the **RAF** during this first winter in **Italy**. Previously targets on the battlefield had been described and their attack requested by army officers stationed at Wing and Group Headquarters, whereupon, after due consultation, the appropriate squadrons were detailed and pilots briefed for the attack. But now mobile observation posts were established with the forward troops at Brigade Headquarters and in direct communication by radio-telephone with a squadron or squadrons of aircraft already airborne. The pilots carried a photographic map with a grid superimposed upon it and, using the same map, controllers gave them their targets. The area of operations would be settled on the evening preceding each day of battle at a conference attended by representatives of the Army and the **Air Force**.

In operation the plan was simple and direct. A squadron of fighters or fighter-bombers would patrol overhead, usually in line astern; on receiving a request from the Army for attack on a specific target the Controller would call up his pilots and give them its position, along with a short description of its nature. A few seconds later one or more aircraft from the formation, or 'cabrank' as it was soon known, would dive upon it and drop bombs or open fire with cannon. The scheme proved an instant success for targets fixed or moving could now be bombed or subjected to cannon or machine-gun fire very swiftly, often within a matter of minutes after they had been chosen. At first operations were controlled from armoured cars fitted with very high frequency transmitters, but soon the equipment included a lorry, a jeep and a trailer manned by an army and an **RAF** officer with a mechanic. Various modifications of the system were tried as the war went on but its

essential principle remained unchanged.

The 'cabrank' system could not, however, have been instituted had the *Luftwaffe* been able to dispute the presence of Allied aircraft over the battlefield. Fortunately our air forces were now possessed of very great resources in men and machines, and having beaten down enemy opposition in the air, they were able to maintain the necessary effort day after day. There could be no doubt, as Army Commanders have warmly testified, that it proved of great value.

New Zealand fighter pilots were well represented among the squadrons operating in close support of the advance towards **Rome**. Wing Commander R. E. Bary's Kittyhawk wing was particularly prominent over the **Eighth Army** front. One day early in October pilots flew 186 sorties against enemy concentrations, claiming hits on over 100 vehicles, including several tanks and armoured cars. 'Largely by your efforts,' signalled the Army next day, 'the counter-attack which the enemy was mounting has been halted and it is now postponed, if not abandoned.' Flight Lieutenant B. H. Thomas and Flight Sergeants S. J. Fourneau, T. A. Gillard, W. G. McConnochie and R. H. Twiname were among the pilots of this wing. Thomas, who had been with his squadron since the days of **Alamein**, was to continue his fine record of service in **Italy**. On one sortie against enemy transport his Spitfire was hit while diving to attack; he had to crash-land at speed among some trees, and although his aircraft broke up about him he escaped injury.

Five New Zealanders were now leading fighter squadrons in **Italy**. They were Squadron Leaders E. D. Mackie, M. R. B. Ingram, E. L. Joyce, R. Webb and D. F. Westenra. All achieved a good record of service. Mackie, for example, was credited with the destruction of no fewer than sixteen enemy machines when he completed his second tour of operations in February 1944. Ingram, a veteran of the Western Desert, now brought his score up to nine enemy aircraft—one of them a Focke-Wulf 190 which he shot down while his squadron was protecting shipping to **Italy**. He was shortly to take his squadron to **South-east Asia**. Joyce was to lead the famous No. 73 Squadron for four months before he

returned to England to take command of a squadron of Mustangs during the **Normandy** invasion. Westenra, another veteran of the **Desert Air Force**, continued his successful command of Spitfires until February 1944, when he also returned to the **United Kingdom** to lead a squadron in the invasion of **France**.

Other fighter pilots who now distinguished themselves in patrol and attack over **Italy** were Flying Officer S. F. Browne, flying with No. 93 Spitfire Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Gould,¹ who flew Hurricanes of No. 241 Squadron, and Flight Lieutenant Livingstone² of No. 111 Spitfire Squadron.

New Zealanders were also well represented among the crews of the Wellingtons, Halifaxes and Liberators of the **RAF** bomber force. Wing Commander D. R. Bagnall, who had done such good work in North Africa, continued in charge of No. 40 Wellington Squadron which operated intensively during the early stages of the Italian campaign. Two veteran pilots, Squadron Leader H. H. Beale, who flew Wellingtons, and Squadron Leader W. R. Kofoed, a **Halifax** captain, were outstanding for their work on operations and as flight commanders in their units.

In the early bombing raids over **Italy** Flight Lieutenant R. J. Taaffe of No. 37 Squadron, Flying Officer L. R. W. Howell and Flight Sergeant R. E. Stowers of No. 70 Squadron were all prominent as captains of Wellington bombers, while Warrant Officer Laloli³ of No. 38 Squadron did good work as a wireless operator. The work of Flying Officer C. H. Masters, bombing leader in No. 70 Squadron, also deserves mention; in one raid on **Viterbo** when he flew in the leading aircraft, 'the whole airfield was brilliantly lit up as a result of his accurate laying of flares and in the subsequent attack few bombs failed to find their mark.'

Through the autumn of 1943 the heavy bomber crews maintained their attacks wherever possible on targets far and near. The gradual establishment of the strategic air forces in the **Foggia** region brought within striking distance most of south-eastern **Europe**, hitherto lying outside the range of bomber bases in the **United Kingdom**. Belgrade

¹ Flight Lieutenant G. R. Gould, DFC; born Rotherham, 25 Jun 1922; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant D. F. Livingstone, DFC; born **Wellington**, 3 Feb 1916; accountant; joined **RNZAF** 27 Oct 1940.

³ Flight Lieutenant C. F. Laloli, DFC; born Karangahape, **Auckland**, 5 Oct 1916; radio serviceman; joined **RNZAF** 8 Feb 1939.

and **Salonika** were less than 400 miles away, while Sofia, Budapest and the Vienna industrial district lay within 500-mile range, and the important **Ploesti** oilfields within 600. American bombers flew their first mission from **Foggia** on 1 October against the aircraft factories of Wiener Neustadt, and this was the start of a campaign which, in conjunction with Bomber Command and the American Eighth Air Force in **Britain**, was to spread far and wide over **Europe**, disrupting enemy industry, oil supplies and communications.

For the moment, however, the main effort of the Allied bombers was directed against the enemy supply routes in support of our armies. During October the RAF Wellingtons struck at railway marshalling yards northward along the coast from **Rome**. American bombers attacked the railway yards at **Pisa** and oil storage plants, railway yards and warehouses at **Bologna**. They also bombed the important ballbearing plant at Turin, and the adjacent Fiat motor-works and the railway yards. On 21 October the combined air forces attacked railways and bridges connecting northern **Italy** with **Rome** and, in the following weeks, the marshalling yards at Genoa, **Pisa**, **Bologna** and **Mestre**, along with important road and railway bridges in the vicinity, all felt the weight of our bomber assault. Eventually the attacks spread farther north to include railway communications leading from **France** to **Italy**, where numerous viaducts, bridges and tunnels made bomb damage more difficult to restore than in level country.

The *Luftwaffe* continued to be conspicuous by its absence. Indeed, after the stabilisation of the battlefield north of **Naples**, the German air effort over **Italy** was almost negligible. Fighter and fighter-bomber sorties in the actual area of battle did not exceed a daily average of thirty to thirty-five during November and December. Even more remarkable was the low scale of the enemy bomber effort, considering the obvious desirability of hampering the movement of Allied supplies. Between mid-October and mid-December, German long-range bombers in **Italy** operated on only eight occasions, six of them against the port of **Naples**; moreover, a large proportion of the four hundred sorties flown were abortive. Their only real success was a raid on **Bari** early in December, when a chance hit on an ammunition ship caused major damage and serious casualties in the port. The truth was that the *Luftwaffe*, after its severe losses in **Sicily** and with the demand of other fronts, especially the need to defend **Germany** itself, was not eager to launch intensive operations over **Italy**. Nor was this felt to be really necessary now that the Allied advance had brought their armies into difficult country. By conserving its strength the German Air Force might be able to react promptly to any major strategic threat— as it had already done in the Aegean.

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The line held by the Germans at the beginning of 1944 was one of the strongest in **Italy**. But it was imperative for the Allies to make every effort to continue their advance and retain the initiative while more momentous operations were being prepared in North-west **Europe**. Accordingly, it was decided to pin down the enemy with a frontal attack along the Garigliano, then turn his position by a landing behind it in the **Anzio** area, some thirty miles south of **Rome**. A forceful advance inland from **Anzio** would cut Kesselring's communications and force him to retire and surrender **Rome**. In support of this plan, the tasks of the Allied air forces were first and foremost to prevent any interference from the 350 operational aircraft which at that time composed the remaining strength of the *Luftwaffe* in **Italy**. Next came the disruption of the

enemy's supply lines, then protection for the assault convoys, and lastly direct support for our land forces by attacking suitable targets on the battlefield and its immediate neighbourhood.

The Fifth Army launched its assault across the Garigliano in mid-January with full support from both fighter and light bombers. The fighting was bitter and after some initial success our troops were held in their further attempts to advance northwards. In these rocky mountains the Germans had now created, with lavish use of concrete and steel, a great fortified system, and from observation posts on the heights they could direct their guns on all movement in the valley below. Kesselring was clearly determined to prevent us from breaking into the **Gustav Line** which, with **Cassino** as its central feature, was the rearmost position of their deep defensive zone. Nevertheless, our continuing attack had the desired effect. It distracted the enemy's attention from the approaching threat to his vulnerable seaward flank and caused him to bring up three divisions from reserve to restore the situation.

Our invasion fleet of some 250 ships reached **Anzio** on the night of 21 January and the landings began in the early hours of the following morning. Spitfire pilots who had taken off in the pallid glow of a waning moon were on patrol over the beaches before dawn and at first light they saw our troops already disembarking—a British infantry division, with supporting artillery and tanks, on the left and an American corps, consisting of infantry, rangers, artillery, tanks and other units, on the right, near Nettuno. By nightfall the ports of **Anzio** and Nettuno were in our hands, whilst inland from the beaches our troops, meeting little enemy opposition, were rapidly extending the bridgehead. The whole operation, in fact, achieved complete surprise—thanks largely to the action of the Allied air forces. During the previous few days they had been striking hard at all the central Italian airfields and so effective were these blows that the *Luftwaffe* was unable to put a single reconnaissance aircraft into the air. In consequence the large concourse of shipping carrying the assaulting troops had been able to reach the **Anzio** beaches unobserved. Once more, thanks to our command of the

air, fifty thousand American and British troops had arrived undetected in full battle array many miles behind the enemy front. Not until six hours after the first troops set foot ashore did a Messerschmitt fighter succeed in penetrating the air screen and in taking back to Kesselring reliable news that the Allies were behind his right flank.

During the next few days the **German Air Force** did what it could to molest the invaders, but it was never able to fly more than one hundred sorties a day. Fog on the airfields and its own depleted numbers made a stouter effort impossible. Its chief success was the sinking of several ships, including the British cruiser *Spartan*, which was hit by a glider bomb. In contrast, the Allied air effort was highly effective. **Royal Air Force** and American fighters on patrol above the bridgehead were numerous and alert. Farther afield, in the area between **Rome** and **Anzio**, the bombs dropped by our medium bombers on road junctions and bridges hindered the approach of enemy reinforcements, and at tacks on the Italian railways farther north, notably at **Pisa**, **Empoli** and **Pontedera**, added to their difficulties. It was, in fact, nearly three weeks before the enemy was able to muster sufficient troops and supplies for effective counter-attack.

Unfortunately our forces ashore at **Anzio** failed, or were not able, to exploit their opportunity. Their commander, instead of ordering a swift dash inland, chose to continue with the painstaking consolidation of his bridgehead, an operation which, owing to the steeply sloping beaches and the limited capacity of the little port of **Anzio**, was admittedly difficult. None the less a great chance was missed and the Germans were given time in which to seal off our bridgehead. ¹ In mid-February, after further reinforcements had reached the area, the Germans counter-attacked and very nearly succeeded in driving our troops back into the sea. Only after some hard and, at times, desperate fighting was the situation restored. But by then the road to **Rome** was effectively barred by the enemy.

¹ The comments of Kesselring's Chief of Staff are interesting: 'At

the moment of the landing south of **Rome**, apart from certain coastal batteries standing by, there were only two battalions There was nothing else in the neighbourhood which could be thrown against the enemy on that same day. The road to **Rome** was open. No one could have stopped a bold advance-guard entering the Holy City. The breath-taking situation continued for the first two days after the landing. It was only then that German counter-measures were effective. What was their nature? In December 1943 the (German) Army Group had issued a comprehensive plan of emergency for the whole of **Italy**. In it was laid down what troops and columns should move against the possible landing-points, on what roads and at what times, and what tasks they should undertake. It was only necessary to issue the code-word "Case Richard" to put into effect these prearranged plans. In fact, most of the troops, in spite of icy roads over the **Apennines**, arrived before schedule. The German High Command helped by sending troops from **France**, **Yugoslavia**, and the homeland The enemy kept surprisingly quiet. They were apparently engaged in building up a bridgehead. It was thus possible to build up a new front opposite them.' Quoted in Churchill, *Second World War*, Vol. V, pp. 426-7.

During this critical period at **Anzio**, the Allied air forces continued to do their utmost in support of our troops, but there were times when bad weather prevented them from exerting their full effort. They were, however, able to protect our men from air attack, and frequent sorties by bombers and fighter-bombers against enemy strongpoints and communications did much to ease the situation on the ground. During the main German counter-attack in mid-February their intervention, along with naval bombardment, probably saved the **Anzio** venture from disaster. At the height of that battle, on the 17th, fighter and medium bombers, including RAF Wellingtons, flew 782 sorties and dropped nearly one thousand tons of bombs in close support of our troops; a few days later more than ten thousand fragmentation bombs were cast down upon enemy concentrations near Carroceto on the road to **Anzio**. Spitfires and Warhawks also dealt effectively with the enemy fighter-bombers, some thirty of which, operating from nearby airfields, flew one hundred and fifty sorties on the first day; our pilots shot down nine of them and

damaged another seven, for the loss of only one Warhawk. The Germans were, however, prevented from making an all-out effort in the air owing to the need to retain a large proportion of their fighters for defensive operations in northern **Italy**, where their communications were suffering serious dislocation from our incessant bombing. Our strategic bombers also added to the enemy's difficulties by their attacks on his airfields, one attack by American Fortresses and Liberators on the Udine Group in the north of **Italy** at the end of January doing considerable execution among the German fighters assembled there.

After the enemy counter-attack at **Anzio** was defeated, Allied bombers maintained their assault on enemy positions and against roads and railways leading to the area. **Ceprano** and **Pontecorvo** were attacked several times and the headquarters of the German forces were bombed. Marshalling yards as far distant as Forno were also attacked, the object being to cut the railway through the **Brenner Pass**, along which enemy reinforcements must be carried. But these efforts to clear a path for an advance by our ground forces were unavailing. Nor were the tactical squadrons, which continued to bomb road junctions immediately beyond the beach-head, more successful.

The Allied landings at **Anzio** thus failed to achieve their object, which was to develop an immediate and serious threat to the enemy's rear. In the meantime **Fifth Army's** attack from the south had run into difficulties at **Cassino**, where the natural obstacles were particularly formidable. The town itself, with its stone buildings, had been turned by the Germans into a veritable stronghold; above it towered the famous hill of **Montecassino**, its steep sides heavily fortified and crowned by an ancient Benedictine monastery which, although not garrisoned by the Germans, had all the appearance of a grim and forbidding fortress. **Montecassino** dominated the road to **Rome** and close by, at the crucial point, flowed the River Rapido, like 'a moat before the castle gate.' The whole position had for years been regarded by the Italian military staffs as a virtually impregnable site, as indeed it was.

The first Allied assault, launched at the end of January 1944, had

been beaten back after 34 American Division had come within sight of success. Thereupon the monastery surmounting **Montecassino**, which, says General Alexander, 'had hitherto been deliberately spared, to our great disadvantage', came under suspicion as an enemy observation post. Opinion varied as to whether it was actually occupied by the Germans or not but after some deliberation the army commanders concerned decided to ask for it to be bombed before another attack was launched. Accordingly, on 15 February, after leaflet warning had been given, 229 bombers flew over and hurled down some 450 tons of high explosive on the abbey. It was utterly destroyed and between one and three hundred refugees within its walls are believed to have perished. ¹ The Germans at once moved in and set up observation posts and strongpoints amid the ruins. Our subsequent ground assault on both the hill and town at **Cassino** came to naught.

The destruction of the monastery at **Montecassino** was probably the most melancholy episode of the whole Italian campaign and it has aroused acute controversy. At the time there was no real evidence that the monastery was occupied by the Germans and we now know that it was not. It is therefore said that its destruction was not only an act of vandalism but also, because the ruins provided excellent defence posts, one of sheer tactical stupidity. On the other hand, it is contended that no troops could have been expected to attack so strong a position as **Montecassino** so long as the buildings which crowned it stood intact. Its destruction was considered a military necessity. This, in fact, was the view taken by the army commanders on the spot, and they had previously been warned by General Eisenhower in a special directive against confusing 'military necessity' with 'military convenience' in the matter of historical buildings and monuments. It is also worth noting that their action was subsequently endorsed by the Allied Chiefs of Staff. Whatever may be thought in these later years, two things are certain. The decision to destroy the monastery was not lightly taken. The result was anything but good. ²

¹ .These figures are given in General Mark Clark's *Calculated Risk* (p. 323) but the truth, which will never be accurately known, may be nearer the higher than the lower figure. 'The official German figure seems to have been 300. In July 1944 the Bishop of Cara di Tirreni estimated that some 200 dead were still beneath the ruins. Denis Richards and Hilary St. G. Saunders (*Royal Air Force 1939–1945*, Vol. II, p. 360) say "between 300 and 400 women and children"; but there were certainly men among the refugees, and it cannot be supposed that the bombs spared all of them.'—Phillips, *Italy*, Vol. I, p. 211, note 1.

² For a fuller account of the bombing of **Montecassino Abbey** see *Italy*, Vol. I, Chap. 9.

Yet another frontal attack was launched at **Cassino** in mid-March 1944. This time the main thrust was directed against the town itself and once again the bombers were called in to prepare the way. Eleven groups of heavies and five groups of mediums were employed and throughout the morning of the 15th wave after wave swept over **Cassino** where, by midday, they had dropped 1100 tons of bombs. The town was completely destroyed. Simultaneously fighter-bombers attacked enemy gun posts and positions to the south-west of the town and to the north of **Aquino**. Then, to cover the advance of the New Zealand infantry, American Lightnings and RAF Spitfires patrolled the battlefield, where they found few enemy aircraft to engage. Mustang and Spitfire pilots observed for the guns and took photographs.

But despite this support from the air the ground attack achieved little. One difficulty was that the bombing had been, if anything, too effective; huge craters in the streets and the masses of fallen brick, rubble and masonry proved formidable obstacles to our troops. The German garrison, consisting of the redoubtable *1 Parachute Division* which had dived into dugouts and shelters, came out as soon as the bombing was over, manned the ruins and maintained a stubborn and successful resistance. ¹ A battle on the **Stalingrad** model developed and after a week of hard fighting, during which casualties mounted and

progress was measured in yards, General Alexander decided to call off the attack. Nearly two months were to pass before it was resumed.

Thus, first at **Anzio** and then at **Cassino**, did the Germans achieve a great defensive victory and frustrate our efforts to reach **Rome** for almost half a year.

During these months of hard fighting towards **Cassino** and at **Anzio**, New Zealanders continued to patrol and attack with their squadrons. In the early stages relatively few fighter pilots had combats owing to the enemy's inactivity, but Flying Officer S. F. Browne of No. 93 Squadron and Flight Sergeant Newman ² of No. 145 Squadron were among the exceptions. Browne shot down a Messerschmitt in the **Volturno** area and Newman sent another Me109 down near **Chieti**. Some particularly rewarding sorties against ground targets were made by Pilot Officers O. P. Cross and R. A. Caldwell and Flight Sergeant G. S. Nordstrand, each of whom flew Kittyhawk fighter-bombers.

Many Spitfire pilots saw action over the **Anzio** bridgehead. Among them were Squadron Leader E. D. Mackie, in command of No. 92 Squadron, Flight Lieutenant D. F. Livingstone of No. 111 Squadron,

¹ 'This was an extraordinary feat,' writes General Alexander in his despatch after personally witnessing the bombardment. 'It seemed to me inconceivable that any troops should be alive after eight hours of such terrific hammering let alone should be able to man their defences. I doubt if any other division in the German Army could have done it.'

² Flying Officer A. G. P. Newman; born **Timaru**, 1 Nov 1920; apprentice motor mechanic; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941; killed on air operations, 18 Jan 1945.

Flying Officer R. B. Hendry and Flight Sergeant Wood ¹ of No. 72 Squadron, Flight Sergeant Cooper ² and Sergeant T. H. Ross of No. 601 Squadron, Flight Sergeants Faulkner, ³ Herbert ⁴ and Tambour ⁵ of No.

93 Squadron and Warrant Officer Young, ⁶ who flew with Mackie's squadron.

Livingstone shot down two Focke-Wulf 190s and a Messerschmitt 109, while Mackie, Cooper and Young each accounted for at least one Messerschmitt. Herbert was less fortunate. During one air battle over **Anzio his engine failed and he had to crash-land, suffering injuries which later proved fatal. He was on his second tour of operations and had twice survived similar hazards during the North African campaign; on one patrol he had been shot down by our own anti-aircraft fire and on another by the enemy; he was taken prisoner and then released by our advancing forces.**

Four more fighter pilots who did good work during these months were Flight Lieutenants Chrystall ⁷ and L. J. Montgomerie and Flight Sergeants Brigham ⁸ and D. J. Towgood. With their Spitfire squadrons they frequently escorted Marauder bombers against enemy airfields and railways and it was during one such mission that Montgomerie shot down two Me109s which attempted a surprise attack on the bombers; a few days later he destroyed another Messerschmitt over **Viterbo. Flight Sergeant E. S. Doherty had similar success with No. 242 Squadron; he shot down an FW190 during a sweep over **Viterbo** and later, while covering the landings on Elba, destroyed two Me109s; these victories brought his score to at least seven enemy machines.**

Chrystall had an unusual and indeed remarkable career. He had begun operating at the outbreak of war as a wireless operator-air gunner in Blenheims, and during the first two years he survived two complete changes of crews and aircraft in his squadron. He then trained as a fighter pilot, joined No. 485 (NZ) Spitfire Squadron, and on one of his first sorties shot down a Focke-Wulf 190 over Dieppe. Now flying with No. 243 Spitfire Squadron in **Italy, Chrystall was prominent in low-level attacks on enemy transport. While he was**

¹ Flying Officer C. E. B. Wood; born **Auckland**, 24 Feb 1918;

cutter; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant M. R. Cooper; born **Waihou**, 13 Mar 1918; linotype operator; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941.

³ Flying Officer A. J. Faulkner; born **Auckland**, 20 Nov 1921; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941.

⁴ Flight Sergeant H. I. Herbert; born **Morrinsville**, 19 Mar 1923; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941; died of injuries sustained on air operations, 7 Feb 1944.

⁵ Flying Officer H. L. Tambour; born **Esbjerg, Denmark**, 21 Nov 1918; tailor; joined **RNZAF** 9 Nov 1941.

⁶ Flying Officer C. D. Young; born **Taradale**, 19 Jan 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941.

⁷ Flight Lieutenant C. Chrystall, DFC; born **Foxton**, 21 Nov 1916; joined **RAF** Jul 1938; transferred **RNZAF** Jul 1945; prisoner of war, Jun 1944.

⁸ Flight Sergeant J. McC. Brigham; born **Auckland**, 8 Dec 1921; apprentice mechanic; joined **RNZAF** 3 Jan 1941; killed on air operations, 12 Jun 1944.

leading a section in one such attack his Spitfire was hit by flak and badly damaged. Chrystall force-landed successfully and made a gallant effort to avoid capture. He lived on his escape rations for two days and then obtained food, clothing and shelter from some Italian peasants. A fortnight later while on his way to a rendezvous, he stepped on a mine which blew off his feet. He was forced to give himself up in order to obtain proper medical attention.

Good hunting over enemy airfields and against rail targets was

enjoyed by Flying Officers Badley ¹ and Crozier ² and Flight Sergeant Cotter, ³ who flew Mosquito night fighters with No. 23 Squadron. Whilst intruding over enemy airfields, Cotter shot down a Heinkel bomber and Badley destroyed one Dornier 217 and damaged two more.

Flying Officer Henry ⁴ and Flight Sergeant Parkin ⁵ both captained **Boston** light bombers which were now operating by night as well as by day. Warrant Officer H. S. McCullum, navigator, and Flying Officer Church, ⁶ Warrant Officer Finlow, ⁷ Warrant Officer May, ⁸ Flight Sergeants Frizzell ⁹ and Kinzett ¹⁰—all wireless operator-air gunners—were among others who did good work with **Baltimore** or **Boston** squadrons. Frizzell had an unenviable experience one night when he and his crew were making an armed reconnaissance in the **Rome** area. On the return flight one engine failed and then when the **Boston** was only five miles from base the second engine gave out. Frizzell and two other members of the crew were able to bale out but in so doing he caught his leg in his parachute harness. He landed head first in a ploughed field and was lucky enough to escape serious injury. The **Boston** crashed and exploded nearby.

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To break the stalemate at **Cassino**, General Alexander now planned an attack on a wider front and with greater forces, but it could not

¹ Flight Lieutenant D. L. Badley, DFC; born **Napier**, 11 Feb 1922; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1941.

² Flying Officer A. Crozier; born Ohakune, 4 May 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 10 Oct 1941; killed on air operations, 2 Mar 1944.

³ Flying Officer K. M. Cotter, DFC; born **Te Kuiti**, 14 Jan 1922; apprentice cabinet maker; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1942.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant R. G. Henry; born **Christchurch**, 15 Dec

1921; apprentice cabinet maker; joined RNZAF9 Nov 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer C. Parkin; born Rakaia, 27 Aug 1922; exchange clerk; joined RNZAF30 Nov 1941; killed in aircraft accident, 16 Jan 1949.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant D. M. B. Church; born Ashburton, 2 Sep 1917; despatch clerk; joined RNZAF4 May 1938.

⁷ Warrant Officer J. Finlow; born New Lynn, 26 Feb 1920; carpenter; joined RNZAFFeb 1940; killed on air operations, 26 Jul 1944.

⁸ Warrant Officer I. V. May; born Wellington, 13 Jun 1920; French polisher; joined RNZAF13 Apr 1941.

⁹ Warrant Officer R. J. Frizzell; born Christchurch, 29 Aug 1915; mechanic; joined RNZAFOct 1941; killed on air operations, 28 Dec 1944.

¹⁰ Warrant Officer F. R. Kinzett; born Invercargill, 18 Aug 1921; railway porter; joined RNZAFDec 1940.

take place for two months. In the meantime the Allied air squadrons were to do their utmost to reduce the enemy's supplies and weaken his resistance to the coming ground assault. A plan, known as Operation STRANGEL, was initiated for the interdiction of traffic from northern Italy and a large part of the Tactical Air Force was switched from the battle area to join with the heavy bombers in carrying it out. The essence of the plan was for the light and medium bombers to attack railway targets, especially bridges, south of the line Pisa- Rimini; fighter-bombers would go for similar objectives closer to the front and also repair depots, open stretches of track and places where stores carried by rail were transferred to lorries. As the assault proceeded, it was anticipated that rolling stock would begin to accumulate in the

marshalling yards of northern **Italy**, where it would provide good targets for the heavy bombers. Supplementing this assault on road and rail, the coastal air forces would pay increased attention to the enemy's harbours and coastal shipping; his dumps in the forward areas would also be bombed.

Operation **STRANGLE** began towards the end of March 1944 and during the next six weeks the attack mounted relentlessly. An occasional spell of bad weather did enable the Germans to make repairs to their battered railways, but our reconnaissance aircraft noted such activities and soon the cycle of attacks was resumed. By the beginning of April an average of twenty-five cuts were being made daily in rail and road communications and by mid-May this had risen to seventy-five and even more. Soon few trains were getting farther south than fifty miles above **Rome** and traffic was usually stopped farther north. At first the Germans used motor trucks to haul supplies around the broken bridges from one train to another, but our fighter patrols prevented this work from being done except at night. Then, as the damage to the railways increased, they applied motor transport to long-distance haulage, using up valuable petrol in the process. But even so, delivery of supplies to the front was substantially reduced.

Greatly handicapped by Operation **STRANGLE**, the Germans were unable to withstand our ground offensive which, with close support from both fighters and bombers, opened on 11 May. This offensive, on a front of between thirty and forty miles, was a truly international one. The Americans attacked along the west coast, French forces struck into the **Aurunci Mountains**, British troops attacked the **Cassino** zone and Polish soldiers stormed the Abbey heights. Short of ammunition and supplies and no longer supported by their ally, bad weather, Kesselring's armies were compelled to withdraw. On the 18th, **Cassino**, turned from the rear, passed completely into British hands and on the same day **Monastery Hill** was occupied by the Poles. On the 23rd, with the enemy in full retreat from the **Gustav Line**, American and British troops struck out from the **Anzio** beach-head to link up with their comrades advancing

from the south. A fortnight later, on 4 June, the **Fifth Army** entered and occupied **Rome**.

Throughout this advance the enemy was subjected to continuous assault from the skies, which took heavy toll of his troops and vehicles and made his withdrawal a protracted nightmare. For the greater part of the time **Tactical Air Force** achieved a daily average of well over 1200 sorties, and on one occasion it set up a new record for the Italian campaign with 1933 sorties in a single day. Little was seen of the *Luftwaffe* except on 25 May, when Focke-Wulf and Messerschmitt fighters appeared in some strength only to suffer severely at the hands of our Spitfires and Warhawks. With Allied air supremacy now assured, our troops enjoyed complete freedom of movement behind their lines. The hazards of congested roads could be ignored and camps and headquarters moved forward with our advancing troops, unhindered by enemy air action.

The Germans made no attempt to defend **Rome**. Leaving twenty thousand men behind as prisoners, they continued their retreat northward using whatever transport was available to get back to their next line of defence. It was virtually impossible for them to move by rail for the fighter-bombers maintained the cuts and created fresh ones. And in their haste to retreat the enemy had no time to make the repairs that were possible when the battlefield was stationary. So they took to the roads, only to become a target for further attack from the air. Their convoys moving through difficult and mountainous country were forced to keep to the highways, where our fighter and medium bombers swept down on them and caused great destruction. The usual method of attack was to smash the head and tail vehicles in a convoy and then deal with the centre at leisure. 'The roads along which their flight had gone presented an amazing sight,' General Alexander wrote afterwards. 'Mile after mile they were littered with the wrecks of armour and other vehicles, destroyed either by our air force or by our armoured pursuit or abandoned and wrecked by their drivers when fuel ran out.'

Through the hot dusty June days, the Fifth and Eighth Armies

continued their advance north of **Rome**. But within a few weeks they met steadily increasing resistance. For Kesselring, displaying his usual brilliant leadership, soon rallied his armies to fight a series of stubborn rearguard actions, thus gaining time for the completion of strong defence positions, known as the **Gothic Line**, in the last barrier of mountains before the country opened out into the wide plains of the Po valley. It was indeed only after some hard fighting through difficult territory that British troops finally entered **Florence** and the Americans took **Pisa** early in August.

In support of the armies pilots and crews of the **Tactical Air Force** worked hard keeping up an average of one thousand sorties a day. And it was heartening when, for example, the New Zealand Division, after being held up for a time by particularly determined resistance south of **Florence**, signalled back: 'Many thanks for accurate bombing. Counter-attacks prevented and decisive results brought nearer.' But the air activity was not confined to the immediate area of battle. Its general pattern included attacks by medium bombers on railways and road bridges well to the rear; fighter-bombers operated over the roads leading northwards and against less distant rail targets; light bombers attacked supply dumps; fighters were out in their hundreds on armed reconnaissance patrols and on tactical and artillery reconnaissances; and there was much light-bomber and defensive fighter activity by night.

Yet, despite these efforts of our soldiers and airmen, the possibility of a rapid advance to the north of **Italy** steadily diminished with the passing weeks. Apart from the severe opposition now encountered along the whole front, our land and air forces had again been seriously weakened by the withdrawal of a considerable part of their strength for Operation DRAGOON—the invasion of southern **France**. Whether this landing in the Riviera and the subsequent march, almost unopposed, to join with the Allied advance from **Normandy** was an operation of greater worth than the smashing of the **Gothic Line** is open to question. Certainly it postponed the final breakthrough on the Italian front for

many months and prevented exploitation of the unhappy situation in which the enemy found himself in southern **Europe** during the summer of 1944.

The Allied build-up of forces and supplies for invading southern **France** had begun during May at ports and airfields of southern **Italy** and in **Corsica** and **Sardinia**. The assault itself, originally planned to take place at the same time as the landings in **Normandy**, was delayed until mid-August owing to shortage of landing craft. Meanwhile Allied fighters and bombers were busy preparing the way. American squadrons did most of the bombing raids and by D Day they had flown some 10,000 sorties, about half of them in a final intensive five-day effort. Royal Air Force Spitfires, based in **Corsica**, flew offensive sweeps to draw off enemy fighters and they also strafed ground targets. Long-range Mosquitos and Beaufighters attacked enemy airfields, ports and railways while Wellingtons of the Coastal Air Force patrolled the narrow seas.

The bombing of radar stations and certain deceptive measures, including the simulation of a convoy by Wellingtons dropping 'window', enabled the landings to achieve a large measure of surprise. Thereafter, with strong air support and meeting only slight opposition, our assault forces made rapid progress up the Rhone valley. Fighters and bombers covered their advance and attacked pockets of resistance. The enemy air effort was almost negligible—only three Messerschmitt 109s were shot down on the first day—but our fighter-bombers had more success in their attacks on retreating enemy motor transport and troop trains. The whole operation was completed in a matter of weeks, whereupon most of the squadrons which had moved into the south of **France** were able to return to **Italy**.

Back in **Italy**, where General Alexander's armies had begun their assault on the **Gothic Line**, the **Tactical Air Force** operating in support now consisted largely of **RAF** and Dominion squadrons, including a substantial contingent from the **South African Air Force**. Both before and during the ground offensive, fighters and bombers were active over and beyond the enemy's lines. On the opening day of the Eighth Army's

attack they flew over 650 sorties, mainly against gun positions, strongpoints, enemy troops and transport in the path of our advance. The attack was continued during the night when Wellingtons and Liberators, aided by **Halifax** flare-droppers, cast down 230 tons of bombs on troop concentrations at **Pesaro** while Baltimores and Bostons sought targets on the roads and railways behind the enemy's line. Beaufighters meanwhile kept a somewhat uneventful lookout for any enemy bombers. And this was the general pattern of air activity during the following weeks as our troops, in some of the hardest fighting of the year, gradually forced their way into the main defences of the **Gothic Line**.

The deepest advances were made on the Adriatic coast through **Rimini** towards **Ravenna**, and in the centre towards **Bologna**. But the enemy front was not broken. Kesselring, reinforced by fresh divisions, had been ordered by **Hitler** to hold on south of **Bologna**. And hold on he did. Then came torrential rains which bogged down the Allied armies and transformed our airfields into lakes. And as autumn faded into the bleak north Italian winter with its valley fogs, rains and snow, the prospect of any further substantial progress before the spring became more and more remote. Nevertheless the enemy was given little respite either on the ground or from the air. Small advances were made and consolidated by our armies and counter-attacks repulsed. The air assault on roads, railways and bridges was sustained as far as the weather permitted and German traffic on the main highways was liable, without warning, to become the target of Allied fighters and bombers slipping through the scudding clouds. Kesselring himself discovered this to his cost when, early in October, his car was attacked and, because of the injuries he suffered, he had to hand over command for some weeks.

Despite appalling weather and bad conditions on the ground the Tactical Air Forces achieved a weekly average of about 3000 sorties during the last three months of 1944. The coastal and strategic squadrons rendered their own specialised help, and such advances as were made by our own ground forces were aided and in certain cases actually rendered possible by the accurate close-support missions flown

by fighters and bombers. And while their offensive against the enemy's lines of communication did not succeed in drying up his stream of supplies entirely, it at least ensured that Kesselring lacked the means to initiate any major attack. Meanwhile Allied preparations went ahead for the spring offensive that was to bring about the complete collapse of enemy resistance in **Italy**.

* * * * *

From **Cassino** to **Rome**, over southern **France**, and throughout the advance to northern **Italy**, New Zealanders had continued to play their part. Fighter and fighter-bomber pilots together with light-bomber crews flew consistently in support of the Army, attacking ground targets and patrolling the forward areas to intercept enemy aircraft.

Among the fighter pilots who successfully engaged German machines were Flight Lieutenants D. F. Livingstone and L. J. Montgomerie, Flying Officer R. B. Hendry and Flight Sergeant E. S. Doherty, all of whom flew Spitfires. Livingstone shot down two Me109s over **Cassino** and an FW190 near Lake Bracciano into which, incidentally, the German pilot fell when he baled out. Montgomerie destroyed at least four enemy fighters before he was himself fatally injured in a crash landing. Flying Officer Hendry shot down two enemy fighters and Warrant Officer Aspinall ¹ accounted for another during a dogfight over the **Rome** area when Spitfires of No. 72 Squadron intercepted some fifteen Messerschmitts. By October 1944, Hendry was credited with three German aircraft destroyed, another shared and one probable.

Flight Lieutenant G. R. Gould, with Hurricanes, Flight Lieutenants Lawrence ² and B. H. Thomas, flying Spitfires, and Flight Lieutenant R. H. Newton, with a Mustang squadron, were other fighter pilots who did good work during this period. On one patrol over the **Ortona** area, Gould achieved the unusual feat of shooting down two Me109s within a matter of minutes. Lawrence, a veteran of Egypt and **Malta**, frequently led Spitfires as escort to Mitchell bombers, while Thomas after an eventful

career with Kittyhawk fighter-bombers now flew Spitfires on offensive sweeps and attacks against ground targets. Newton was one of the most skilful and experienced pilots engaged in

¹ Flying Officer J. T. Aspinall; born Dunedin, 27 Oct 1917; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant T. E. Lawrence; born **Auckland**, 16 Oct 1918; architectural draughts man; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941.

ground attack operations; he had now completed two tours of operations with his No. 112 Squadron, the first on Kittyhawks and the second on Mustangs.

Lawrence, Newton and Thomas were among the twenty-five New Zealand fighter pilots who flew from **Corsica** in support of the invasion of southern **France**. Others who took part in patrol and attack during the landings and the subsequent advance up the Rhone valley were Flight Lieutenant Barber ¹ and Pilot Officer Frewer ² with No. 232 Spitfire Squadron, Flight Lieutenant K. P. F. Neill of No. 225 Squadron, Pilot Officer H. H. S. Moore with No. 242 Squadron, and Pilot Officer Doyle ³ of No. 154 Squadron. Frewer accounted for one of the few enemy fighters that were shot down during the invasion period.

During the second phase of the Italian campaign, Flying Officer A. J. Faulkner of No. 93 Squadron and Flying Officers C. D. Young and Condon ⁴ of No. 92 Squadron achieved a good record of service as Spitfire pilots. Flying Officers G. M. Buchanan, Osborne, ⁵ Palliser, ⁶ and T. D. Stewart were prominent with No. 185 Squadron, which did specially good work in armed reconnaissance and in bombing road and rail targets behind the enemy front; Buchanan and Osborne frequently led fighters on 'cabrank' patrols.

¹ Flight Lieutenant R. J. P. Barber; born **Auckland**, 25 Aug 1916; joined **RAF** Oct 1938.

² Flying Officer A. V. Frewer; born **Christchurch**, 2 Aug 1914; apprentice electrician; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

³ Flying Officer B. J. Doyle; born **Gisborne**, 10 Oct 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer A. T. Condon; born **Rakaia**, 14 Aug 1923; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 7 Sep 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer A. J. Osborne; born **Papakura**, 11 Jun 1922; mail-van driver; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant D. G. Palliser; born **Wanganui**, 29 Dec 1919; panel beater; joined **RNZAF** 19 Jan 1941.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 9 – BEYOND THE ITALIAN BATTLEFRONT

CHAPTER 9

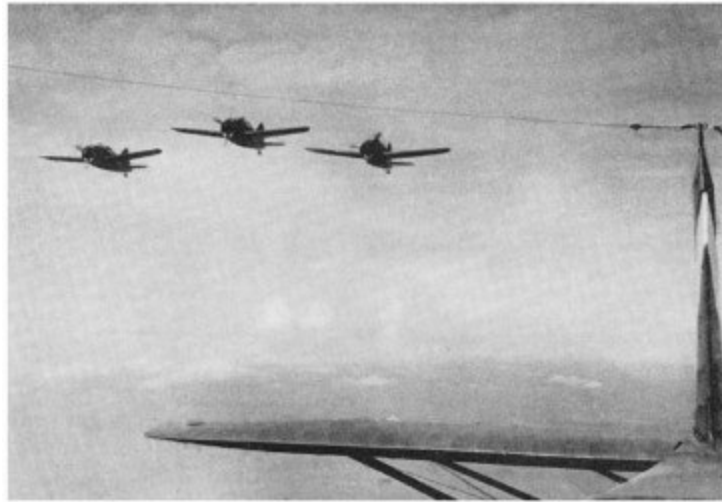
Beyond the Italian Battlefield

CLOSE support of the armies fighting in **Italy** was but one of the many tasks assigned to the Allied Mediterranean Air Forces. All those months when our troops were battling northwards to the valley of the Po, American and British heavy bombers were striking farther afield—across the Alps into southern **Europe** and over the sea against targets in the enemy-occupied **Balkans**; other squadrons flew extensive supply dropping operations to aid the various resistance groups, especially the formidable body of partisans operating in **Yugoslavia** under the leadership of Marshal Tito. The **Coastal Air Forces** also played an important part, while splendid work was done by photographic and air-sea rescue squadrons. In all these activities New Zealand airmen shared as pilots and crews of **RAF** aircraft.

The American and British heavy bombers were organised in what was known as the **Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Force**. The United States Fifteenth Air Force with its eighty-odd squadrons of Fortress and Liberator day bombers provided the main strength, but its efforts were effectively supplemented by RAF No. **205 Group** with its ten Wellington, Liberator and **Halifax** squadrons operating largely by night. Railway communications on both sides of the Alps and in **Bulgaria** and **Rumania**, together with oil plants, aircraft factories and air bases in southern **Europe**, were the principal objectives attacked. And as, month by month, the assault continued with increasing intensity, German skill and ingenuity were taxed to the utmost. By the end of 1944 the widespread dislocation of rail traffic, the accumulating damage to factories and, above all, the dwindling production of oil in those areas within range of Italian bases showed that the Allied heavy bombers were well on the way to winning their battle.

An interesting feature of the campaign against German communications was the sustained minelaying offensive carried out by **RAF** bombers in the River Danube. This great river was the natural link

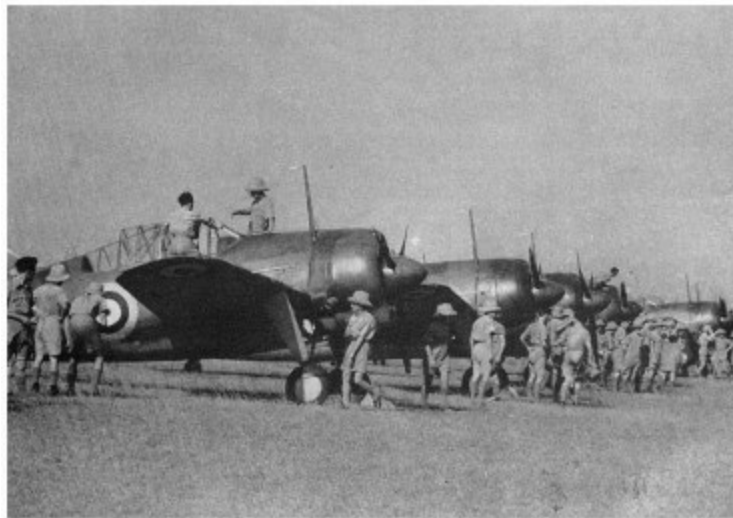
between **Germany** and the grain lands of **Hungary**, a strategic route to the Russian front, a link with **Turkey** and, above all, a pipeline connecting the Reich with the Rumanian oilfields. It was estimated that, in 1942, approximately 8,000,000 tons of materials reached



Buffaloes in flight, as seen from a Vildebeeste

Buffaloes in flight, as seen from a Vildebeeste

Brewster Buffalo fighters at Singapore



Brewster Buffalo fighters at Singapore



No. 488 Fighter Squadron pilots at Singapore, December 1941
From left: Flt-Lts J. N. Mackenzie and J. R. Hutcheson, Sgts T. W. Honan and H. J. Meharry, P/Os J. C. Godsiff (kneeling), F. S. Johnstone and E. W. Cox, Sgts E. E. G. Kuhn and V. E. Meaclem (head only), P/Os G. P. White, H. S. Pettit and W. J. Greenhalgh, Sgts P. E. E. Killick, J. F. Burton, D. L. Clow and C. D. Charters, P/Os L. R. Farr and P. D. Gifford (kneeling)

No. 488 Fighter Squadron pilots at [Singapore](#), December 1941

***From left:* Flt-Lts J. N. Mackenzie and J. R. Hutcheson, Sgts T. W. Honan and H. J. Meharry, P/Os J. C. Godsiff(kneeling), F. S. Johnstone and E. W. Cox, Sgts E. E. G. Kuhn and V. E. Meaclem (head only), P/Os G. P. White, H. S. Pettit and W. J. Greenhalgh, Sgts P. E. E. Killick, J. F. Burton, D.L. Clow and C. D. Charters, P/Os L. R. Farr and P. D. Gifford (kneeling)**



SS Talthybius at a Singapore wharf escapes attack

***SS Talthybius* at a [Singapore](#) wharf escapes attack**



No. 67 Squadron group at Mingaladon
Back, from left: Sgt C. V. Bargh, P/O C. McG. Simpson. *In front:* Sgts G. A. Williams, E. E. Pedersen, E. L. Sadler, F/Os P. M. Bingham Wallace (RAF) and G. S. Sharp, Sgts K. A. Rutherford and J. Macpherson

No. 67 Squadron group at Mingaladon

***Back, from left:* Sgt C. V. Bargh, P/O C. McG. Simpson. *In front:* Sgts G. A. Williams, E. E. Pedersen, E. L. Sadler, F/Os P. M. Bingham-Wallace (RAF) and G. S. Sharp, Sgts K. A. Rutherford and J. Macpherson**



No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron working on the bomber strip at Tebrau

No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron working on the bomber strip at Tebrau



Ground crew of a Spitfire squadron in Burma erect a workshop during a minor monsoon

Ground crew of a Spitfire squadron in Burma erect a workshop during a minor monsoon

Sentinel aircraft being unloaded from an LCV



Sentinel aircraft being unloaded from an LCV



Vultee Vengeance dive-bomber on a forward airfield

Vultee Vengeance dive-bomber on a forward airfield

Blenheims over Akyab



Blenheims over Akyab



Indian troops in Burma prepare to board a troop-carrier

Indian troops in Burma prepare to board a troop-carrier



Loading a jeep

Loading a jeep



Over the Hump

Over the Hump



Hurri-bombers in Burma. Pilots are briefed before take-off

Hurri-bombers in Burma. Pilots are briefed before take-off



Hurri-bomber destroys a bridge on the Tiddim road

Hurri-bomber destroys a bridge on the Tiddim road

A direct hit on a Japanese base in the Andaman Islands



A direct hit on a Japanese base in the Andaman Islands



RAF pilots off duty in Burma

RAF pilots off duty in Burma



Dakota drops supplies for Fourteenth Army south of the Irrawaddy River

Dakota drops supplies for Fourteenth Army south of the Irrawaddy River



Liberators bomb Yenangyaung

Liberators bomb Yenangyaung



The Myitnge bridge after attack by RAF Thunderbolts. The bridge carried the main railway line from Mandalay to Rangoon

The Myitnge bridge after attack by RAF Thunderbolts. The bridge carried the main railway line from Mandalay to Rangoon



Bombs straddle a bridge on the Moulmein-Bangkok railway

Bombs straddle a bridge on the Moulmein- Bangkok railway



The bomb-shattered docks at Rangoon

The bomb-shattered docks at Rangoon



A Beaufighter attack on a supply train near Kanbalu, Burma

A Beaufighter attack on a supply train near Kanbalu, Burma

Liberators bomb supply base at
Armapure



Liberators bomb supply base at Armapure



The 'Tree Tops' Club - an RAF
control tower in central Burma

The 'Tree Tops' Club - an RAF control tower in central Burma



Remains of Japanese headquarters on Ramree Island

Remains of Japanese headquarters on Ramree Island



Indian troops collect supplies dropped at Mandalay

Indian troops collect supplies dropped at [Mandalay](#)



Air Vice-Marshal S. F. Vincent, Lord Louis Mountbatten and

Air Vice-Marshal S. F. Vincent, Lord Louis Mountbatten and Lieutenant-General Sir William Slim



The Kohima battlefield. Looking down on Treasury Hill

The **Kohima** battlefield. Looking down on Treasury Hill

Germany by means of the River Danube waterway alone. By March 1944 not only had the major part of all oil products coming from **Rumania** been diverted from the railways but the river traffic was twice as heavy as that by rail. ¹

The RAF bombers opened their minelaying offensive early in April that same year, dropping the first forty mines in the river near Belgrade, and by the end of the following month a total of 530 mines had been laid. At first these ‘Gardening’ missions, as they were called, were flown only in moon periods because the bombers had to fly at no more than 200 feet, and heights of forty and fifty feet were often reported. Later on, however, the use of pathfinder aircraft and illumination by flares made it possible to operate over any part of the Danube during any period of the month. The minelaying continued throughout the summer and by October more than 1380 mines had been dropped by the Wellingtons and Liberators. In their support Beaufighters attacked river craft or suitable targets in the nearby ports, roads and railways; eight large oil barges were destroyed— ‘their cargoes mushrooming up in vivid orange and red flames’—and more than a hundred other vessels were damaged by these attacks.

There can be little doubt about the success of the **RAF** campaign. ‘The enemy has mined the Danube according to plan,’ says a German

report written in July 1944. 'Thirty-nine vessels have been sunk from the beginning of May to the middle of June and forty-two damaged by these weapons. The most effective means for minesweeping are the mine-detecting aircraft but unfortunately they are few in number owing to lack of fuel. It is therefore not possible to clear the Danube of mines with the means we have at hand and the position regarding shipping is badly affected in consequence.' By August 1944 the volume of traffic on the river was reduced by more than half and the Germans forced to deploy along a considerable length of its course large quantities of anti-aircraft equipment, including balloons and guns, as well as trained crews to man them. The delaying of German supplies to the Eastern Front aided the Russian forces in their westward drive; at the same time an important contribution was made to the campaign against German transport throughout **Europe** now being waged by the Allied air forces from **Britain**.

Some ninety New Zealand pilots, navigators, bomb-aimers, wireless operators and air gunners served with the **RAF** squadrons of No. 205 Group during the last eighteen months of the war. Three-quarters of these men operated with the faithful Wellingtons—still the mainstay of the night-bomber force—while the remainder flew four-engined

¹ One Rhine-type barge could, in fact, transport a load equivalent to that carried by one hundred 10-ton railway trucks.

Liberators and Halifaxes. There were now many newcomers among the New Zealand contingent, but a sprinkling of veterans from the desert like Squadron Leader H. H. Beale, flight commander of No. 37 Squadron, and Squadron Leader B. M. O'Connor, flight commander of No. 70 Squadron, continued to give outstanding service. Beale served with his squadron for over a year and his leadership and experience were invaluable during the diverse operations of this period. He was badly wounded when his Wellington was shot down over **Yugoslavia** and died as a prisoner of war. Squadron Leader O'Connor had completed seventy-two

operational sorties by November 1944; he attacked many heavily defended targets in **Austria, Italy, Hungary, Rumania** and **Yugoslavia** and he was also successful in laying mines in the River Danube.

Flight Sergeant Cornwell, ¹ Squadron, Warrant Officer J. R. Turvey, No. 70 Squadron, Warrant Officer Harkness ² with NO.142 Squadron and Pilot Officer Walker, ³ No.150 Squadron, all achieved fine records of service as Wellington Pilots. Typical of the good work done by other Wellington aircrew was that of Warrant Officer Morgan ⁴ as navigator, Flight Sergeants Brocherie ⁵ and Hanrahan ⁶ as bomb-aimers, and Flight Sergeant Popplewell, ⁷ wireless operator. Flight Lieutenant C. H. Masters continued as bombing leader with No.70 Squadron until he was lost in a raid on marshalling yards at Bucharest. Flying Liberators of No. 178 Squadron, Flying Officer McNaughton ⁸ as pilot and Warrant Officer Brothers, ⁹ wireless operator, made a series of highly successful sorties to lay mines in the Danube; they also took part in a number of bombing raids and it was on a mission to attack Feuersbruhn airfield in **Austria** that they were lost.

New Zealanders had their share of incident. For example, after bombing the marshalling yards at Campina, ten miles north-west of the **Ploesti** oilfields, engine failure forced Flight Sergeant Cornwell to 'ditch' his Wellington in the Adriatic; all but one member of the crew

¹ Warrant Officer J. Cornwell; born **Temuka**, 30 May 1922; journalist; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1941.

² Warrant Officer D. A. Harkenss, DFC; born Te Horo, 16 Jan 1916; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941; killed on active service, 23 Jul 1944.

³ Flying Officer E. J. Walker, DFC; born Maungaturoto, 6 Apr 1915; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 7 Mar 1942.

⁴ Flying Officer H. J. M. Morgan; born Kawhia, 1 Oct 1920;

engineer cadet; joined **RNZAF** 19 Oct 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer V. L. Brocherie; born **Akaroa**, 22 Aug 1913; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1942.

⁶ Warrant Officer M. J. Hanrahan; born Hokitika, 6 Oct 1917; machine operator; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1942.

⁷ Warrant Officer F. C. Popplewell; born Geraldine, 21 Apr 1922; blacksmith; joined **RNZAF** 25 Jan 1942.

⁸ Flying Officer G. E. S. McNaughton; born **Christchurch**, 3 Jun 1912; truck driver; joined **RNZAF** 25 May 1941; killed on air operations, 7 Jul 1944.

⁹ Warrant Officer W. Brothers; born **Taihape**, 21 Aug 1921; postal messenger; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; killed on air operations, 7 Jul 1944.

were saved and Cornwell, although injured, was soon back with his unit. Some weeks later when Wellingtons bombed an oil refinery at Budapest, Cornwell's gunners scored what was now a rare success in shooting down a Messerschmitt 110. Another pilot, Warrant Officer Harkness, had just taken off one wintry night when he found that his port engine was not working properly. Nevertheless he pressed on and bombed his target at Cecina. During the return flight the faulty engine seized up, but he flew for three hours on the remaining engine before making a crash landing with only slight damage to the aircraft.

Many similar episodes of perseverance and fortitude are recorded. There was also the quiet efficiency of men like Pilot Officer Tong,¹ who captained a Wellington of No. 150 Squadron. On one occasion he was sent to make a low-level attack against the Pitesti railway bridge situated at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains in **Rumania** and an important link in communications between Brasov and Bucharest. This

entailed low flying up narrow mountain defiles where even a slight error of judgment would bring immediate disaster, and then bombing with no other illumination than that provided by the moon. After a difficult flight Tong reached and pinpointed the target. Determined to make absolutely certain that he was over the right bridge, he made four dummy runs at low level before releasing his 4000 lb. bomb, fused for eleven seconds' delay, from about 150 feet. It was seen to fall near one of the stone piers in the middle of the river and when it exploded the centre of the bridge was 'enveloped in smoke and flame'. Subsequent reconnaissance showed that structural damage to the bridge was extensive and that it was closed to traffic.

An important innovation for the night-bomber force was the somewhat belated introduction of a pathfinder squadron modelled on those which had proved so successful with Royal Air Force Bomber Command. The unit selected was No. 614 Squadron, now equipped with Halifaxes and possessing a nucleus of men trained in the pathfinder technique. Commencing operations in mid-April 1944, its crews soon became skilled in finding and marking the various targets in south east Europe. The bomber crews welcomed this new development, and as they learned to trust the illumination provided by the pathfinders there was a remarkable increase in the accuracy and concentration of attack.

As in Bomber Command, New Zealanders were among the first pathfinder crews to operate from Italy. Flying Officer Parker,² pilot,

¹ Flying Officer W. A. Tong, DFC; born Waharoa, 20 Sep 1921; electrician; joined RNZAF 11 Jan 1942.

² Flying Officer T. W. Parker, DFC; born Hastings, 23 Mar 1920; sheep-station manager; joined RNZAF 6 Sep 1941.

and Pilot Officer Heeps,¹ navigator, who had previously operated with No. 462 Halifax Squadron, did particularly good work. Parker went on to complete an extended tour of sixty sorties against targets in the

Balkans, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, southern Germany and Italy, including forty-three using pathfinder technique. He was a specialist in 'blind' illuminating, for which aircraft made a timed run over the target area to drop their flares. One night in September he flew to illuminate the marshalling yards at Bologna. While on the timed run his Halifax was seriously damaged by flak. Parker managed to keep control of the crippled machine and made a straight run over the aim aiming point so that his bomb-aimer could place his flares accurately for the following visual markers.

In their operations over heavily defended targets, aircrew of No. 614 Squadron were operating with four-engined bombers on a type of mission for which RAF Bomber Command had learned to prefer the fast and less vulnerable Mosquito. Consequently the pathfinders had heavy casualties. Flight Sergeant MacLeod ² and Flying Officer Fels, ³ navigators, Flight Sergeant Foster, ⁴ bomb-aimer, and Flying Officer Ellison, ⁵ wireless operator, were among those who failed to return from operations during the pioneering stages.

*** * * * ***

Air operations in support of the Yugoslav Partisan Army were begun as soon as the Allies were firmly established in Italy. Our long-range fighters and bombers were also required to do everything possible to hinder the Germans building up their air force in Yugoslavia, to disturb the enemy's control of the Dalmatian Islands, to keep open the sea routes for supplying the partisans and, indirectly, to prevent reinforcement of the Italian front from the Balkans.

The assault opened in mid-October 1943 with fighter and light-bomber attacks against ports, shipping, oil dumps, bridges, transports and gun emplacements in Yugoslavia; heavy bombers paid particular attention to marshalling yards at Sofia and airfields at Athens. As time went on the link between the air forces and the partisans grew stronger and RAF missions were directed more and more against specific objectives closely related to enemy shipping movements or ground

operations. A critical period came in May 1944 when the Germans,

¹ Flying Officer T. N. Hccps; born Wathi, 25 Dec 1912; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** 7 Jan 1942.

² Flight Sergeant J. M. MacLeod; born **Christchurch**, 31 Jul 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 21 Mar 1942; killed on air operations, 20 Apr 1944.

³ Flight Lieutenant P. W. Fels; born Dunedin, 26 Nov 1920; draper's assistant; joined **RNZAF** 9 Feb 1941; prisoner of war, 29 Jun 1944.

⁴ Flying Officer N. L. Foster; born Frankton Junction, 18 Jun 1919; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1941; prisoner of war, 8 May 1944.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant N. R. Ellison; born **Christchurch**, 19 Apr 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 6 Jan 1940; prisoner of war, 29 Jun 1944.

in the hope of recovering the initiative in **Yugoslavia**, began an offensive against the territory controlled by the partisans. Paratroops and gliders also made a direct assault on Marshal Tito's headquarters and both he and his staff had to flee to the rocky fastnesses of the Dinaric Alps. In support of the hard-pressed partisans British and American heavy bombers, light bombers and fighters flew more than 1000 sorties. By 1 June the enemy was back on the defensive and Marshal Tito was able to signal: 'British and American aircraft have driven the Luftwaffe from Yugoslavian skies and considerable damage has been inflicted on German forces. As a result partisan morale and Anglo- American prestige have soared.'

The growing importance of air operations in the **Balkans** and the need for a co-ordinating authority resulted in the formation of a Balkan

Air Force on 7 June 1944. It controlled a miscellaneous collection of fighters, light bombers and transport aircraft manned by men of many nationalities. And to render their sorties the more effective the closest contact was maintained with the partisans, and special parties, equipped with wireless, slipped into German-occupied islands to report on enemy movements. In its first month of operations, the Balkan Air Force mounted almost 2400 sorties. The main successes were scored by Spitfires and Mustangs against rail traffic on the Zagreb-Belgrade-Skoplje route; the coastal supply line through Brod- Sarajevo-Mostar was also attacked with good results. Although the weather was often bad, no fewer than 260 railway engines were claimed destroyed or damaged, many of which were hauling troop trains. Baltimores also did good work in raids against such objectives as steel-works, supply bases and rail repair-shops. Beaufighters, carrying rocket projectiles over Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece, damaged at least fourteen locomotives and sixty waggons and coaches in five days.

By early September there was a dramatic change in the situation in the Balkans. Rumania and Bulgaria had changed sides and were now at war with Germany, while Russian forces stood on the Yugoslavia-Rumania frontier. The Germans were forced to safeguard rail communications in Serbia and for this purpose withdraw large numbers of troops at the most critical stage of the battle of Montenegro, which brought a welcome relief to the well-nigh exhausted partisan forces. Before long the growing insecurity of their control in Yugoslavia, and the threat to their garrisons in Greece and the Aegean, caused the Germans to begin a full-scale withdrawal. This was hastened by the Allied air assault on their road, rail, sea and air communications. Over 100 locomotives, 320 waggons and 770 motor vehicles were destroyed or damaged during September, while 25 ships were sunk and a further 44 crippled. An outstanding success was the sinking of the 51,000-ton Italian liner Rex at Capodistria by Beaufighters of Coastal and Balkan air forces.

By the middle of October 1944 British troops were established in

Athens and moving northwards, while Russian troops and Yugoslav partisans had linked up and Belgrade was liberated. German divisions retreating from Corfu, north-west **Greece**, and the Aegean were in a serious plight. All rail communications south of Belgrade were cut and the only means of retreating were over the roads across Bosnia, under fire from partisan bands, or by the limited alternative of air transport. Air strikes against their communications increased the difficulties under which the enemy laboured, and the assault continued with even greater intensity during the last two months of the year, when a total of 9200 sorties was flown.

As German resistance crumbled Allied airmen continued to support the partisans in their relentless pressure on the lines of retreat. In March 1945, the **Yugoslav Fourth Army** offensive in **Croatia** was strongly supported by intensive bombing by Marauders and Baltimores, while the Strategic and Tactical Air Forces also intervened. During April single-engined fighters were concentrated at Zara to provide even closer support. Thus powerfully helped in the air, the Yugoslavs broke through north **Istria** to link up with advanced troops of the **Eighth Army** at **Monfalcone** on 1 May. Five days later German troops remaining north-west of **Fiume** surrendered; and so ended a long and arduous campaign which, fought over wide areas, was of extraordinary complexity.

The activities of New Zealand airmen during the campaign were many and varied. Among Spitfire pilots who flew some of the first sorties across the Adriatic were Squadron Leader E. L. Joyce, commanding No. 73 Squadron, and Flying Officer A. F. Lissette of No. 126 Squadron. One day in November 1943, Lissette led four aircraft to attack motor transport along the Albanian coast. As he went down to strafe a convoy his Spitfire was hit; oil and glycol streamed from the engine, which at once began to overheat. Lissette headed for the coast covered by his companions but, losing height rapidly, he was forced to crash-land at the side of some hills, inland from Durazzo. As his Spitfire swept along the ground it struck a rough patch and turned several somersaults. Lissette escaped serious injury but was dazed and badly shaken. He just

had time to crawl to the shelter of some nearby trees before German soldiers reached his wrecked Spitfire. Then an Albanian peasant suddenly appeared from nowhere and led him along goat tracks until they came in sight of the coast, where he indicated by signs that guards were posted along the main routes. After taking cover until dark Lissette went on, but when daylight came he was only halfway across the coastal plain to the sea. Avoiding several groups of Germans he kept moving, for he knew that Spitfires on weather reconnaissance crossed the coast each morning and he hoped to attract their attention so that a Walrus amphibian could be sent to pick him up. But his luck was out. He emerged from a clump of scrub right alongside a party of soldiers preparing a gun position and was taken prisoner.

As the air effort over the **Balkans** increased New Zealand fighter pilots were particularly prominent. Wing Commander R. Webb, as commander of No. 1435 Squadron and with No. **323 Wing**, frequently led Spitfires to attack enemy transport in the **Balkans** and shipping off the Dalmatian coast. On one occasion when four Messerschmitt 109s were shot down within five minutes, Webb and one of his flight commanders, Flight Lieutenant W. E. Schrader, got one each and shared in the destruction of the others. Schrader also did good work in leading his flight against enemy shipping. In one dawn reconnaissance off Corfu an E-boat was set on fire; in another attack a similar vessel exploded amidships. In the middle of May 1944, Webb led his wing on a typical bombing and strafing attack in the Vinjerac area. He had just set a petrol bowser on fire when his Spitfire was hit and two explosive bullets burst in the cockpit. Webb was knocked unconscious and badly wounded in one eye, but, recovering quickly, he asked another pilot to lead him the 200 miles back to base at **Foggia** where, despite his injury, he landed his aircraft safely. Flight Lieutenant N. D. Harrison, after distinguished service with Webb's squadron, joined No. 73 Squadron as flight commander and continued to do good work in bombing missions across the Adriatic. Other pilots prominent with this squadron were Pilot Officer Horn, ¹ Warrant Officer Karatau ² and Flight Sergeant Buckley. ³

Flight Lieutenant Jacobsen ⁴ and Flying Officer Lamb ⁵ of No. 249 Spitfire Squadron also took part in bombing attacks against shipping and motor transport. Jacobsen, who had joined his unit as a flight sergeant, rose to command a flight in less than a year. Flight Lieutenant G. R. Gould, No. 241 Squadron, flew Spitfires on weather and shipping reconnaissance along the east Adriatic coast. On one such flight he sighted three E-boats that were later attacked by Kittyhawks; he also found and pinpointed several small cargo vessels which were eventually destroyed by fighter-bombers.

¹ Flying Officer J. L. Horn; born **Lower Hutt**, 17 Jul 1915; metal worker; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941.

² Flying Officer E. M. Karatau; born **Pihama**, 1 Dec 1915; student; joined **RNZAF** 6 Sep 1941.

³ Warrant Officer T. W. Buckley; born **Auckland**, 22 May 1920; audit clerk; joined **RNZAF** May 1941; killed on air operations, 26 May 1944.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant C. F. Jacobsen, m.i.d.; born **Blenheim**, 27 Jun 1921; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF** 26 Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 23 Jun 1944.

⁵ Flying Officer A. H. Lamb; born **Dunedin**, 6 Oct 1912; commercial traveller; joined **RNZAF** 27 Jul 1941.

Flight Lieutenant McKenzie ¹ and Flying Officer Tye ² flew with No. 6 Squadron against such targets as German headquarters, motor transport parks and schooners plying amid the Dalmatian Islands- No. 6 Squadron, which had been the original 'tank-buster' squadron in the desert, now carried on its tradition, but instead of being armed with one cannon under each wing the Hurricanes carried eight rocket projectiles.

With the formation of Balkan Air Force a small but determined group

of New Zealanders continued operations. Pilot Officer Harrison ³ of No. 253 Spitfire Squadron frequently led sections on offensive sweeps and armed reconnaissance over the Dalmatians, Bosnia and western **Serbia**. In a July sweep he faced intense crossfire from anti-aircraft guns to attack a Ju52 on Banjaluka airfield; although his Spitfire was badly damaged, he pressed home his attack until the enemy machine was well on fire and flames were spreading to a nearby hangar. A few months later while leading a flight over **Greece** he sighted a large transport park containing some 200 vehicles. He led his Spitfires in repeated strafing runs until relieved by another section of the squadron. By the time the aircraft left the ill-fated park 'smoke from the blazing mass rose to 8,000 feet while equally spectacular were the intermittent explosions from the few remaining bowsers and ammunition cars'.

Other pilots with good records in Balkan Air Force were Pilot Officer A. E. W. Day, also of No. 253 Squadron, Flying Officer Bonifant ⁴ and Pilot Officer Chappie ⁵ of No. 1435 Squadron, and Flying Officer F. M. Clarke⁶ of No. ⁶ Squadron. Clarke took part in a series of successful attacks on German coastal shipping in which a number of schooners, ferries and barges were destroyed or damaged by rocket projectiles.

* * * * *

New Zealanders also took part in the air operations over the Aegean Sea and the eastern **Mediterranean**. Here the Germans held a strong defensive 'outer ring' consisting of the islands of **Crete**, **Scarpanto** and **Rhodes**, while behind them a number of smaller island outposts were maintained to keep open communications. The whole object was to keep closed the back door to **Hitler's Europe** through **Greece** and

¹ Flight Lieutenant R. G. McKenzie; born **Christchurch**, 18 Jun 1914; tailor; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

² Flying Officer W. Tye; born Marton, 14 Apr 1920; invoice clerk; joined **RNZAF** 23 Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 23 May 1944.

³ Flying Officer T. H. Harrison, DFC; born Hastings, 11 May 1919; postman; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant B. Bonifant; born **Ashburton**, 12 Jan 1923; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1942.

⁵ Pilot Officer P. Chappie; born Oakland, **San Francisco, USA**, 18 Dec 1922; apprentice turner and joiner; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1942; died of injuries sustained in aircraft accident, 25 Apr 1945.

⁶ Flying Officer F. M. Clarke; born **Te Awamutu**, 20 Nov 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1942; killed on air operations, 14 Sep 1944.

the **Balkans**. Garrison duties were largely in the hands of the Italians until the collapse of their country. Nevertheless September 1943 saw some 35,000 German troops in **Crete**, 7000 in Rhodes and some 4000 scattered around the other islands, and they were strong enough to seize complete control within a few days of the Italian armistice. Furthermore, within a few weeks they were able to recapture Kos, **Leros** and Samos, which, as related elsewhere, were seized by the Allies simultaneously with the invasion of **Italy**.

To maintain their troops the Germans used a fleet of ships, mainly small craft seldom exceeding 3000 or 4000 tons, while plying to and from **Greece** or between the numerous islands there were large numbers of caiques, schooners, trawlers and barges. Early air operations against these supply ships were flown by Beaufighters, Baltimores, Marauders and Wellingtons of No. **201 Naval Co-operation Group** from bases in Egypt. As a result of their activities during the first nine months of 1943, no fewer than 163 ships with an estimated tonnage of some 53,500 tons were sunk or damaged. In addition the **Luftwaffe** was forced to expend considerable effort in an attempt to protect convoys, while the island garrisons had to be reinforced by troops which otherwise

could have been employed in the main theatres of war.

Spectacular success against shipping carrying supplies to the Dodecanese Islands was scored by Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron commanded by Wing Commander R. M. Mackenzie. In one five-month period under his leadership, squadron crews sank or probably sank 49 merchant ships and caiques totalling 9300 tons and damaged 63 vessels of more than 17,400 tons. Flying Officer W. Y. McGregor and Flight Sergeant Shattky ¹ were two New Zealand Beaufighter pilots particularly successful in offensive sweeps over the Aegean. On one occasion McGregor attacked a 2000-ton ship with cannon, setting drums of petrol on fire, which finally resulted in the vessel sinking, while Shattky scored a direct hit on a caique and blew the frail craft to pieces.

There were also bomber captains like Flight Sergeant D. R. Browne, of No. 462 Squadron, who took part in raids against targets in **Crete**, **Greece** and the **Dodecanese**. Browne and his crew frequently acted as 'pathfinders' and on several occasions their **Halifax** aircraft was the only illuminator for a successful sortie.

Fighter squadrons, whose primary duties were the defence of Egypt and convoy patrols, also made a series of attacks against targets in **Crete**. Squadron Leader Stratton, ² a veteran of the early air battles

¹ Flying Officer H. M. Shattky; born Hastings, 23 Jan 1920; student optician; joined **RNZAF** 14 Jun 1941.

² Group Captain W. H. Stratton, DFC and bar; born Hastings, 22 Jul 1916; sheep farmer; joined **RAF** 12 Jul 1937; transferred **RNZAF** 1 Jan 1944; commanded No. **134 Sqdn**, **Middle East**, **Burma** and **India**, 1943–44; OC Flying Wing, **Wigram**, 1945; served with **BCOF**, **Japan**, 1947–48.

over **France**, who now commanded No. 134 Squadron, Flying Officer Cochrane¹ of No. 94 Squadron and Flight Sergeant Rayment² of No. 238 Squadron were among New Zealand Hurricane pilots who took part.

The air assault against enemy supply routes in the Aegean and eastern **Mediterranean** was maintained throughout 1944. Supply ports, bases, airfields, radar stations and fuel dumps were also bombed, mines were strewn in harbours, channels and anchorages, while intruder raids by night and offensive sweeps by day took their toll of Ju52 transports and other aircraft. By the beginning of 1945 there were still some 18,000 Germans and 4500 Italian Fascists on the islands of **Crete**, **Rhodes**, **Leros**, **Kos** and **Melos**. Their lot was not a happy one. Discontent was growing in the various garrisons and desertions were becoming common. Towards the end the Axis troops, cut off as they were by the Allied recapture of **Greece**, were wont to describe themselves as 'independent and self-supporting prisoners of war'. And that is exactly what they had become, thanks to the efforts of the Allied air and naval forces. The Aegean story finally ended with the surrender of the enemy commanders in May 1945, almost four years after it had begun with the German airborne invasion of **Crete**.

New Zealanders continued to operate over the Aegean and eastern **Mediterranean** during this last year. There was a relatively large representation with No. 38 Squadron, the only Wellington unit left in the eastern **Mediterranean**. These men flew day and night reconnaissances, made torpedo strikes against shipping, bombed ports and airfields and laid mines in enemy waters. These varied missions were not carried out without a steady sequence of casualties. Squadron Leader Green ³ and Flight Sergeant Taylor, ⁴ both pilots, were among those lost in anti-shipping operations; Pilot Officer Armstrong, ⁵ navigator, was fortunate to escape with severe injuries when his Wellington crashed into the top of an escarpment near **Tocra** on return from a sortie to the Aegean.

Among Beaufighter pilots who distinguished themselves in daylight operations was Squadron Leader Kemp, ⁶ a flight commander in No. 227 Squadron. During one offensive sweep over the Aegean early in 1944, Kemp led four Beaufighters in an attack on a small convoy.

¹ Squadron Leader J. McL. Cochrane; born Gore, 2 Mar 1913; bookkeeper; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

² Pilot Officer H. D. R. Rayment; born **Auckland**, 12 Sep 1914; builder and contractor; joined **RNZAF** 25 May 1941; prisoner of war, 23 Jul 1943.

³ Squadron Leader A. H. Green; born **Christchurch**, 15 Jun 1918; joined **RNZAF** 4 Nov 1936; killed on air operations, 6 Apr 1944.

⁴ Flight Sergeant L. R. Taylor; born **Auckland**, 2 Jul 1921; apprentice electrician; joined **RNZAF** 25 May 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Feb 1944.

⁵ Flying Officer T. E. Armstrong; born **Akaroa**, 9 Aug 1912; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1940.

⁶ Wing Commander W. P. Kemp, DSO, DFC; born Russell North, 1 Mar 1915; abattoir assistant; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940; commanded No. 487 (NZ) Sqdn 1945.

His aircraft was badly damaged by flak and he was wounded; two of the other three Beaufighters were also hit, one eventually ditching, but Kemp continued with the attack until all three ships were set on fire. Some months later, at the end of his tour of operations, Kemp, along with another pilot, set out to deliver a **Halifax** to **Algiers**. When about one hundred miles from their destination two engines failed and the **Halifax** was forced to land in the sea. The two men then found there were no rations and very little water in the dinghy. After two nights and two days in the dinghy they succeeded in reaching land. Kemp then walked for ten miles to get help for his companion, who was badly injured. Flight Lieutenant Simpson, ¹ of No. 603 Beaufighter Squadron, operated with similar spirit and shared in the destruction of such targets

as merchantmen, escort vessels and a large fuel dump. On one occasion, he and another pilot shot down two Arado 196s and damaged a third.

Squadron Leader Hooker ² as flight commander and Flying Officer Keys, ³ radio operator, were prominent on night operations with Beaufighters of No. 46 Squadron. This unit was committed to night defence of Egypt but crews varied what was now a monotonous routine by intruder operations over enemy-held islands. Hooker flew many effective sorties and commanded the unit detachment at **Tocra** which covered the Aegean. On one night in February while patrolling airfields at Rhodes, the Beaufighter in which Keys was flying shot down two Ju52 transports and damaged a third over Calato.

Warrant Officer McMurray, ⁴ who flew with an Australian Baltimore squadron, was an outstanding reconnaissance pilot. Towards the end of February 1944, he sighted the enemy's largest available dry-supply ship in the Aegean—the 5000-ton *Livenza*. As a result of his report twenty-four British Beaufighters and four American Mitchells caught up with the *Livenza*; she was set on fire and left sinking.

The transport squadrons continued to do splendid work. Indeed, their supply and 'special duty' missions—the latter usually flown at night over difficult mountainous country and all too often in appalling weather—were a major factor in the success achieved by those who fought so stubbornly beyond the Italian front. During the last eighteen months of war some sixty New Zealanders served with these squadrons, speeding the movement of personnel and urgent freight and delivering agents, arms, ammunition, food, medical stores and other

¹ Flight Lieutenant D. G. Simpson, DFC; born **Green Island**, 29 Mar 1921; motor mechanic; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941.

² Squadron Leader C. O. Hooker; born **New Plymouth**, 22 Aug 1913; police constable; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant M. G. Keys; born **Auckland**, 26 Oct 1915; electrical engineer; joined **RAF** Sep 1941; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944.

⁴ Flying Officer D. H. McMurray; born **Glasgow, Scotland**, 8 Dec 1912; storekeeper; joined **RNZAF** 23 Mar 1941.

supplies to the partisan and resistance movements in the **Balkans**, northern **Italy**, **Poland** and southern **France**. Men serving with heavy bomber, coastal and even fighter squadrons also co-operated in supply dropping as the need arose.

The largest and most successful effort was that directed to the **Balkans**, especially **Yugoslavia**, to which the first supply dropping flights had been made as early as May 1942. By the end of the war Allied aircraft had flown some 11,600 sorties to **Yugoslavia** to drop, or land at specially built airstrips, over 16,400 tons of supplies. In 'pick-up' operations, some 2500 persons were flown into that country and over 19,000, mostly wounded, brought out.

At the beginning of June 1944 Marshal Tito himself was brought to **Bari** by an RAF Dakota, while his staff and 118 wounded were picked up by American Dakotas. At a subsequent meeting Tito requested the evacuation of his wounded, of whom the majority through lack of medical supplies and a shortage of doctors were in a desperate plight. This meant aircraft landing at night on hastily prepared landing grounds in mountainous country with German troops frequently in the vicinity. However, the task was soon accomplished. In all, Allied transports flew out about 11,000 casualties, some of them women, to **RAF** hospitals in **Italy**. A similar errand of mercy followed in late August, when partisans wounded in the battle of Montenegro were evacuated from Brezna. The airstrip was prepared by those partisans who had the strength to lend a hand; this after a four-days' march from another strip which came under shellfire before they could be picked up. Altogether on this occasion American, Russian and British crews flew out 1078 persons—1059

partisans, 19 Allied aircrew and members of the Allied commission.

During the abortive rising in [Warsaw](#), Allied aircrews based in [Italy](#) made a gallant, but only partially successful, attempt to answer urgent calls for arms and ammunition. The hazards were great. Aircraft flew a round trip of 1750 miles, often in bad weather and largely over enemy territory heavily defended by fighters, anti-aircraft guns and searchlight belts. To make certain of identification of ground signals and to release containers accurately, crews went in at low speed and little more than roof-top height, so that their aircraft were extremely vulnerable. Indeed, the Polish, British and South African units engaged paid a heavy price in their efforts to assist the patriots in their bid to expel the German invaders. Operations were flown on twenty-two nights during August and September 1944, and of the 181 Halifaxes and Liberators despatched 31 failed to return.

New Zealand representation was particularly strong with No. 148 Squadron, which undertook a large proportion of supply dropping missions. Formerly a bomber squadron, No. 148 had become a special duty unit in March 1943, equipped with Halifaxes and Liberators. On operations Flight Lieutenant Crawford ¹ did valuable work as signals leader until late in 1943, when the lone Liberator in which he flew on a supply dropping sortie to [Yugoslavia](#) failed to return. Flight Lieutenant Elliott, ² who had already completed a tour of operations as a rear-gunner with Bomber Command, was one of the pioneers of air despatch. Elliott did a special course as a parachutist to gain the knowledge essential to drop supplies accurately and despatch troops or individual agents safely. He then completed his second tour as the squadron's despatch leader and won distinction for his work. Warrant Officer Docherty ³ as air gunner and Flying Officer Domigan ⁴ as bomb-aimer also had fine records on special duty operations. On one occasion Domigan assisted in the despatch of parachutes and containers in what proved one of the most accurate drops in northern [Italy](#). Subsequently No. 148 received a message reading: 'Absolute magnificent launch. Could not have been better if you had been at Hendon air display. All

chutes and packages on “T”. Thank you.’⁵ The success of special duty operations depended largely on the efficiency of squadron navigators. Flight Sergeant Ellison⁶ navigated Halifaxes on a number of sorties before he and his crew were lost while endeavouring to aid the patriots in **Warsaw**.

Dakota captains of No. 267 Squadron who flew on ‘pick-up’ missions to **Yugoslavia** included Flight Lieutenant J. H. Norman, Flying Officer G. D. Askew and Warrant Officer Rathbone,⁷ all with long experience of air transport. Flight Lieutenant S. G. Culliford also continued as a senior captain with No. 267 and, as described elsewhere in this history, he flew a Dakota to **Poland** in July 1944 to pick up one of the leaders of the Polish underground movement, who brought out with him vital data regarding the German V-2 rocket. A veteran wireless operator was Flight Lieutenant G. W. Warden, who took part in a number of hazardous supply drops to the **Balkans**; in one notable daylight mission to the heart of **Yugoslavia** towards the end of March 1944, he was responsible for the signals organisation of the formation employed and ‘the major success achieved was in no small way due to his energy and expert performance of his duties.’

¹ Flight Lieutenant H. I. Crawford; born **Thames**, 10 Mar 1918; painter; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Nov 1943.

² Flight Lieutenant L. Elliott, DFC; born **Petone**, 7 Sep 1918; commercial artist and photographer; joined **RNZAF** 7 May 1940; died Oct 1945.

³ Warrant Officer L. G. Docherty; born Dunedin, 11 Oct 1920; labourer; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant L. J. Domigan; born Gore, 4 Oct 1921; civil servant; joined FAA Oct 1940; transferred **RAF** Aug 1941 and **RNZAF** Dec 1943.

⁵ The usual form of ground signal was a large 'T' borrowed from normal airfield ground signals, which indicated direction of wind as well as the centre of the dropping zone.

⁶ Flight Sergeant B. W. Ellison; born **Napier**, 24 May 1918; accountant; joined FAA 18 Dec 1940; transferred **RAF** 18 Dec 1941 and **RNZAF** 1 Nov 1943; killed on air operations, 12 Sep 1944.

⁷ Pilot Officer R. E. Rathbone; born **Auckland**, 6 Mar 1919; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** 19 Jan 1941.

Flight Lieutenant J. P. Ford, another very experienced transport pilot, continued with No. 216 Dakota Squadron, with which he had flown almost continuously since May 1942. Ford made many notable transport nights, including trips to **Rumania**, **Bulgaria**, **Greece** and southern **France**; he also flew supply dropping and 'pick-up' operations to **Yugoslavia**. During the unhappy political war in **Greece**, he captained one of a number of aircraft which maintained a shuttle service between **Bari** and **Kalamaki** to fly in urgent supplies and evacuate casualties.

Before the invasion of southern **France**, Halifaxes of No. 624 Squadron operating from **Blida**, near **Algiers**, rendered excellent Service in dropping agents and stores to the Maquis. After running the gauntlet of the enemy defences, crews often found it far from easy to identify the flickering lamps and fires which marked the dropping zones. Nor was it by any means certain that the reception parties would be waiting at the pre-arranged spot, for frequently the activities of German troops made it inadvisable for them to put in an appearance. Nevertheless the proportion of successful sorties was remarkably high. Flight Lieutenants Hynd ¹ and Garnett, ² who had earlier flown **Halifax** bombers in raids against targets in **Germany**, were captains whose consistency won them distinction, while a high standard of navigation was attained by Flying Officer Neale ³ and Pilot Officer Millar. ⁴

We now turn to the **Coastal Air Forces** with which some two hundred New Zealanders served during the last eighteen months of the war. Their main duties were the defence of our own convoys, ports and bases, and the attack of enemy shipping, and the aircraft they flew included Beaufighters, Wellingtons and Marauders. Patrols were only occasionally enlivened by brief flashes of combat, but they were maintained with the same unflagging zeal shown by their comrades in the Battle of the **Atlantic**.

Among the Beaufighter pilots who saw action was Flight Sergeant Ashwell ⁵ of No. 153 Squadron, operating from a base near **Algiers**. Scrambled one night in pursuit of enemy aircraft over the North African shipping lanes, he intercepted a Dornier 217; holding his fire until he had closed to within about fifty yards, he had the satisfaction

¹ Flight Lieutenant C. A. Hynd, DFC, Croix de Guerre (Fr); born **Invercargill**, 23 May 1917; accounting clerk; joined **RNZAF** 12 Jan 1940.

² Flight Lieutenant E. W. Garnett, DFC; born Eltham, 22 Jun 1917; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 6 Sep 1941.

³ Flying Officer L. W. Ncale; born Runanga, 14 Aug 1909; cost accountant; joined **RNZAF** 30 May 1942; killed on air operations, 14 Aug 1944.

⁴ Flying Officer J. A. Millar; born **Auckland**, 19 Apr 1920; postman; joined **RNZAF** 30 May 1942; killed in aircraft accident, 16 Apr 1945.

⁵ Flying Officer P. Ashwell; born Kelso, Otago, 28 Aug 1918; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1941.

of seeing the Dornier burst into flames and then go spinning down into the sea. Another Beaufighter crew of No. 256 Squadron-Flying Officer Nicolson ¹ with Flying Officer Ching ² as his radio observer- were on patrol some ninety miles off **Algiers** when they sighted six Ju88s. Selecting one which was flying apart from the main formation, they sent it down a flaming mass to crash upon the sea.

Daylight strikes against enemy ships with torpedo and later with rocket projectiles were among the highlights for crews like Flight Sergeant Furness ³ and Flying Officer Forbes ⁴ of No. 272 Squadron. Flight Lieutenants C. M. Gibbs, Flight Lieutenant Gellatly, ⁵ Flying Officer Cornish ⁶ and Pilot Officer Holland ⁷ were among the pilots who completed many sorties with No. 14 Marauder Squadron. Gibbs had joined the squadron after serving for almost eighteen months in transport and supply dropping missions. Gellatly had seen service with light-bomber units in the **United Kingdom**, including the New Zealand Ventura squadron, and had also captained Bisleys and Bostons during the North African campaign.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1944 the assault by German U-boats and aircraft on Allied shipping in the **Mediterranean** grew weaker and weaker. For example, in the three months May to July, only one destroyer and two merchant ships were sunk—a striking contrast to the heavy losses suffered by convoys before the victory in North Africa. During the same period four enemy submarines were sunk and fourteen Ju88s shot down.

With the invasion of southern **France** and the early capture of **Toulon** and Marseilles, German U-boats in the **Mediterranean** were left without an adequate base from which to continue operations. Three U-boats were scuttled in **Toulon** in August and a further three were scuttled off the Turkish coast on 10 September; nine days later the last U-boat to be sunk in the **Mediterranean** fell victim to a naval force south of **Greece**. Thereafter Allied ships in the **Mediterranean** were completely free of the submarine menace which had plagued them for so long.

With enemy activity thus diminishing, the men who flew anti-submarine patrols could seldom report an eventful sortie. But their

¹ Flight Lieutenant J. M. Nicolson; born Dunedin, 22 Apr 1921; stock and station clerk; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant A. H. Ching; born Reefton, 25 Jan 1923; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1942; died of injuries sustained in aircraft accident, 8 Aug 1945.

³ Flying Officer J. P. Furness; born **Auckland**, 17 Jun 1923; apprentice engineer; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1942.

⁴ Flying Officer W. H. Forbes; born **Blenheim**, 26 Jan 1923; draughtsman; joined **RNZAF** 19 Sep 1942.

⁵ Squadron Leader W. R. Gellatly; born **Dunedin**, 17 Dec 1920; architectural draughtsman; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1940; commanded No. 293 ASR Sqdn 1944–45.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant N. Cornish; born **Auckland**, 7 Apr 1917; builder; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 1 Jul 1944.

⁷ Flying Officer M. L. **Holland**; born **Christchurch**, 6 Jun 1918; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1941.

work deserves recognition. In particular one must mention the crews of the Leigh Light Wellingtons, who kept up their long patrols over the sea night after night. It was as captain of one of these aircraft that Flight Lieutenant Bamford ¹ made a gallant attack on a German U-boat off the Spanish coast early in 1944. There were three other New Zealanders in his crew—Flying Officer Colquhoun, ² navigator, Flying Officer Medcalf, ³ wireless operator, and Flying Officer Cull ⁴ as gunner. During the approach, which was made in bright moonlight, accurate

flak from the U-boat set the Wellington on fire, but Bamford completed his attack before bringing his Wellington down on the sea; neither he nor his navigator survived but the remainder of his crew were picked up from their dinghy by a Polish destroyer. Flying Officers Dudding ⁵ and Everiss, ⁶ Flight Sergeants N. McC. Clark ⁷ and Franklin ⁸ all piloted Leigh Light Wellingtons of No. 36 Squadron in numerous searches for the elusive U-boats.

It is also interesting to record that a small group of New Zealanders—some twenty aircrew and nine radar mechanics—made their contribution to the safety of Allied shipping in the approaches to the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the western area of the **Indian Ocean**. They served with the Catalina, Wellington, Sunderland and Bisley squadrons that flew from bases in **East Africa** and at **Aden**. The patrols, as usual, were long and monotonous and there were some months when aircraft from **Aden** alone flew more than two thousand hours without incident. Yet crews had the satisfaction of knowing that two million tons of shipping passed safely through their area.

Two New Zealanders, Sergeants Martin ⁹ and Peters, ¹⁰ were, however, fortunate enough to see action during August 1943. They were gunners in a Catalina flying-boat which found the German submarine U.I 97 patrolling the convoy route near the southern end of the Mozambique Channel and east of **Durban**. In a spirited attack with depth-charges and machine-gun fire the enemy craft was damaged. Then, for

¹ Flight Lieutenant R. D. Bamford; born **Auckland**, 27 Nov 1917; university student; joined RN2AF May 1941; killed on air operations, 8 Jan 1944.

² Flying Officer I. A. Colquhoun; born **Oamaru**, 10 Jan 1920; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 8 Jan 1944.

³ Flight Lieutenant W. L. Medcalf; born Liverpool, England, 3 Aug 1920; motor mechanic; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant D. G. Cull; born Fairfax, 15 Oct 1918; bushman; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant T. V. Dudding; born **Whangarei**, 2 Jun 1923; clerk; joined **RNZAF** May 1941.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant R. E. Everiss; born **New Plymouth**, 24 Sep 1920; insurance clerk; joined **RNZAF** 14 Jun 1941.

⁷ Flying Officer N. McC. Clark; born **Auckland**, 2 Jan 1921; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1941.

⁸ Flying Officer J. P. Franklin; born **Napier**, 1 Mar 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941.

⁹ Warrant Officer R. F. Martin; born **Napier**, 14 Dec 1918; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 18 Jan 1941.

¹⁰ Warrant Officer W. M. Peters; born **Auckland**, 22 Nov 1922; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 10 Jul 1940.

over thirty minutes, the Catalina made strafing attacks until the U-boat submerged and sent up a deceptive patch of oil. The crew of the flying-boat were not to be put off by this subterfuge and continued to patrol the area. An hour later, when the U-boat again broke surface, it was seen to have a decided list to port. The enemy gunners immediately opened fire on the flying-boat and intermittent action continued for four hours. A relieving Catalina now appeared. Martin and Peters were again at their guns as their aircraft went in yet again, this time clearing the U-boat's deck and so enabling the second flying-boat to follow up with an accurate depth-charge attack. This sent the U-boat down, leaving large

oil patches and bubbles on the sea. No survivors or wreckage were seen but the sinking was later confirmed.

Air-Sea Rescue squadrons of the **Coastal Air Forces** did splendid work in picking up many hundreds of Allied airmen forced to 'ditch' or bale out while over the **Mediterranean**. New Zealanders had been among the pioneers of this work in the **Middle East** and Squadron Leader S. W. R. Hughes had commanded the Air-Sea Rescue Flight based in Egypt. Now, during the last two years of hostilities, almost forty New Zealand airmen flew with the RAF Walrus, **Warwick** and Wellington aircraft which played a leading part in the work of search and rescue.

The Walrus, which carried a crew of three—pilot, navigator and wireless operator—proved of the utmost value in that it could usually alight safely on the relatively calm **Mediterranean**. Flight Sergeant Divers ¹ of No. 283 Squadron and Flight Sergeant Berry ² of No. 284 Squadron were conspicuous for their operations with these unarmed aircraft.

In one period of four months Divers was responsible for eleven successful rescues of British and American airmen and on several occasions he displayed unusual audacity. For example, early in July 1943 he rescued a fighter pilot from a position only fifteen miles off **Sardinia**, still in enemy hands. A fortnight later he rescued another pilot twenty miles off **Sicily** despite considerable enemy activity; the next month he repeated this exploit by picking up a fighter pilot eight miles outside the port of Vulcano, although his aircraft was the target for a number of enemy anti-aircraft batteries. But his most outstanding achievement was on 3 November 1943. On that day he had been discharged from hospital and had returned to his unit with instructions that he was not fit for flying for a further two weeks. On arrival he found all other pilots were away in other sectors and that a distress

¹ Flying Officer A. Divers, DFM; born Dunedin, 15 Mar 1921; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941.

² Warrant Officer J. R. Berry, DFM; born Kurrikurri, Aust, 14 Feb 1911. wicker worker; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1940.

call had been received from a position west of the Italian coast. There was no senior officer to whom he could refer so Divers decided to answer the call himself. He flew his Walrus to the position, located a dinghy, landed on the sea and took five aircrew safely aboard. They said their dinghy was leaking so badly that they could not have possibly survived in it for more than another two hours. Meanwhile the rough sea had torn such large gaps in the fabric of the amphibian that Divers was unable to take off; he attempted to taxi but this soon became impracticable. However, he managed to keep his aircraft afloat and, after being tossed about for about ten hours, the crew and the rescued airmen were picked up the next morning by an American hospital ship. The ship's log reads: 'Sea rough, sky overcast, rain squalls. It required considerable persuasion by the Chief Engineer to induce the pilot to leave the damaged aircraft. In our estimation the plane could not survive.'

In a period of six weeks Flight Sergeant Berry was concerned in the rescue of eight aircrew, all from positions dangerously close to the enemy coast. On one mission from **Sicily** his Walrus picked up two fighter pilots near Cape Spartivento in the toe of **Italy**—one of them was only a few hundred yards from the shore and the aircraft was being fired on while it landed and took off again. On another occasion Berry's aircraft was sent to search for the leader of a Spitfire wing. As the Walrus alighted beside the pilot's dinghy, its Spitfire escort was attacked by two Messerschmitt 109s and one was shot down. The Walrus was also attacked as it sat on the water and was damaged in the hull below the waterline. Berry covered two holes near the tail with his hands, and with the inrush of water thus reduced the Walrus was able to take off and fly back to its base in **Sicily**. One day later in the campaign Berry and his crew made two sorties lasting nearly seven hours from Pomigliano, near **Naples**, and rescued seven American airmen.

Other New Zealanders prominent in air-sea rescue were Squadron Leader W. R. Gellatly, who commanded No. 293 Squadron, equipped with Walrus amphibians and Warwicks, and Flight Lieutenant Grant,¹ who served as flight commander with No. 283 Squadron and captained Warwicks. Flying Officer Kearse,² navigator, and Flight Sergeants Scown³ and Watson,⁴ wireless operator–air gunners of No. 284 Squadron, and Flight Sergeant Ritchie,⁵ wireless operator of No. 293

¹ Flight Lieutenant J. R. Grant; born **Gisborne**, 24 Apr 1914; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant K. H. Kearse; born **Wanganui**, 19 Nov 1916; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 29 Nov 1941.

³ Warrant Officer A. S. Scown; born Patea, 15 Mar 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 29 Nov 1941.

⁴ Warrant Officer A. A. Watson; born Dunedin, 25 Jul 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 6 Jul 1941.

⁵ Warrant Officer M. V. H. Ritchie; born Cromwell, 22 Aug 1922; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** 30 Nov 1941.

Squadron, took part in successful rescues in the central **Mediterranean** as aircrew with Warwicks, which were capable of carrying an airborne lifeboat. With No. 294 Wellington Squadron covering the eastern **Mediterranean**, Flying Officer Freeman¹ and Pilot Officer Lister² did good work as captains and Pilot Officer Drake³ as a wireless operator.

Photographic reconnaissance was yet another specialised air activity in which New Zealanders were concerned. Its importance may be judged from the fact that in the twelve months to October 1944 almost eight thousand effective sorties were flown by British and American

photographic aircraft. A detailed description of operations is not possible here but the following glimpses will give some impression of the work and its influence on both air and ground operations.

In January 1944 reconnaissance over **Ploesti** revealed that the Germans had built a complete decoy town incorporating the essential features of **Ploesti** itself, including accurate and well-positioned dummies of all the main oil refineries. In February the photographic squadrons were called upon to provide material for the preparation of maps showing the location of all enemy airfields within a 700-mile radius of **Foggia**. Another special task came during the advance on **Rome**. On this occasion Tactical Air Forces required annotated prints of all important bridges in central **Italy** for use in the interdiction programme against enemy road and rail communications leading to the battle area. Mid-1944 also brought additional demands for reports on targets in **Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria and Greece**; special cover of Danube river traffic in connection with the prolific minelaying by the **RAF** bomber squadrons was another feature of this time. Survey work, reports on harbours, airfields and enemy defences in preparation for the invasion of southern **France** and nights to **Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland** also absorbed many sorties. Areas in northern **Italy** were not neglected and there was no lack of support for army requirements during the campaign.

The outstanding New Zealand personality in this photographic reconnaissance work in the **Mediterranean** was Wing Commander R. C. Buchanan, who had concentrated on such duties since mid-1942 and won special commendation during the campaign in North Africa. He now commanded No. 682 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron for seven months and was then appointed wing leader of the **RAF's** photo-reconnaissance wing. Under Buchanan's leadership, No. 682 Squadron

¹ Flight Lieutenant F. P. Freeman; born **Otaki**, 18 Feb 1918; farm labourer; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1942.

² Flying Officer G. D. Lister; born **Napier**, 7 Jun 1920; draughting and clerical cadet; joined **RNZAF** 14 Jun 1941.

³ Flying Officer R. D. W. Drake; born Walthamstow, **London**, 1 Jul 1922; shipwright; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

operated intensively. For example, in July 1944, pilots made 236 sorties involving over 700 hours' flying. Missions were varied. On one of them Buchanan photographed Dalmatian ports and bomb damage on targets in **Greece**; in another he covered sections of the Po valley and the city of Milan, while on a third he went to nine airfields in southern **Germany**. On one sortie early in September, Buchanan was chased by an Me262 jet fighter while searching for bases from which these aircraft were operating. The jet gained rapidly on his Spitfire but Buchanan went down in a sharp spiral almost to ground level and, following the valley of the Rhine, finally shook off his pursuer as he flew through a pass in the Alps.

Other New Zealand veterans of photographic reconnaissance were Flight Lieutenants Olson ¹ and Walker ² of No. 680 Squadron and Flight Lieutenant Burnet ³ of No. 683 Squadron. Olson and Walker gained distinction for their work over the **Aegean Sea** and the Dodeca nese archipelago. During their tours both men completed some 300 operational hours, repeatedly flying deep in enemy territory and returning with photographs of the utmost value. Burnet flew Spitfires with No. 683 Squadron based at Luqa, **Malta**. Early in October 1943, he was sent to Greek airfields bordering the **Aegean Sea**, and after completing his task landed at **Brindisi** to refuel; he then set off for **Malta**, but a violent thunderstorm blanketed the island in dense cloud, and although Burnet was in contact to within a few miles he failed to arrive at base.

* * * * *

To conclude this chapter it is appropriate to record the names of

some of the many New Zealand airmen who did good work in non-operational roles during the last two years of the war. Several held important commands or appointments, and a number of men who had seen their share of action in the **Mediterranean** area gave the benefit of their experience to the training organisation; others filled a variety of posts as engineer, navigation, signals and medical officers or airfield controllers. Good work was also done by the staff of the **RNZAF** Liaison Office in **Cairo**, which dealt with matters of promotion, posting, repatriation, and assisted with personal problems.

Of particular interest was the work of Sir Keith Park as Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, **Middle East**. He took up this post in January 1944 following his brilliant conduct of both defensive and offensive

¹ Flight Lieutenant O. P. Olson, DFC; born **Auckland**, 2 Sep 1920; student; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941; prisoner of war, 29 Dec 1944; killed in Tangiwai train accident, 24 Dec 1953.

² Flight Lieutenant P. M. Walker, DFC; born **Te Awamutu**, 28 Jun 1919; electrician; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant J. B. Bumet; born **Wellington**, 25 May 1916; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941; killed on air operations, 2 Oct 1943.

operations as Air Officer Commanding, **Malta**. Park remained in his new position until February 1945, when he moved to **South-east Asia** as Allied Air Commander-in-Chief. Air Commodore H. D. McGregor and Group Captain M. W. B. Knight, after long spells on the operations planning staff of Mediterranean Allied Air Force, spent the closing months of the war in new appointments; McGregor became Air Officer Commanding, **Levant**, and Knight assumed command of RAF Station, **Ismailia**, in Egypt.

Air Commodore McKee, ¹ who had long been associated with heavy

bombers based in the **United Kingdom**, commanded No. **205 Group** in the final days of hostilities and the immediate post-war period. Group Captain Jarman,² another experienced leader of bombers, was Senior Air Staff Officer with this group for a nine-month period beginning in mid-1944. Group Captain L. H. Anderson occupied important posts in the **Middle East**, including the command of wings and then of RAF Station, Berka, before leaving for South Africa to control a large training school. He had previously done good work at training schools in the Union during 1941 and 1942.

Group Captain J. J. McKay, following his successful command of Liberators, spent a period as Senior Air Staff Officer at Headquarters, Levant. In May 1944 he was sent to **Italy**, where he took over as commander of No. 240 Liberator Wing—a post he was to hold for the next eighteen months. Group Captain E. W. Whitley, of ‘Whitforce’ fame, commanded groups in the **Middle East**, while Wing Commander J. E. S. Morton was Chief Training Instructor at No. **203 Group** and Wing Commander S. W. R. Hughes was on the training staff at Royal Air Force Headquarters.

¹ Air Vice-Marshal Sir A. McKee, KCB, CBE, DSO, DFC, AFC; **RAF**; born **Oxford, Canterbury**, 10 Jan 1902; joined **RAF** 1926; permanent commission 1936; commanded No. 9 Sqn 1940; Wing Commander Training, No. 3 Bomber Group, 1941; commanded RAF Station, Marham, 1941–42; RAF Station, Downham Market, 1942–43; Base Commander, Mildenhall, 1943–45; AOC No. **205 Group, Italy**, 1945; SASO, HQ **Mediterranean and Middle East**, 1946–47; Commandant RAF Flying College, Manby, 1949–51; AOC No. 21 Group, Flying Training Command, 1951–53.

² Group Captain L. E. Jarman, DFC; **RAF**; born **Christchurch**, 17 Aug 1907; joined **RAF** 1929; permanent commission 1934; CFI, No. 23 OTU, 1941; commanded **RAF** Station, Litchfield, 1941–42; SASO, No. 93 Group, 1942–43; commanded RAF Station, Kirmington, 1943; RAF Station, Wyton, 1943–44; SASO, No. **205 Group, Italy**. 1944–45.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 10 – THE END IN ITALY

CHAPTER 10

The End In Italy

BY the autumn of 1944 the Allied armies had broken into the Gothic Line, that strong system of fortifications which the enemy had prepared to defend northern Italy. But before our troops could fight their way through the last mountain barriers severe weather intervened. And as the valleys filled with mist and the roads turned to quagmires, it became evident that holding operations were all that could be undertaken until the advent of spring made it possible to resume the offensive on a grand scale.

Close air support was thereupon reduced to the minimum required for strictly local operations and the main task of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces became the reduction of the enemy's fighting capacity in readiness for the final reckoning. To achieve this it was necessary to deny him freedom of movement and access to his sources of supply—in other words, to disrupt his lines of communication, particularly the frontier rail routes. The enemy divisions which remained in Italy would then be cut off and without the resources to carry out sustained operations; the transfer of large forces to reinforce other fronts would also be impracticable.

The railway and road through the Brenner Pass connecting Verona with Innsbruck was still the main lifeline for the enemy forces in Italy and it therefore received high priority for attack. In January 1945, despite twelve days on which the route was shrouded in thick cloud, a total of 1725 tons of bombs were dropped by medium bombers of Tactical Air Force, with Avisio, Rovereto and San Michele as their main targets; British and American heavy bombers also joined in striking hard at rail targets, notably at the Verona marshalling yards. The combined assault during this month made the Brenner route impassable for fifteen days and probably for another five; photographic reconnaissance also showed little rail activity south of Trento. In February better weather produced better results. Nearly 5000 tons of high explosive from medium

and heavy bombers, together with over 1000 sorties by fighter-bombers, so devastated the Brenner route that at no time was it open to continuous through traffic. During March ten to twelve blocks at a time were common and on one occasion there were fifteen on the vital stretch between **Verona** and Bolzano. Similar havoc had meantime been wrought upon the railways in the north-eastern frontier zone. By the end of March the Brenner and other routes were little more than a series of disconnected stretches of track, and German stocks of petrol had been so much reduced that any considerable movement by road of troops or supplies was out of the question. The neutral Swiss were so impressed that they now hastened to conclude an agreement with the Allies which forbade the passage of war materials through their country between **Italy** and the Reich. The blockade of northern **Italy** was thus virtually complete.

Along with this onslaught on the frontier railways, a considerable air effort was directed against enemy communications immediately behind the battle area. Medium bombers paid particular attention to the lines leading to Milan, Turin and Genoa, while fighter-bombers cratered tracks and broke bridges, especially in the areas north of the Po and east of the Adda River. Night fighters struck at road convoys both in the central Po valley and farther north. Dumps and installations were also attacked, and as the date of the land offensive drew nearer the onslaught upon them in all areas mounted steadily. Ships sailing along those stretches of the Adriatic coast still under German control were also bombed, for in desperation the enemy had resorted to using small vessels and barges to supplement his dwindling supplies.

In all these various ways the air forces did their utmost to ensure that the enemy would be as weak as possible when the time came to launch the final land offensive.

Towards the end of March 1945, General von Vietinghoff took over command of the German forces in **Italy** in succession to Field Marshal Kesselring, who had been recalled to assume the command of the collapsing Western Front. The enemy forces in **Italy** were still strong for

Hitler seemed determined to hold this front, possibly because he still retained visions of a last stand in a Southern Redoubt amidst the crumbling ruins of his Third Reich. General Alexander's armies, which comprised seventeen divisions, four Italian combat groups, six armoured and four infantry brigades, were now faced by twenty– three German and four Italian divisions. Of these, sixteen German divisions and one Italian held the Apennine– **Senio** line, with two German mobile divisions in reserve, the remainder of the enemy forces being stationed in the north–east and north–west, where Yugoslav partisan activities in the neighbourhood of **Trieste** and Allied movements on the other side of the Alps kept them fully occupied.

The Allies, however, had one great advantage—their overwhelming air superiority which, quite apart from its achievement in weakening enemy resistance, had enabled our ground forces to make their preparations for the coming offensive with complete immunity and in possession of full information about the enemy's dispositions and possible counter moves. The air force now retained in **Italy** by the Germans was almost negligible and during the first three months of 1945 its activity had been so slight that our fighter pilots seldom had opportunity for combat. The only enemy operations maintained with any regularity were reconnaissance sorties, some of which in March were flown by a small detachment of jet aircraft. But it is doubtful whether they met even the minimum intelligence requirements of the German Army.

The morning of 9 April was unusually quiet with little activity either in the air or on the ground. Then, in the early afternoon the storm burst as 1750 Allied fighters and bombers went into the attack. Wave after wave of Fortresses, Liberators, Marauders, Mitchells, Baltimores and Bostons swept over the enemy lines, and as their bombs exploded clouds of dust rose across the **Senio**. A carpet of 1692 tons of bombs was laid by the heavy bombers in defended areas west and south–west of **Lugo**; medium bombers saturated gun positions in the vicinity of **Imola** with 24,000 twenty–pound incendiaries; and as soon as these carpets had

been laid, fighter-bombers went screaming down upon command posts, divisional headquarters, gun positions, buildings, battalion and company headquarters, causing consternation and confusion among the enemy troops in the forward areas. Our guns then opened up with a heavy barrage and in the evening the **Eighth Army** attacked across the River Senio. Its first objectives were quickly captured and soon British, Indian, Polish and New Zealand troops were fighting their way forward beyond the fortified floodbanks at which they had gazed so enviously all the winter. One New Zealand pilot who was above the battlefield that day with an army observer has recorded this impression of the combined ground and air assault:

‘We watched from the air,’ he says, ‘and saw a dense mass of dust arising from the heart of the defensive positions across the **Senio**. Stretching right back to the coast was a double line of white smoke flares, the final of the two just on our side of the river being orange, with **Lugo** a mile or so beyond. As we cruised beneath the bomber stream, we suddenly saw a carpet of dust almost below us and hastily steered clear. That evening we again watched the terrific offensive from the air. Flame-throwers of the Eighth Indian and Second New Zealand Divisions, leaning against the **Senio** stop-banks, poured a grim barrage of flame at the hapless enemy in dugouts. All along the line, little flashes of flame flickered through the evening haze. The mighty roar of the barrage ceased abruptly at regular intervals for just four minutes when fighters swept in to strafe the German positions and dive-bombers hurled bombs at their vital points. It was awe inspiring enough to watch; no wonder many of the wretched prisoners captured next day were in a stupefied daze.’

That night RAF Liberators continued the air attack and bombed strongpoints barely a mile in front of the **Eighth Army**, their targets being marked by shells emitting red smoke. On the following day **Lugo** was taken and within a week, during which air support ceased neither by day nor night, **Argenta** had been overrun and the Eighth Army was moving on through the Gap to **Ferrara**. Meanwhile the **Fifth Army** had

opened its attack in the central sector on 14 April, heralded, as on the eastern flank, by an intense aerial offensive. The troops soon fought their way through the mountains and then closed in on **Bologna** from the south-west just as units of the **Eighth Army** came in from the east.

The enemy, realising that disaster was upon him, now began to withdraw northwards across the Po. Our medium, light and fighter-bombers immediately threw almost their entire effort both by day and by night against the river crossings. And since the permanent bridges had already been destroyed some months previously, they were able to concentrate on the congested ferry sites and pontoon bridges. The destruction they caused was enormous. Behind the retreating Germans the railway at the **Brenner Pass** was a shambles, as were all the other rail lines which they might have wanted to use. Thus thousands of enemy troops were soon trapped or immobilised by the Fifth and Eighth Armies. Pursued by Allied armour and harried by the air forces, they had been obliged to abandon what remained of their equipment and transport. By the end of April there remained only four German divisions which bore any semblance to fighting formations.

The end came quickly. On the right the **Eighth Army** raced up the plain, captured **Padua**, **Venice** and **Treviso**, and heading for **Trieste**, established contact with the Yugoslav forces under Marshal Tito. In the centre the **Fifth Army** made for **Verona** and the Brenner and linked up with an American army from Bavaria. On the left it reached Turin and from Genoa it made contact with French troops which had moved along the Riviera. But before the last of these events occurred, the struggle was really over. German emissaries had come to Alexander's headquarters with proposals for surrender, and after brief negotiations the whole of the German forces in **Italy** laid down their arms in unconditional surrender on 2 May 1945.

Such were the operations in which New Zealanders played their part with the **RAF** during the final stages of the Italian campaign. They had shared in, and often led, every type of air operation from fighter-bomber attacks on the actual battlefield to the long-range missions across the

Alps by the heavy bombers; they had flown Spitfires on fighter patrol and attack, Mustangs on armed reconnaissance, Bostons to bomb enemy communications, Mosquitos on photographic sorties, Dakotas on transport and supply missions, and their contribution had been made with characteristic spirit and dash. Typical of that spirit was the action of one young fighter pilot, Flying Officer A. G. P. Newman of No. 145 Squadron. On a reconnaissance of the Po valley, he sighted some fifteen barges and at once dived to attack. His bombs fell short but, determined not to be frustrated, he went down again to strafe the barges with cannon and machine-gun fire, flying repeatedly up and down the river. He was then seen to turn and begin strafing a building on the river bank, and as he swept over it at very low level the target blew up. Unhappily Newman's aircraft was damaged by the blast and as he headed for base his engine caught fire. A few moments later the Spitfire hit the ground and exploded.

Flying and fighting with their squadrons, New Zealanders continued in action till the end. Fighter pilots, for example, shared in the low-level attacks which led to the collapse of enemy resistance in the **Bologna** area and bomber crews took part in the assault on enemy strongpoints at **Bastia**. And it is interesting to record that on 26 April 1945, when the **RAF** bombers based in **Italy** made their last major raid, New Zealanders, including two captains of aircraft—Flight Lieutenant K. B. Smith ¹ of No. 70 Squadron and Pilot Officer Struthers ² of No. 178 Squadron—were among those who flew with the Liberators. Their objective was the railway marshalling yards at Freilassing; with the target well marked by pathfinders, large explosions and many fires were started; some 300 waggons were destroyed, buildings burnt out and all lines blocked. The flight out and back was made in bright moonlight with the Alps gleaming white below, and the target itself was only a few miles from **Hitler**'s famous 'Redoubt' at Berchtesgaden, which had been attacked that same day by Bomber Command. It was a fitting final sortie.

In the achievement of final victory in **Italy** the share of the air

forces was undoubtedly great. Their disruption of rail and road communications had brought about the almost complete immobilisation of the enemy land forces and their relentless activity over the battle area assisted the advance of our armies at every stage. Had the enemy commanders enjoyed freedom of movement and safe and secure communications, with all that these imply, they must have held at bay and perhaps defeated armies many times larger than those commanded by Alexander. As it was, they had to contend with a steadily mounting offensive over and behind their lines which their own air forces were powerless to prevent or even hinder. General von Vietinghoff afterwards paid tribute to the work of the Allied fighter bombers. 'They hindered essential movement,' he said, 'even tanks could not be moved by day. Their very presence over the battlefield paralysed movement.' And he left little doubt about the effect of the air attacks at the opening of the final battle. 'The smashing of communications was specially disastrous. Thereafter orders failed to come through at all or failed to come through at the right time. In any case the command was not able to keep itself informed of the situation at the front, so that its own decisions and orders came, for the most part, too late.' Similar testimony regarding the work of the Allied bombers came from General von Senger, a corps commander in the German *Fourteenth Army*. 'The Allied air attacks on the frontier route of **Italy** made the fuel and ammunition situation very critical Night bombing was very effective and caused heavy losses.' He also declared that 'It was the bombing of the river Po crossings that finished us. We could have withdrawn successfully with normal rearguard action despite the heavy pressure but owing to the destruction of the ferries and river crossings, we lost all our equipment. North of the river we were no longer an army.'

¹ Flight Lieutenant K. B. Smith; born Manurewa, 13 May 1923; apprentice engineer; joined **RNZAF** 31 Oct 1942.

² Flight Lieutenant A. B. Struthers; born Dalmuir, **Scotland**, 10 Aug 1921; commercial traveller; joined **RNZAF** 27 Mar 1942; killed in aircraft accident 17 Nov 1952 whilst serving with **RAF**.

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NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 11 – MALAYA, SUMATRA, AND JAVA

CHAPTER 11

Malaya, Sumatra, and Java

JAPAN'S invasion of **Malaya** was not wholly unexpected for it had long been evident that she was determined to establish herself as the controlling power in **South-east Asia** and only awaited the opportunity to fulfil this ambition. But the blow which fell in December 1941 was swift and sudden and it achieved astonishing success. Within seventy days the whole of the Malay peninsula, **Britain's** richest tropical possession, the world's chief source of rubber and one of its best sources of tin, was completely in enemy hands. Two powerful British warships— *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*—sent out at the last minute to strengthen our **Far East** defences, were both at the bottom of the sea, torpedoed and bombed by Japanese aircraft. **Singapore** and its great naval base, previously described as ‘an impregnable fortress’ and ‘the **Gibraltar** of the **Far East**’, had fallen after a brief siege. And seventy thousand weary and exhausted defenders had passed into a captivity so rigorous and brutal as to bring about the death of more than half of them.

This disaster, as great as any suffered by British arms, has been ascribed to a combination of circumstances. There was the climate and the apathy of the local population towards the defence of the territory. Our troops, although superior in numbers to the enemy, were untrained in jungle warfare and they became worn out and dispirited by their continual and long retreat. The efficiency of the Japanese in air warfare was greatly underestimated and the sinking of the British warships, coupled with the crippling of the American **Pacific Fleet** at Pearl Harbour, gave the enemy almost complete freedom of movement in the neighbouring seas. ¹ Certainly these were all contributing factors but behind them is the fact that the preparations and plans made by **Britain**, **Australia** and New Zealand in the pre-war years were unequal to the situation which developed in 1941.

¹ Early in the morning of 7 December 1941, waves of Japanese aircraft flown from carriers had appeared over the Hawaiian

island of Oahu, where the American **Pacific Fleet** lay in **Pearl Harbour**. It was a complete surprise. Ships, airfields, troops, all alike were caught off their guard. Within a matter of minutes virtually the whole fleet was out of action, sunk or incapacitated for a considerable period.

For twenty years these plans and preparations had been based on sea power and they were mainly concerned with the defence of **Britain's** naval base at **Singapore**, built at a cost of £65,000,000. Through those years the general opinion was that this would be the first objective of the enemy and that it would be attacked by warships supported by carrier-borne aircraft. The possibility that an assault might be made from another direction seems to have been largely discounted and as late as the autumn of 1939 attention was still concentrated on **Singapore**. There powerful batteries of fixed guns were in position to defend the naval base, with arcs of fire covering a wide area of sea to the south of the island, but these batteries had no forts or fixed defences to protect their rear, a fact which Winston Churchill later described as 'one of the greatest scandals that could possibly be exposed.' Supplementing the guns there were four bomber squadrons, of which two were torpedo-bombers, and there were also two flying-boat squadrons. Their presence, however, was regarded as of secondary importance and the defensive plan remained essentially a naval one. British warships based on **Singapore** would control the sea approaches to **Malaya** and deal with any enemy forces in the vicinity. ¹

This situation endured during the opening months of the Second World War until the collapse of **France** and the occupation of French Indo- **China** by the Japanese brought about a rude awakening. But now when **Malaya** was more closely threatened, **Britain** could not spare warships for the **Far East** owing to the delicate balance of naval strength in European waters. It was therefore decided that the defence of **Malaya** must depend primarily upon air power, backed by such land forces as could be made available. This was at the end of July 1940, at which time *there were precisely eighty-four operational aircraft in the whole*

of *Malaya* and not one of them was a modern fighter.² Plans were concerted between Britain, Australia and New Zealand for substantial reinforcements of machines, equipment and trained pilots to be sent to the Far East but, in the circumstances of 1940, such things could not be provided in a matter of weeks, or even months, for by this time the Middle East and Britain herself were in grave danger. The result was that, when the Japanese launched their attack, these plans were nothing like fulfilled. For example, instead of 582 first-line aircraft which had been considered necessary to meet the changed situation, there were only 158 and many of these were obsolete. Reserves actually held were only 88 machines instead of the 157 authorised. Indeed, at no time during the brief campaign were the British Commonwealth squadrons charged with the defence of Malaya capable of dealing adequately with those opposed to

¹ See Churchill, *Second World War*, Vol. IV, Appendix D, Memorandum on Singapore Defences.

² Author's italics.

them or with the naval and military forces of the invader. They had neither the modern aircraft nor the necessary facilities with which to perform these tasks.

This weakness of our air forces, due largely to their neglect in the years of peace, was probably the main reason why the Japanese were able to achieve such a rapid and overwhelming victory. But it was accentuated by a lack of preparedness in other directions which it is impossible to discuss here. The whole sad tale, however, now lies unfolded in the pages of the official British history—*The War Against Japan*, Volume I—and its concluding chapter, in particular, deserves careful study by all who seek to understand and to avoid a repetition of the melancholy events here related.

To support their invasion of Malaya the Japanese had a force of 300

land-based aircraft deployed in Indo- **China** in addition to those which were carrier-borne. They included the twin-engined Army types '97' and '99' for bombing and reconnaissance and the Navy type '96' for use as a torpedo-bomber. Their principal fighter aircraft were the Army types 'I' and '97' and the Navy type 'O'. The latter, better known as the 'Zero', proved one of the greatest surprises of the campaign. Fast, well-armed and extremely manoeuvrable, it was more than a match for our fighters, whose pilots, unaware of its high performance, suffered many casualties through adopting the wrong tactics against it. ¹ The Japanese squadrons were trained for certain definite roles. That of the **Army Air Force** units was to strike hard in close support of the armies in the field while the Naval Air Forces had the duty of attacking shipping, bombing suitable targets on shore and covering their own warships. The enemy pilots, many of them with long experience in the Chinese war, were skilful and resolute men. They gave eloquent proof of these qualities on the second day of the campaign when they flew through fierce anti-aircraft fire to sink the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, a task which they accomplished with the probable loss of only four aircraft.

Opposing this formidable Japanese force we had a fighter defence of four squadrons—No. 243 RAF, Nos. 21 and 453 Australian and

¹ Reasons why nothing was known about the Zero are thus recorded in the RAF Official History: 'The Japanese had made use of the Navy Zero against the Chinese in the spring of 1940. Some details of its performance had been divulged by American newspaper correspondents stationed in Chungking who had seen it in action at that time, and in the same year more details had reached the **Air Ministry** from other sources in that city. On 2 September 1941, this information was duly forwarded to the Far Eastern Combined Bureau for transmission to Air Headquarters. It never arrived there. Moreover, in addition to the information on this fighter provided by **Air Ministry** a detailed description of it, written in Chinese, reached **Singapore** in July and was duly translated. What happened next is a matter for conjecture since all records have been destroyed; but it seems probable that this very important report formed part of the mass of accumulated

files with which the makeshift Intelligence Section, set up at Air Headquarters in October 1941, attempted to deal. When war broke out they had by no means completed their task and the report remained undiscovered.'

No. 488 New Zealand—all equipped with Brewster Buffalos. This aircraft, according to contemporary opinion, had a disappointing performance. 'It did not stand up well to sustained climbing at full throttle and frequently suffered from loss of power due to a drop in oil pressure and overheating. Both its speed and rate of climb were inferior to that of the Japanese Zero. Its fighting efficiency was further diminished by its radio instruments which were obsolete and unreliable.' Our bombing and reconnaissance force consisted of four squadrons of RAF Blenheims and two of RAAF Hudsons; there were also three Catalina flying-boats based at Seletar near [Singapore](#). For torpedo bombing there were two squadrons of Vildebeestes— machines which, with their light armament and top speed of about 100 miles an hour, were scarcely suitable for attacking modern warships with heavy anti-aircraft defensive armament.

Facilities for the repair and maintenance of these machines were sadly lacking. Such as did exist were concentrated in the workshops at Seletar on [Singapore](#) Island. These workshops, although equipped only to deal with the requirements of two squadrons at the most, were called upon to service the whole air force in [Malaya](#); the magnitude of their task may be gauged from the fact that twenty-seven modifications had to be made in the Brewster Buffalo fighter before it could be used in battle. Of two other maintenance units that were authorised, one never passed beyond the embryo stage while the other, though possessed of personnel, was lacking in equipment.

Our squadrons were seriously short of trained and experienced pilots. Many of those serving in [Malaya](#) had come straight from flying training schools in [Australia](#) and New Zealand, where most of them had never flown anything more modern than a Hart and had no experience of retractable undercarriages, variable pitch propellers or flaps.

Furthermore, when the Japanese attacked, the Buffalo fighter squadrons had only been formed a few months and half of them had not reached full operational efficiency.

The situation as regards airfields was also far from satisfactory although great efforts had been made to improve matters in the year before war came. Of the airfields that had been built, fifteen possessed no concrete runways but were surfaced with grass, a serious matter in a country where tropical rains are frequent and severe. Several, such as that at Alor Star, were out-of-date, with congested buildings close to the runways and few facilities for dispersal. Very few were camouflaged. Ground defences were inadequate or non-existent. ¹ Because

¹ It had been laid down that each airfield was to have eight heavy and eight light anti-aircraft guns but the best-defended airfield was Seletar, which had eight Bofors. Those in central and southern **Malaya** and a number in the northern districts had no anti-aircraft defences at all.

of the rugged and difficult nature of the territory in **Malaya** many airfields had to be built on the exposed east coast, and several were sited in places where their defence proved well-nigh impossible. For example, the landing grounds at Kuantan and Kota Bharu had been built next to long and excellent sea beaches, a fact of which the Japanese were to take full advantage.

Another serious feature, especially for the fighter defence, was the lack of radar units to detect the approach of hostile aircraft and ships. On the east coast of **Malaya**, where the first landings took place, only two were operational, the remaining five still being under construction. On the west coast one had been completed and two others were approaching completion. Only on **Singapore** Island itself were there three posts all in working order. At some stations there was no more effective warning system than that provided by an air craftsman standing on the perimeter and waving a white handkerchief on the

approach of hostile aircraft. These were some of the handicaps under which our pilots and crews went into action against the Japanese invaders.

* * * * *

On the morning of 6 December 1941 the great, humid, prosperous city of **Singapore** went about its business as usual. The streets were thronged with people, the markets bustled with activity and the wharves and docks were busy with the loading and unloading of ships. There was no indication as to how rudely this peaceful scene was soon to be disturbed, yet that same morning the Japanese invasion fleet was already moving southwards. First news of its approach came from a Hudson aircraft on routine reconnaissance over the approaches to the Gulf of **Thailand** which reported two convoys steaming westwards off Cape Cambodia. More aircraft were sent out but low cloud and rain prevented them from finding the ships and a Catalina flying-boat sent to continue the search failed to return—actually it was shot down by Japanese warships. For the next twenty-four hours the whole situation was shrouded in uncertainty, but in the early hours of the 8th the roar of guns off the coast at Kota Bharu and the sound of exploding bombs in the streets of **Singapore** itself left no doubt as to Japanese intentions. The invasion of **Malaya** had begun.

At the outset, the enemy was able to achieve tactical surprise. For the main Japanese landings were made, not in **Malaya**, but across the border in **Siam** (**Thailand**), where for political reasons and in the general uncertainty they were unmolested by our bombers. ¹ Airfields and bases in **Thailand** were thus taken intact and without a fight. Then, before

¹ The C-in-C, **Malaya**, had previously been directed most firmly to do everything possible to avoid war and also to avoid any incident that might harm our cause in the **United States**.

our bombers could be switched to what should have been their main

objectives at Singora and Patani, our own airfields in northern **Malaya** were subjected to heavy and continuous attacks. The bombs used were mainly fragmentation and anti-personnel and they did serious damage to aircraft and men but little to the surface of the airfields, for the Japanese were obviously anxious to capture these in good condition. Raids often took place when our squadrons were either landing or taking off and it was soon discovered that information of aircraft movements was reaching the enemy. By the evening of 8 December, ¹ out of 110 British aircraft available in the morning for combat in northern **Malaya**, only fifty remained in a serviceable condition.

Counter-attacks were launched the next day. The first, carried out in the afternoon, was markedly successful and the congested airfield at Singora was repeatedly hit. But as our squadrons were about to take off for a second assault Japanese bombers came over and, after dropping their bombs, followed up with low-level machine-gun attacks on the airfield. All the aircraft were put out of action except for one single **Blenheim**. Its pilot, Squadron Leader Scarf, ² a Londoner, despite the fact that he was alone, flew on towards his objective. Over Singora he was attacked by enemy fighters but dropped his bombs and turned for home. He had been hit in the back and left arm and mortally wounded, but, still conscious, he maintained a running fight until the Malay border was reached, then landed successfully in a paddy field near Alor Star. His navigator was unhurt but he himself died that night. He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

¹ On the morning of 8 December the strength and dispositions of squadrons in **Malaya** were:

<i>Base</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Strength in Aircraft</i>
Seletar	No. 36 (TB) Sqn RAF	Vildebeeste	6
	No. 100 (TB) Sqn RAF	Vildebeeste	12
	No. 205 (FB) Sqn RAF	Catalina	3
Tengah	No. 34 (B) Sqn RAF	Blenheim IV	16

Sembawang	No. 453 (F) Sqn RAAF	Buffalo	16
Kallang	No. 243 (F) Sqn RAF	Buffalo	30
	No. 488 (F) Sqn	Buffalo	30
	RNZAF		
Sungei Patani	No. 21 (F) Sqn RAAF	Buffalo	12
	No. 27 (NF) Sqn RAAF	Blenheim I	12
Kota Bharu	No. 1 (GR) Sqn RAAF	Hudson	12
	Det No. 243 (F) Sqn	Buffalo	2
	RAF		
Gong Kedah	Det No. 36 (TB) Sqn	Vildebeeste	6
	RAF		
Kuantan	No. 8 (GR) Sqn RAAF	Hudsons	12
	No. 60 (B) Sqn RAF	Blenheim	8
Alor Star	No. 62 (B) Sqn RAF	Blenheim I	11

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On **Singapore** Island there were also three Catalinas manned by Dutch crews.

² Squadron Leader A. S. K. Scarf, VC; born Wimbledon, **London**, 14 Jun 1913; joined **RAF** 1936; died of wounds sustained on air operations, 9 Dec 1941.



THE CAMPAIGN IN MALAYA, 7 DECEMBER 1941 – 15 FEBRUARY 1942

Against the first enemy landings in **Malaya** itself—at Kota Bharu—our bombers were able to achieve some success. During the night of 8 December they sank one transport and severely damaged two others. Landing barges were also attacked and the estimated casualties among the Japanese were 3000. It is recorded that during this phase an unknown **Blenheim** pilot was seen to dive his burning aircraft into an enemy landing craft, destroying it and its occupants. But the success at Kota Bharu was only temporary. The airfield had to be abandoned the next day after a fight in which the ground staff, along with elements of 11 Indian Division, gave a good account of themselves. Eleven aircraft got away south.

Well aware of our weakness in the air, the Japanese continued to strike hard and often against our airfields and it was not long before all the bases in north-east and north-west **Malaya** were rendered untenable. What aircraft were left had to be withdrawn southwards.

Throughout this period the difficulties of all units were increased by the fact that the native labourers usually fled the airfields as soon as bombing began and did not return. Nevertheless many fine individual efforts were made to bring back stores and equipment. The demolition of buildings and runways was also attempted but this did not retard by more than a few hours the use of the airfields by the enemy. Moreover, such demolitions inevitably had a depressing effect on the spirits of the soldiers who, holding positions in front of them, had but to turn their heads to see large fires and columns of smoke in their rear.

Within the first few days the Japanese thus obtained virtual control in the air over northern **Malaya**. Their troops had already thrust from Singora towards Alor Star, and they now began advancing down both coasts with infiltrating groups moving forward through the jungle. Our own ground forces were compelled to give ground and fight a series of rearguard actions. Two squadrons of Buffalo fighters sent north to Ipoh to give them some support went straight into action, attacked Japanese convoys on the roads, reconnoitred to good effect and claimed some

success in air combat. But enemy bombing soon forced these squadrons back to Kuala Lumpur. Here they again came under attack and by 22 December possessed only four serviceable aircraft between them. Thereafter our troops had to meet the full force of the Japanese onslaught with negligible close support from the air.

Our few remaining fighters were meanwhile active in defence of **Singapore** and of shipping in its vicinity; Hudsons continued with coastal reconnaissance and the remnants of the bomber force attacked enemy airfields, bases and troop movements in northern **Malaya** and **Thailand**. These latter missions entailed long flights by night and often through violent tropical thunderstorms. Damage and casualties were certainly inflicted on the enemy, but it is equally certain that he had more than sufficient reserves to replace his losses without delay.

Reinforcements of troops and aircraft began to reach **Singapore** by sea at the beginning of January and the convoys were safely escorted through the dangerous approaches by relays of aircraft, a task which absorbed a good deal of the available air effort. However, before these reinforcements could intervene in the fighting the situation farther north seriously deteriorated. Taking full advantage of their command of the sea the Japanese had begun to make landings behind our positions, and such action, combined with heavy frontal attacks, forced our troops to make further withdrawals. Both fighters and bombers did what they could to help the hard-pressed Army, but the few hundred sorties that were flown, although they inflicted some damage, did not seriously upset enemy plans. Bomber crews made a last gallant effort at Endau on 26 January when reconnaissance reported two cruisers, eleven destroyers, two transports and many small craft approaching the coast. All the aircraft that could be mustered for a strike went out against them in two attacks. The convoys were well protected by fighters and our losses, especially of the slow and out-dated Vildebeestes, were heavy. But the attacks were pressed home. Both transports were hit and thirteen enemy aircraft were claimed destroyed.

By this time the Japanese had extended their air attacks to the

island of **Singapore**, directing them mainly against its four airfields. Daylight raids, first by bombers alone and later by bombers escorted by fighters, took place with increasing intensity, and as the days passed the continual pounding of the airfields made it difficult to keep their surfaces usable. Heavy rainfall seriously handicapped repair work and, to complicate matters further, practically all native labour disappeared. Our depleted fighter squadrons did their utmost to ward off the enemy's attacks. Hurricanes which had arrived in crates were assembled with all speed, but it was 20 January before they first took to the air. For a few days these modern fighters did much damage but before long Japanese superiority in numbers began to take its toll. Our fighter pilots fought on gallantly under growing pressure but it was soon obvious that their resistance could not long be sustained.

By the end of January our ground forces had withdrawn to **Singapore**, and of the four airfields on the island three were being shelled and all four continually bombed. The remnants of the bomber force had already been sent to operate from **Sumatra** along with what remained of the reconnaissance squadrons; only a few fighters were kept—eight Hurricanes and the last six Buffalos. Taking off without any adequate ground control, they did what they could to help our troops, to intercept enemy bombers and to protect shipping leaving the port. That they were able to operate at all was due to the incredible efforts of the servicing staffs and the men who went out after every raid and repaired the runways. It is recorded that as late as 9 February our pilots were able to claim six Japanese bombers destroyed and a further fourteen damaged. But this was their final gallant gesture of defiance and on the following day, with their last base out of action, they had to be withdrawn. **Singapore** fell on 15 February.

For a few more bitter days our squadrons carried on the fight from the islands of the Dutch East Indies. Reinforced by some Hurricanes flown off HMS *Indomitable*, they gave a good account of themselves, notably in the battle of the Palembang River, before their bases and airfields were again overrun by the invading Japanese. Thereupon some

men managed to escape by sea to **Australia**, suffering all manner of torments in small ships and open boats that were mercilessly bombed and machine-gunned by enemy aircraft. But the large majority were taken prisoner and for four long years they had to endure the misery, privations, and often the cruelty of Japanese prison camps. By the time due retribution had fallen from the skies above **Hiroshima** upon the sons of Nippon hundreds had succumbed to their treatment, and among the survivors there were many sick and broken men.

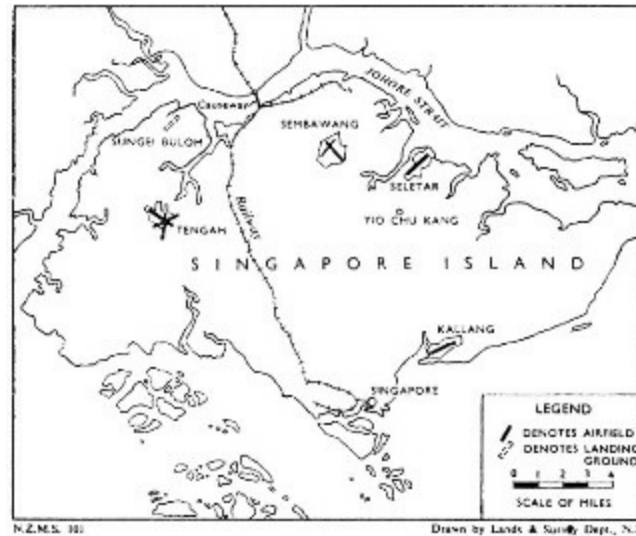
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In this first brief campaign in **South-east Asia** over 400 New Zealanders took part. They were especially prominent in the small fighter force where No. 488 Squadron personnel, both pilots and ground staff, were almost entirely from the Dominion, along with a majority of the pilots in No. 243 Squadron. There was also a substantial representation of pilots, observers, wireless operators and gunners in the bomber and reconnaissance units and among the crews of the flying-boats. In addition New Zealand engineers, mechanics and armourers shared in the work of servicing, maintenance and repair of aircraft, and there were others engaged in signals, radar, equipment, medical and administrative work. Last, but not least, a New Zealand airfield construction squadron did particularly good work both before and during the fighting in **Malaya**.

Fighter pilots of No. 243 Squadron were among the first to see action against the Japanese. Their squadron, formed six months before the war came, was based at **Kallang**, near **Singapore**, where its main task was to defend that city. A small detachment, however, had been sent north to Kota Bharu. Here on the first day of the Japanese landings the Buffalos strafed enemy barges on the Kelantan River. On patrol later the same day Pilot Officer Shield ¹ made contact with enemy bombers but was robbed of the chance of a decisive encounter.

¹ Pilot Officer R. S. Shield; born **Napier**, 29 Sep 1918;

farmhand; joined **RNZAF** 30 Nov 1940; killed on operations, 5 Jan 1942.



SINGAPORE AIRFIELDS
SINGAPORE AIRFIELDS

His combat report illustrates the difficulties with which pilots flying the obsolete Buffalos had to contend:

While at 9,000 feet in pursuit of nine enemy bombers, I observed a bomb burst approximately three miles ahead Turning sharply to port I saw a Japanese aircraft about 2,000 feet below. I overhauled the enemy but as my windshield was covered with oil I was able to get only occasional glimpses of him. At 350 yards, as near as I could judge in the circumstances, I opened fire. After one burst three of my guns stopped; the remaining gun stopped after two further short bursts. I was unable to see whether the enemy returned my fire Breaking away downwards I returned to base while the enemy aircraft continued on its course to the north-east, presumably to Saigon. The combat was broken off ten miles out to sea.

Also serving with the flight at Kota Bharu was Sergeant Wareham,¹ who now began a career as photographic reconnaissance pilot which was carried on with distinction throughout the later campaign in **Burma. In **Malaya** the PR flight of Buffalos flew over one hundred sorties, most of which ranged as far north as Singora, the airfield in **Thailand** from**

which the Japanese launched their early air attacks. Throughout their operations these aircraft carried no armour or guns and when intercepted pilots relied solely on evasive action to get through.

¹ Flight Lieutenant C. B. Wareham, DFM; born Kaikoura, 4 Mar 1916; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940.

Back in **Singapore** pilots of No. 243 Squadron flew defensive patrols over the island and over shipping in the approaches. As daylight raids on the city developed there were frequent 'scrambles' and it was during one of these that Sergeant Kronk ¹ and Sergeant Wipiti, ² a Maori pilot, shared in the destruction of the first Japanese aircraft over **Singapore**. Thereafter, as enemy activity over the southern area steadily increased, pilots were often in action and, despite the absence of an adequate warning system and the inferior performance of their fighter aircraft, they achieved a certain measure of hard-earned success. No details of the squadron's operations during this phase are available but its Commanding Officer reports that Pilot Officers Marra ³ and Pevreal ⁴ and Sergeant Kronk were prominent in the air fighting. Marra, he says, shot down three enemy aircraft and after one sortie skilfully brought his fighter back although the controls were severely damaged. Pevreal and Kronk each destroyed two enemy machines and damaged others. Another young pilot, Pilot Officer Bonham, ⁵ showed great fortitude after he had been seriously injured during a dogfight over **Singapore**, when he flew back and landed successfully before collapsing at the controls. 'In the cold light of the aftermath of a lost campaign' adds the Squadron Leader, 'the efforts of the men involved may appear small but the Squadron was called upon to do all manner of work including day and night fighting, bomber escort, convoy work, reconnaissance and front line patrols. The enemy was far superior in numbers and it was an uphill fight all the time. The majority of pilots lost were New Zealanders who had only left their training schools in New Zealand four months before and without the advantage of an O.T.U. training; they went into the battle with a cheerfulness and spirit of which their families and New

Zealand can be justly proud.'

No. 488 Fighter Squadron shared with No. 243 in the defence of Singapore. The unit had been formed in New Zealand during September 1941, barely three months before the Japanese attack; it comprised 155 officers and airmen. The Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Clouston, ⁶ and the two flight commanders, Flight

¹ **Sergeant C. T. Kronk; born Kohuratahi, Taranaki, 28 Jul 1918; joined RNZAF 18 Jan 1941; clerk; killed in aircraft accident, 28 May 1942.**

² **Warrant Officer B. S. Wipiti, DFM; born New Plymouth, 16 Jan 1922; refrigerator serviceman; joined RNZAF 18 Jan 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Oct 1943.**

³ **Flight Lieutenant T. B. Marra; born Stratford, 17 Aug 1916; service station proprietor; joined RNZAF 29 Sep 1940.**

⁴ **Squadron Leader E. A. Pevreal; born Morrinsville, 18 May 1920; postal clerk; joined RNZAF 9 Apr 1940; commanded No. 17 Sqdn, SE Asia, 1944.**

⁵ **Flight Lieutenant G. L. Bonham, DFC; born Dunedin, 24 Mar 1921; P & T employee; joined RNZAF Jul 1940; killed on air operations, 25 Sep 1944.**

⁶ **Wing Commander W. G. Clouston, DFC; born Auckland, 15 Jan 1916; clerk; joined RAF 1936; commanded No. 258 Sqdn, 1940–41; No. 488 (NZ) Sqdn, 1941–42; prisoner of war (Singapore) Feb 1942.**

Lieutenants Mackenzie ¹ and Hutcheson, ² were New Zealanders already serving in Royal Air Force Fighter Command and they came out from England to meet the squadron at Singapore.

It was November before the complete squadron arrived at [Kallang](#) airfield. An intensive training programme was thereupon commenced with the pilots, who had no experience of operational aircraft, doing refresher flying on Wirraway aircraft—an Australian version of the Harvard trainer—before converting to Buffalo fighters. Many difficulties were experienced. In particular the conversion to Buffalos was delayed because the aircraft allotted were in a bad state of repair and engines, airframes, instruments, guns and radio equipment had all to be cleaned, checked and repaired; there was also a shortage of tools, spare parts and accessories. However, largely through the initiative of the squadron's equipment officer, Flying Officer Franks,³ the shortages were made up and after some very hard work the aircraft were made serviceable. The weather at this time of the year was unhelpful and frequent heavy tropical thunderstorms, which reduced visibility almost to nil, interrupted training and grounded the aircraft.

No. 488 was thus not fully operational when war came but the more experienced pilots were at once employed on patrols over [Singapore](#) and the sea approaches. On 10 December squadron aircraft were among the fighter force sent to aid the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* on receipt of a message that they were under attack from Japanese bombers. When the first Buffalos from No. 488 Squadron reached the scene, over 170 miles away, both ships had already been sunk; all the fighters could do was to cover the ships that were picking up survivors and escort them southwards. At [Singapore](#) during the first weeks there were frequent night raids but not much enemy activity by day except for reconnaissance. No. 488 took advantage of the respite to continue its training and before the end of the month almost all the pilots had been passed as fit for combat flying, although facilities for gunnery training were scarce. On several days pilots had been ordered off the ground in pairs to intercept Japanese reconnaissance aircraft, but the enemy, flying high, always escaped before the slow-climbing Buffalos could reach them.

The squadron made a major effort on 3 January to cover the first

convoy bringing reinforcements to **Singapore**. Five separate missions, involving over sixty-four hours' flying, were flown. The weather was bad all the time, with low cloud and intermittent rainstorms which

¹ Squadron Leader J. N. Mackenzie, DFC; born Goodwood, 11 Aug 1914; farmer; joined **RAF** 6 Dec 1937; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944; commanded No. 488 (NZ) Sqdn, **Singapore**, 1942; No. 64 (**RAF**) Sqdn, 1944.

² Squadron Leader J. R. Hutcheson, DFC; born **Wellington**, 18 Mar 1912; salesman; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939.

³ Squadron Leader C. W. Franks, MBE; born Leithfield, North Canterbury, 12 Jul 1912; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1939.

added to the difficulties of locating and escorting ships. Pilots had to fly at 1000 feet or less to keep below the cloud, and this restricted their vision and gave them very little height for manoeuvre. On the airfield at **Kallang** the ground crews maintained their reputation for hard work and efficiency, toiling all day checking the aircraft as they came in, refuelling them and making them ready for the next patrol. Further convoy patrols were flown during the next few days but there were no incidents.

Kallang had its first raid on 9 January when the squadron's offices, equipment store and the oil and ammunition stores were hit and almost completely demolished. Three days later the New Zealanders had their first serious encounter with the enemy. In the early morning eight aircraft that were standing by at readiness were ordered to take off and intercept a raid coming south. Led by Mackenzie they began climbing over Johore, but had barely reached 12,000 feet when they sighted the enemy force several thousand feet above them. It comprised twenty-seven fighters. Realising that his small formation was heavily outnumbered and at a serious disadvantage in height, Mackenzie at once ordered the pilots to fly into the sun and take evasive action. The

enemy, however, had already spotted them and swept down to the attack. Two Buffalos were shot down in the first few seconds but their pilots, Sergeants Honan ¹ and MacMillan, ² both baled out and landed safely fifteen miles from Johore. Five other machines were damaged and three pilots wounded but all managed to return to base.

The next day's operations were equally severe, six aircraft being lost or seriously damaged without loss to the enemy. There were several narrow escapes. Sergeant Meaclem ³ got out uninjured when his machine crashed in a swamp; Pilot Officer Oakden ⁴ and Sergeant Clow ⁵ both survived after being shot down into the sea—Oakden was picked up by fishermen in a sampan and Clow swam 400 yards to a small island, where he was found by some Chinese and returned to **Kallang** two days later.

From now on the Japanese were over **Singapore** every day, but as long as they had aircraft to fly the defending pilots went up to meet them. The odds were heavy. On 15 January, when No. 488 'Readiness Section' took off to intercept a raid, it was attacked by a swarm of

¹ Warrant Officer T. W. Honan; born **New Plymouth**, 30 Aug 1916; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

² Flight Lieutenant R. W. MacMillan; born **Timaru**, 2 Oct 1918; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** 1 Dec 1940.

³ Flying Officer V. E. Meaclem; born **Ashburton**, 10 Nov 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Feb 1941.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant F. W. J. Oakden; born **Dunedin**, 29 Sep 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Apr 1940; prisoner of war, 25 Mar 1942.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant D. L. Clow, DFC; born **Te Kuiti**, 25 Sep 1921; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941.

Japanese fighters; Pilot Officer Hesketh, ¹ who was leading, was shot down and killed and most of the other pilots had their machines badly damaged. Sergeant Kuhn, ² however, managed to get on the tail of a Type 97 fighter and sent it crashing to the ground—the squadron's first victory.

Three days later a patrol led by Hutcheson scored a major success when, in a battle with nine Zeros, they shot down two and probably destroyed three more without loss to themselves; Pilot Officer Sharp ³ and Sergeant Killick ⁴ both sent their opponents down in flames while Hutcheson, along with Sergeants Meaclem and MacIntosh, ⁵ claimed the probables. During a second patrol the same day, also led by Hutcheson, Sergeant Kuhn sent another Zero into the sea but Hutcheson and Pilot Officer Cox ⁶ were shot down; Hutcheson crashed into jungle but was unhurt; Cox was killed.

Yet despite these valiant efforts by the defending fighters and their ground staffs it was impossible to ward off the ever-increasing enemy attacks. **Kallang** was heavily raided on 22 January just as four New Zealand aircraft were about to take off. Three of them got away safely amid a cloud of smoke and dust, but the fourth was destroyed by a bomb and its pilot, Pilot Officer Farr, ⁷ was fatally wounded.

Very few of the squadron's original twenty Buffalos were now left. The number available for operations varied from day to day between one and four as the ground staff succeeded in making them serviceable. Too few to operate effectively by themselves, they flew with what was left of No. 243 Squadron. Even so, the combined formations were pitifully weak in comparison with those of the enemy, but the pilots, having gained their experience the hard way, were now fully seasoned fighters and could give a better account of themselves.

On 23 January Clouston went to the Headquarters Operations Room and the command of No. 488 Squadron passed to Mackenzie. During the next few days the unit was re-equipped with nine Hurricanes from the shipment which had arrived early in the month. Changing to a new type

of aircraft in the midst of the fighting was far from easy. The pilots had to learn to fly them and become acquainted with their characteristics in between sorties, while the

¹ Pilot Officer G. L. Hesketh; born **Auckland**, 24 Feb 1915; law clerk; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940; killed on air operations, 15 Jan 1942.

² Warrant Officer E. E. G. Kuhn, DFM; born **Wellington**, 14 Sep 1919; mechanic; joined **RNZAF** 9 Feb 1941; prisoner of war Mar 1942.

³ Flying Officer N. C. Sharp, DFC; born **Auckland**, 9 Feb 1922; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941; killed on air operations, 1 Mar 1942.

⁴ Pilot Officer P. E. E. Killick; born **Wellington**, 12 Jun 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Feb 1941.

⁵ Warrant Officer W. J. N. MacIntosh; born **Wyndham**, 12 Jun 1915; driver; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; prisoner of war, 8 Mar 1942.

⁶ Pilot Officer E. W. Cox; born **Christchurch**, 27 Nov 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941; killed on air operations, 18 Jan 1942.

⁷ Pilot Officer L. R. Farr; born **Auckland**, 22 Mar 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941; died as a result of wounds sustained on air operations, 25 Jan 1942.

ground staff had to familiarise themselves with new equipment, new tools and new techniques. But the changeover was made and spirits rose at the thought of what the pilots could do with these modern fighters. They were, however, to have little chance of operating them. On the

morning of the 27th when all the fighters were on the ground refuelling, Japanese bombers attacked the airfield: No. 488 lost two Hurricanes destroyed, with six more damaged, and No. 243 Squadron had most of its Buffalos destroyed or damaged. Two Blenheims on the airfield were completely burnt out, three petrol tankers set on fire and motor transport badly damaged. Forty minutes later a second wave of bombers came over and their bombs destroyed two more Buffalos and pitted the airfield with craters. Eight pilots sheltering in a gun emplacement had a narrow escape; they were buried when a bomb burst close by but were dragged out unhurt.

For the next few days everyone worked feverishly repairing the least damaged aircraft and filling in bomb craters, so that by 30 January a single strip had been cleared and three Hurricanes were able to take the air. But by this time the whole situation at [Singapore](#) had seriously deteriorated and the following evening No. 488 Squadron was ordered to prepare to leave. Thereupon the aircraft that could be made serviceable were flown out to [Sumatra](#). Then it was decided that No. 488 ground staff should stay to keep the last few remaining fighters flying. On 4 February, therefore, a party led by Pilot Officer Gifford ¹ and Flight Sergeant Rees ² went to Sembawang to service aircraft of No. 232 Squadron. They arrived just as the Japanese started shelling the airfield from across the Strait. They worked on machines that night, and next morning the pilots took off under shellfire and flew all the serviceable planes to [Kallang](#); one was hit whilst taxi-ing out, but the pilot immediately leapt out and jumped into another which he flew off. Later in the day the same party went to Tengah and succeeded in getting all the aircraft left there to [Kallang](#).

Somehow Kallang continued to put planes into the air in spite of frequent raids. On 8 February its defending fighters turned back three waves of enemy bombers and the next day they totalled sixty-four hours on interceptions and patrols. But that same night the Japanese landed on [Singapore](#) Island, and two days later reports were received of enemy parties infiltrating close to the station. The men were thereupon issued

with rifles and told to dig in among the rubber trees surrounding the airfield, but these instructions were later cancelled and the squadron was told it would be evacuated by sea that same afternoon. The men retired to the docks and, with bombs falling all around them, went on

¹ Flight Lieutenant P. D. Gifford; born **Christchurch**, 14 Apr 1915; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

² Squadron Leader J. Rees, BEM; born **Thames**, 28 Dec 1914; electrical engineer; joined **RNZAF** 20 Oct 1937.

board the *Empire Star*. She sailed next morning for **Batavia**, but two hours out from **Singapore** was attacked by waves of dive-bombers which scored three direct hits. Men from No. 488 Squadron manned Lewis guns and others blazed away with rifles, and as a result of their fire one enemy plane was shot down and another was damaged. More waves of bombers continued to come over until after midday, but they scored no more hits and eventually the battered ship reached **Batavia**.

No. 488's pilots and ground staff were reunited in mid-February at Tjililitan, near **Batavia**, which base they now shared with No. 232 Squadron. Between them the two units could muster only a dozen aircraft, but these were kept flying on patrols over **Java**. The maintenance of even these few machines amid the prevailing chaos and disorganisation was an outstanding achievement, for no equipment had been brought from **Singapore** and tools and spares were scarce. But by hunting in the docks and warehouses of **Batavia** the equipment staff found quantities of goods originally destined for **Malaya** and were able to supply what was necessary to the servicing crews. However, it was soon clear that the Japanese would very quickly overrun the whole of the Dutch East Indies. There was indeed very little to stop them, for our squadrons were depleted after weeks of continuous operations, serviceability was low, equipment scarce and the whole force disorganised. To avoid their inevitable capture, those units which could

not be profitably employed were therefore withdrawn. No. 488 Squadron was among those instructed to leave and on 23 February the men sailed for **Australia** aboard the *Deucalion*.

The men who flew bomber and reconnaissance aircraft—the Blenheims and Hudsons and the Vildebeeste torpedo-bombers—had a most unenviable experience for their bases came under heavy enemy air attack from the outset. Their squadrons were forced back and compelled to operate under very difficult conditions, but they did their best to keep up attacks against Japanese bases and airfields and against their landing places on the Malayan coast. In his despatch the British Army Commander, Lieutenant-General Percival, pays tribute to these aircrews who ‘throughout the later stages of the Malayan campaign went unflinchingly to almost certain death in obsolete aircraft which should have been replaced several years before.’

There were twenty-five New Zealand pilots with Nos. 36 and 100 Vildebeeste Squadrons which carried out some very hazardous operations during the campaign—notably that against Japanese landings at Endau. Here, on 26 January 1942, twenty-one Vildebeestes escorted by a small force of Buffalos and Hurricanes were sent to attack enemy ships off the coast. Before they reached their target they were intercepted by fighters, and those which got through met sharp anti-aircraft fire from the ships. Eleven Vildebeestes were shot down, together with four of their escort, the loss including the commanding officers of both Nos. 36 and 100 Squadrons. Two New Zealanders, Sergeants Tanner ¹ and Fleming, ² were among the pilots killed on this raid. A third, Pilot Officer Barclay, ³ had his machine badly shot up by enemy fighters and his gunner killed, but he flew through to the target where he delivered an attack in the face of an intense anti-aircraft barrage. A few moments afterwards his aircraft was shot down into the sea, but Barclay, together with his observer, managed to get clear and swim ashore. They walked down the coast for two days, then they fell in with the survivors from a sunken destroyer, with whom they continued their journey and reached **Singapore** a week later.

After their heavy losses at Endau Nos. 36 and 100 Squadrons were withdrawn to **Java**, where they were amalgamated as No. 36 Squadron and based at Tjikampek. They were soon in action again against one of the Japanese convoys carrying invasion forces to **Java**. The ships were sighted about 100 miles west of **Sourabaya** and most of the pilots claimed hits on transport and barges; but three Vildebeestes, including that flown by the squadron commander, failed to return.

The remaining crews continued to operate almost without respite until, by 4 March, the squadron was reduced to only four serviceable aircraft. Nevertheless they continued to fly two missions each night against enemy landings until the morning of the 7th, when only two patched up aircraft remained. Orders were given for these to be flown north in an endeavour to reach **Burma**. They left that day, but both crashed in **Sumatra** and the crews were either killed or captured. The squadron thus literally fought to a finish. Of its New Zealand members, six fell into enemy hands, but the remainder got away to **Australia** before **Java** surrendered.

New Zealanders were also prominent with No. 62 Bomber Squadron, which was at Alor Star when the Japanese invasion of **Malaya** began and which suffered heavy losses in the first weeks. During December eighteen Hudsons and crews, amongst whom were six New Zealanders, were despatched from **Britain** to reinforce the squadron. This flight, which was under the command of Squadron Leader Lilly,⁴ arrived in

¹ Sergeant T. S. Tanner; born **Wellington**, 11 Aug 1918; civil engineer; joined **RNZAF** 19 Jan 1941; killed on air operations, 26 Jan 1942.

² Sergeant A. M. H. Fleming; born **Wellington**, 16 Jan 1912; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1940; killed on air operations, 26 Jan 1942.

³ Flight Lieutenant R. C. Barclay, DFC; born **Dunedin**, 27

Feb 1916; salesman.

⁴ Wing Commander L. G. W. Lilly; born **Manchester**, England, 1 Aug 1917; joined **RNZAF** 5 Apr 1938; transferred **RAF** 15 Mar 1939; retransferred **RNZAF** 16 Mar 1944; commanded No. 353 Sqdn, SE Asia, 1942–43.

Singapore early in January and began operations immediately.

However, with the enemy pressing southwards, the Hudsons were soon moved to **Sumatra**, where they flew from a strip near **Palembang** known as P2. For a while their missions were mainly sea reconnaissance, but as the situation deteriorated the Hudsons were employed as a bombing force. On 4 February Lilly led a successful raid on the enemy-held airfield at Kluang, on the mainland of **Malaya**, from which the Japanese fighters were operating; for this raid the Hudsons had to fly to **Sembawang** on **Singapore** Island, and when they took off from there enemy snipers were active around the perimeter and the area was under artillery fire from the mainland.

When the Japanese invaded **Sumatra**, No. 62 Squadron attacked their ships, on one occasion losing almost half the force despatched. Here is an account of a sortie made by five squadron aircraft on the afternoon of 13 February. It is provided by Flying Officer Henry, ¹ who led the formation that day.

Airborne at 4 p.m. we set course for **Banka Island**, and from there commenced a sweep over the estimated course that the convoy was steering. Before long smoke was sighted on the horizon and the formation dived to sea level, altering course to bring us in for a beam attack. There was no cloud to speak of and visibility was good. The time was about 5.30 p.m., which left about half-an-hour until dusk, which was followed very quickly by complete darkness.

When we were about five miles away the enemy ships opened up with very accurate fire from heavy calibre guns. Their object appeared to be to put up a barrage a short distance in front of us, hoping that we would

be caught in the ensuing spouts of water and explosions. Evasive action was taken and course altered towards the head of the convoy in order to make an attack from the east and obtain benefit from the failing light. The ack-ack was very accurate at this period, and although we were 'right down on the deck' and doing about 145 knots, one salvo actually landed in the middle of the formation, which fortunately at this moment was in a very broad 'vic'. My turret gunner reported that the other aircraft completely disappeared in a cloud of spray, but they all came through untouched, although one side gunner received a wetting. The formation then pulled up and attacked in a shallow dive. Each aircraft singled out a ship, and I attacked three transports which appeared to be hove to in the form of a triangle. Other aircraft attacked the naval ships, consisting of three cruisers and three destroyers. Very little flak came up, and hits were observed on one cruiser and one destroyer, while the transports received near misses.

After delivering their attack, the aircraft broke formation and returned to base independently. On reaching the coast, however, we ran into the usual evening storm with heavy thunder, forked lightning, and a terrific downpour of rain. Radios became useless, beacons were non-existent, and the visibility was nil. Under such conditions it says much for the navigators that four aircraft got into [Palembang](#) aerodrome, while the fifth made P2,

¹ Squadron Leader E. J. Henry; born Rangiora, 3 May 1917; motor mechanic; joined [RNZAF](#) Apr 1940.

all without mishap. At Palembang a searchlight in the form of several Aldis lamps was put up as a guide, while the flarepath consisted of 44-gallon drums of petrol, lit up and going full bore, fanned by a light breeze.

When the Japanese attacked [Palembang](#) the aircraft of No. 62 Squadron were withdrawn to [Java](#), where they continued to operate until the island was overrun by the Japanese.

Other New Zealanders served in **Sumatra** and **Java** at this time as Hurricane fighter pilots with No. 605 Squadron, and in No. 232 Squadron which had been sent out from England by aircraft carrier to reinforce **Singapore**. Flight Lieutenants Julian ¹ and Gartrell ² were particularly prominent in the last bitter actions. Julian led the final flight to operate from **Java**, by which time he had destroyed at least four enemy aircraft in the air and one on the ground, while Gartrell also had four definite kills to his credit as well as several probables. Nos. 605 and 232 Squadrons fought on until the final surrender in **Java**, when their gallant personnel passed into captivity.

* * * * *

The story of the New Zealand airfield construction unit is one of hard work, devoted effort and dogged perseverance in the face of all manner of difficulties and the final frustration of retreat. Formed at Wellington in July 1941, this unit, the first of its kind in the air forces of the British Commonwealth, included men from private construction companies, the Public Works Department, and from those already enlisted in the **Air Force**. All were specially selected for their skill in various trades, for their physical toughness and their ability to do heavy work in tropical conditions. By mid-August an advanced party of four officers and fifteen men, who formed the Survey Section, had arrived at **Singapore** together with the Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Smart. ³ Owing to shipping difficulties, however, it was another ten weeks before the complete unit reached **Malaya**.

Its first base was at **Tebrau** in southern Johore. Here a camp had been built by the Air Ministry Department of Works and the rows of long, green-roofed huts set in the shade of rubber trees came as a pleasant surprise to men who had expected rigorous living conditions in the jungle. The living quarters were, in fact, very comfortable and recreation facilities adequate; **Singapore** with its multiple attractions was less than twenty miles away. The only complaint was about the army field service rations, which compared rather unfavourably with those enjoyed by **RAF**

¹ Squadron Leader I. Julian, DFC; born **Wellington**, 20 Oct 1917; salesman; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1940; prisoner of war, Mar 1942.

² Squadron Leader E. C. Gartrell, DFC; born **Palmerston North**, 9 Nov 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; prisoner of war, Mar 1942.

³ Squadron Leader E. C. Smart; born **New Plymouth**, 11 Jun 1903; aerodrome engineer; joined **RNZAF** 1 Apr 1940; commanded No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Unit.

The squadron's first task was the construction of a bomber airfield at **Tebrau**. Two runways had already been marked out by the survey section and the construction machinery assembled ready to begin work, but as the whole area was covered by rubber plantations hundreds of trees had first to be uprooted by bulldozers and cast aside. Then came the rough levelling of the ground by 'carry-alls', enormous scoops drawn by 18-ton tractors, which took the tops off the hillocks and deposited the soil in the holes; next the graders took over, smoothing out rough spots and evenly distributing the gravel put down to surface the runways. Hundreds of coolies swarmed every where with picks and shovels, putting the finishing touches to what the machines had done. The north-east monsoon which had already begun did not interfere seriously with the tree-felling, but the tractors and 'carry-alls' working on the bare clay often became bogged to their axles after the heavy rainstorms. However, whenever a fine spell of weather occurred, work went on continuously far into the night to make up for lost time.

Towards the end of November, when the **Tebrau** airfield was well under way, a survey party led by Flight Lieutenant Begg ¹ was sent to **Bekok**, ninety miles to the north, to mark the site for a second bomber airfield. But within a fortnight came the Japanese attack, and this soon enforced a change of plans. For the loss of airfields in northern **Malaya**

during the first few days of the war made it necessary to develop new ones in the south as quickly as possible, the most urgent need being fighter strips to accommodate the reinforcements that were expected. The development of **Tebrau** was therefore restricted to the completion as soon as possible of a runway of 1200 yards, but in the middle of December this work was suspended and the squadron split up into several parties for work on other urgent jobs. A large detachment was sent to the new site at Bekok to make a fighter strip there; another party was posted to **Singapore** Island to begin a strip at Sungei Buloh, near the Causeway; smaller groups were sent to Seletar and Tengah to help with the construction and repair work; the rest of the squadron began building another fighter strip on the site of the rifle range at the Johore military barracks.

Although its main task was building airfields, the squadron was called upon to do many other jobs, whenever experience in handling heavy equipment or machinery was needed. The salvage party formed at the beginning of the war had been sent to northern **Malaya** to rescue and repair equipment in the battle zone. For the next six weeks, throughout the 500-mile retreat to **Singapore**, its members were responsible for saving large quantities of equipment from under the

¹ Squadron Leader A. G. Begg; born Dunedin, 8 Jul 1901; civil engineer; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941.

very noses of the Japanese. Operating much of the time only just ahead of the British rearguard, they collected abandoned trucks, cars, steam-rollers, graders, put native drivers into them and sent them rolling down the road to **Singapore**. From bombed-out airfields they also collected lorry loads of precious radio and other equipment and sent them to join the southbound convoys.

Early in January the detachments at Seletar and Tengah were recalled to start work again on the **Tebrau** strip. Most of the Bekok party also returned, but just when they had almost completed their job they

were ordered to leave it. Trees and other obstacles were dragged across the runway; and a rear party began to lay mines in preparation for later demolition. The survey group meanwhile went back to Singapore to mark out yet another fighter strip near Seletar.

By the middle of the month the Rifle Range strip was virtually finished and it was being used by light aircraft of the Malayan Volunteer **Air Force**. This strip was in fact the only one built by the squadron in **Malaya** to be used operationally, and it was the last to be evacuated when the British forces retired to **Singapore** Island.

On 15 January, with the Japanese at the northern border of Johore, the Bekok camp was finally evacuated and the runway blown up next day. Work at **Tebrau** was carried on while the fighting rolled nearer, but soon came the order to evacuate the camp and prepare the runway for demolition. The camp was stripped of equipment, stores and moveable gear and on the morning of 27 January the squadron moved out; it was the last **Air Force** unit to leave the mainland.

On **Singapore** Island the New Zealanders were quartered at the **Singapore** Dairy Farm about a dozen miles from the city, and for the next few days, despite frequent interruptions by enemy bombers, work was continued on the two new strips at Sungei Buloh and Yio Chu Kang, both of which were by then almost completed. There was also constant demand for men and machinery to help repair bomb damage on the main airfields, which were now under daily attack. In addition, at the request of the Army, another detachment spent several days building tank traps in the western part of the island.

By the end of January, however, it was clear that **Singapore** was no longer the place for an airfield construction squadron. The airfields already in existence were being steadily pounded and any new construction would share the same fate. Therefore, on the morning 1 February, the New Zealand squadron was ordered to embark on the SS *Talhybius*. All loading had to be done by the New Zealanders themselves but, despite frequent air raids, it proceeded well. Then, on the

morning of the 3rd, there were two heavy air raids in which the *Talhythius* received direct hits; she was set on fire and also badly holed, and of the working party caught on board one was killed and seven more seriously injured. The fires were put out after a long struggle, but within a few hours another bombing attack set the ship on fire again and she sank.

For the next two days the New Zealanders waited at their camp for new embarkation orders. It was anything but pleasant, for by this time the Japanese were shelling the area and there were constant bombing attacks on nearby targets in **Singapore**. Eventually, on 6 February, the New Zealand squadron was told it would leave on a convoy sailing that evening.

At the docks two parties were formed, one going on the SS *City of Canterbury* and the other on the SS *Darvel*. Both ships moved out to join their convoy but the *Darvel* was soon ordered back by the naval authorities, partly because she had insufficient crew and partly because her speed was too slow for the other ships which were going. The convoy sailed that night for **Java**, and although the men in the *City of Canterbury* had the discomfort of overcrowding and insufficient food, and there were frequent air-raid alarms, the escorting warships warded off enemy attacks and the ships reached **Batavia** safely on 9 February.

Meanwhile the *Darvel* had returned to port and the men aboard her were taken to a transit camp. The following afternoon they again embarked on the *Darvel* and, after several hours, during which there were more air raids, she eventually put to sea. But barely had she cleared the harbour when she was again recalled—bad weather was reported out side and visibility had become too low to risk passage through the minefields beyond the entrance. Once more the men returned to their transit camp, but towards midday the Japanese artillery began shelling the area and a few hours later, during a lull, the men scrambled into their trucks and returned to the docks. This time they went straight aboard the *Darvel* and she immediately headed for the open sea. Within the hour there was a heavy bombing attack on the docks and the last view the men had of

Singapore was of blazing wharf sheds, columns of smoke rising from burning oil tanks and a sky full of enemy planes and bursting anti-aircraft shells.

The *Darvel* sailed through the night and at daybreak anchored off the southern tip of a small island to avoid observation by enemy aircraft. The ship was still short-staffed and members of the squadron took turns in the engine room and stokehold; others mounted and manned light anti-aircraft guns and helped with the organisation for the troops on board. The next stage of the voyage lay through Bangka Strait, between **Sumatra** and Bangka Island, whose waters were constantly patrolled by Japanese bombers during daylight, but it was hoped to pass through this danger area under cover of darkness. The ship therefore got under way again at dusk, but just before entering the strait she was delayed for two hours assisting another vessel that had run ashore, and in consequence she was still in Bangka Strait when the next day dawned. The *Darvel* thereupon anchored near a group of small islands in the hope that the Japanese would not see her. Close by was another small ship which had been bombed and abandoned some days before.

The morning passed quietly, but just before midday a formation of enemy bombers appeared. They came directly overhead and released their bombs. For a minute all was confusion. There were no direct hits but the explosions tossed the ship about like a cork, drenching her with spray. Moreover, concussion and splinters from near misses caused casualties and damage. Five minutes later the bombers returned, but fortunately this time they concentrated their attack upon the abandoned steamer a few hundred yards away; they sank her and, having used up all their bombs, new away.

The *Darvel*, although spared a second bombing, was in a bad way. Her hull was riddled with holes from bomb splinters and she was leaking badly; the steering gear was damaged and so were all the lifeboats; fires had broken out and many of the troops on board were killed or wounded.

In the New Zealand unit one man was killed, seventeen wounded and several more slightly injured. The captain now gave orders to abandon ship but the state of the boats made this impossible. The fires were quickly brought under control, and then working parties from the squadron went below to block the scores of small holes. Others set to work to repair the lifeboats and clear up the debris on the decks. There was no doctor on board so medical orderlies cared for the wounded. A naval officer took over command of the ship and, rather than wait for another attack, decided to risk steaming through the rest of the strait in daylight. The passage was accomplished, and with the welcome onset of darkness course was set for **Batavia where, leaking badly and with all passengers and baggage crowded to one side, she arrived the following day.**

At Batavia the New Zealand squadron was reunited and moved to a camp at Buitenzorg. There it remained for a week while Squadron Leader Smart discussed future plans with Allied Air Headquarters. In the prevailing confusion it was difficult to obtain any instructions. At first it was thought that **Java could still be defended and that the squadron would be employed digging trenches and tank traps, but with the Japanese invasion coming closer the situation was constantly changing. Eventually it was decided that the New Zealand unit, having lost all its equipment, should be evacuated, and accordingly, on 20 February, it left **Batavia** aboard the *SS Marella*. She got away without incident, sailing in one of the last convoys to leave **Java** unharmed, and reached the friendly shores of **Australia** a week later. It was a fortunate escape.**

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 12 – THE RETREAT FROM BURMA

CHAPTER 12

The Retreat from Burma

WITHIN a few weeks of their invasion of **Malaya**, the Japanese swarmed into **Burma**. Ahead of them came their bombers, making **Rangoon**, the capital city and main supply port, their primary target. The first raid came during the morning of 23 December 1941 when a force of some eighty aircraft appeared over the city and prepared to drop their bombs upon its crowded streets and docks. A score of Allied fighters which had taken off from the dusty airfield at **Mingaladon** a few minutes earlier were in the air to meet them. And as these fighters circled overhead their ground control was somewhat surprised when over the radio telephone there came, not the time-honoured 'Tally- Ho', but the excited voice of a young New Zealand sergeant-pilot crying: 'Hell! Showers of them. Look, Willie, showers of them!' This somewhat unconventional announcement signalled the beginning of a lively engagement in which thirteen of the raiders were claimed destroyed, along with several more probables. It also marked the opening of the brief air campaign that was to provide the only bright feature in the whole melancholy story of the British retreat from **Burma**.

Burma had multiple attractions for the Japanese High Command. These included the oil and rice of the Irrawaddy plains, the acquisition of bases for a possible invasion of **India** and the occupation of territory which would give protection to their already vast conquests in Thailand, **French Indo-China** and **Malaya**. But uppermost in their thoughts at this moment was the need to stop the flow of supplies that were reaching the Chinese by way of **Burma**. Because of the mountain barriers and lack of communications with **India**, these supplies were being unloaded at **Rangoon** and sent northwards over range after range of steep mountains, along the few but well-built roads, along the railway to **Mandalay** and beyond, up the tree-fringed Irrawaddy to **Lashio**, from where the **Burma Road** stretched its narrow winding length before the radiators of creaking and straining lorries. And since **Rangoon** was the start of this last remaining supply line to **China** and also the principal

supply port of the Allied forces defending **Burma**, the Japanese began by bombing and then attacking towards that city.

The defence available against this assault was far from strong. On the ground there were some 25,000 combat troops, but most of these were local recruits, only partly trained, and they were not well equipped for jungle warfare. The main defensive position was that of the River Salween, and to help the Army hold it, plans had been drawn up for the construction of eight airfields. By the time war came seven of these had been built and they stretched from **Lashio** in the north to **Mingaladon** in the south; there were also landing strips farther south at **Moulmein**, **Tavoy**, **Mergui** and at **Victoria Point**. But although bases for a considerable defending air force were thus available, the force itself was almost wholly lacking. In December 1941, only thirty-seven front-line aircraft, British and American, were available in **Burma**, though the defence plan stipulated that a figure of 280 was the minimum necessary to meet an invading enemy. Of this small force, sixteen were Buffalo fighters of No. 67 RAF Squadron. The remainder were Tomahawks of an American squadron—part of the American Volunteer Group stationed in **Burma** for the protection of the **Burma Road**, from which they had been detached to aid in the defence of **Rangoon**. Both squadrons were based at **Mingaladon** airfield a few miles north-west of that city, for it was rightly anticipated that the enemy would aim first at disrupting this important supply port.

No. 67 Squadron was virtually a New Zealand unit since, apart from the squadron and flight commanders, almost all its pilots were New Zealanders. They were to establish a fine record. Most of them had come straight from flying training schools in the Dominion, but they made up for their lack of experience with a fine aggressive spirit and their efforts over **Rangoon** in the next few weeks were to win high praise from their more seasoned American comrades.

Based originally at **Singapore**, No. 67 was not transferred to **Burma** until October 1941, barely two months before the first enemy attack. On their arrival at **Mingaladon** the New Zealanders and their fellow pilots

had settled down to intensive training and to familiarise themselves with the airfield layout and the area over which they were to operate. They had little time, however, for on 7 December came news of the Japanese landings in **Thailand**, whereupon full operational readiness was ordered. Three days later the American squadron arrived at **Rangoon** and a close liaison was soon established between the two units.

The first alarm came on 10 December, when a small force of Japanese bombers was reported south of **Mergui** heading for **Rangoon**, but they turned away and bombed the airfield at **Mergui** instead. In retaliation two low-level attacks were made on enemy air bases just across the border, but apart from these forays and a few shipping escort patrols the next fortnight passed quietly. Then, on the 23rd, came the first Japanese raid on **Rangoon**. Both American Tomahawks and **RAF** Buffalos were scrambled to meet it and, as already related, the Allied



THE JAPANESE ADVANCE THROUGH BURMA, JANUARY - MAY 1942

pilots made the most of their opportunities, claiming thirteen of the raiders destroyed. Two days later the Japanese returned in somewhat greater strength, when it was noticed that the number of escorting fighters had been considerably increased. The defenders, although thus heavily outnumbered, went undaunted into battle. Again and again they dived into the enemy formations and, after a series of whirlwind

engagements, claimed more than twenty Japanese aircraft destroyed. Their efforts undoubtedly impressed the enemy for he at once turned to night bombing, and for the next four weeks **Rangoon** remained virtually free from daylight attack. This in itself was a notable victory; moreover, the respite from day bombing thus gained enabled supplies and reinforcements, including **7 Armoured Brigade**, to be safely disembarked at **Rangoon**.

The fighter pilots of No. 67 Squadron acquitted themselves well in these opening air battles. On the 23rd, Sergeants Bargh ¹ and G. A. Williams ² were among the first to sight the enemy. In a moment Bargh was among the Japanese fighters, where he at once became involved in a series of confused dogfights. Then, as the enemy fighters drew away from the formation, Williams saw his opportunity and went for the bombers, shot one of them down and got bursts into the petrol tanks of five or six more; since the Japanese tanks were not self-sealing it is possible that some of these aircraft failed to return to their base. Meanwhile, with his aircraft shot full of holes, Bargh dived away from the enemy fighters, flew out to sea and regained height to renew the attack. His windscreen had oiled up so he took off one of his flying boots, wiped the perspex clean with his sock, and then swept down upon the bombers as they came away from the target. Joined now by Sergeant Beable, ³ he dived on the enemy formation and succeeded in destroying one bomber and probably a fighter. Beable also got a long burst into a bomber, which was last seen trailing smoke. Sergeant Christiansen ⁴ was among other pilots who engaged the enemy, but his windscreen became covered with oil and he was unable to observe results.

In the second day's attack No. 67 Squadron met the enemy on the way in, but the fighter opposition was so intense that only Williams and one other pilot got through to the bombers. They quickly shot one down, each claiming a half share. Williams then attacked a fighter and saw it go down apparently out of control, but he was at once jumped from behind and did not see it hit the ground. Pilot Officer

¹ Flight Lieutenant C. V. Bargh, DFC; born Carterton, 30 Sep 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1940.

² Flight Lieutenant G. A. Williams, DFM; born **Napier**, 29 Apr 1918; builder's apprentice; joined **RNZAF** 21 Dec 1940.

³ Flight Lieutenant E. H. Beable; born **Auckland**, 12 Nov 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1940.

⁴ Flying Officer W. Christiansen; born Frankton Junction, 16 Oct 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1940; killed on air operations, 9 Apr 1943.

Sharp ¹ and Sergeant Pedersen ² became involved with a large number of Japanese fighters but fought their way through after shooting up three of them. Sergeant Beable, making the most of the opportunities that came his way, blew up a Zero fighter that was on his leader's tail and also claimed a possible and a damaged. From each of these combats he had to dive away to evade enemy fighters, but each time he returned to the fray until his ammunition was exhausted.

Sergeants Bargh, Finn ³ and Rutherford ⁴ were among other pilots in the thick of the fighting this day and each of them scored hits on enemy aircraft. But during the air battle No. 67 lost four pilots, three of whom—Sergeants Macpherson, ⁵ Hewitt ⁶ and McNabb ⁷—were New Zealanders.

The destruction by Allied pilots of more than thirty enemy machines in these two days was no mean achievement considering the difficulties under which the defence operated. The worst of these difficulties was, and remained, the lack of an adequate warning system. In the whole of **Burma** there was only one single radar unit. Worn and already obsolete, it was sited to the east of **Rangoon**, where it supplemented a chain of observer posts spread thinly along the hills and reporting by means of the local telephone service. The unit did its best, but its efficiency may

be judged by the fact that only on one occasion did the warning which it gave of the approach of enemy aircraft arrive earlier—and then only by a few minutes—than that given by the men of the **Observer Corps**. Similarly, on the **Rangoon** airfields there was no modern system of communication and during the first heavy raids orders to ‘scramble’ were often delivered to the waiting pilots by messengers racing to them on bicycles.

When these last-minute warnings came pilots took off through swirling clouds of dust, which hung in the air like a solid wall, and climbed away from the enemy—lest the Japanese fighters already on the horizon should sweep down on them. Then, having gained the necessary height, they returned to attack the Japanese bombers, which were usually found flying in formations of twenty-seven, with fighters circling round them.

¹ Squadron Leader G. S. Sharp, DSO; born **Gisborne**, 8 Jul 1912; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** 28 Sep 1940; commanded No. 4 (RIAF) Sqdn, 1944–45.

² Pilot Officer E. E. Pedersen; born **Taihape**, 2 Mar 1916; orchard worker; joined **RNZAF** 26 Oct 1940; killed on air operations, 18 Mar 1943.

³ Sergeant J. G. Finn; born Winton, 6 Nov 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; killed on air operations, 20 Jan 1942.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant K. A. Rutherford, DFC; born **Christchurch**, 26 Oct 1918; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

⁵ Sergeant J. Macpherson; born Otautau, 21 Jan 1916; survey chainman; joined **RNZAF** 21 Jan 1941; killed on air operations, 25 Dec 1941.

⁶ Sergeant E. B. Hewitt; born **Opotiki**, 11 Sep 1922; student; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; killed on air operations, 25 Dec 1941.

⁷ Sergeant R. P. McNabb; born **Wellington**, 23 May 1922; garage assistant; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940; killed on air operations, 25 Dec 1941.

Whenever possible the British and American pilots would swoop down from above, firing at anything Japanese in their sights, but never lifting from their dive. Enemy fighters would follow them down and then turn to let others take up the chase. Near the ground our pilots would pull up, gain height, and then dive again into the Japanese formations. These were not orthodox tactics, but when the enemy seemed to have almost every advantage they were necessary, and they were highly successful.

Inevitably, of course, many of the bombers succeeded in getting through and there were casualties and damage in **Rangoon** and on the airfields. In **Rangoon** the population was quite unprepared for total war and curiosity ousted fear. Traders in the market-places left their stalls, sweating coolies laid aside their burdens to line the quays or the Strand Road, worshippers ran from their pagodas, women and children from their houses—all peering intently upwards to watch the dogfights in the skies. On the first day there were 2000 casualties from the fragmentation bombs. On the second day no one wanted to miss the sights so there were 5000 more casualties. Then panic was immediate and widespread. All who could fled the city or prepared to do so. Thousands moved out to live in the open. Thousands more, uncomprehending, left their homes in sad processions for the hills. Seen by our pilots from the air, the trains and lorries running north from **Rangoon** resembled moving twigs on which bees had swarmed. Indeed the number of men, women and children who began to stream out of the city will never be accurately known but it was not less than 100,000. In the following months, as more of **Burma** was overrun by the enemy, this number increased until it seemed that half the population was wending

its way northwards, disorganised and panic stricken. Thousands died by the wayside from cholera, malaria, or from fatigue and hunger. Through the hot jungle, past steaming paddy fields up into the hills they plodded on, making for the doubtful safety of **India**. But only a broken and disease-ridden remnant achieved their goal.

At the end of December 1941, however, this appalling migration of human beings, one of the grimmest ever recorded, was still in the future. In the absence of further daylight raids the first panic subsided and life in **Rangoon** returned to something like normal for a few weeks. On the airfield at **Mingaladon** all hands had set to work to fill in bomb craters and repair damaged aircraft against the possibility of further raids. The operations room, demolished by one of the first bombs, was quickly rebuilt, the ground staff worked hard to achieve maximum serviceability and pilots waited at readiness for the next attack. When the Supreme Commander, General Sir Archibald Wavell, visited the station a few days later, he was able to congratulate all ranks not only on their defeat of the enemy but on their efforts in repairing the damage and having the squadron again at maximum preparedness.

The New Zealanders readily adapted themselves to the new conditions and to the strain of waiting—a strain which only those who have waited for the reappearance of the enemy under such conditions can fully appreciate. Here is one pilot's description of the early morning scene at **Mingaladon** airfield:

Before dawn the flight truck would roll up to the dispersal hut and yawning pilots would jump out to disentangle their flying gear from the heap on the bench. Outside, in the keen air of the early dawn, the silence would be split by the sudden crackle of Cyclone engines bursting into life, blue flames licking back from the motors as they were run up. Rutherford, a sheep farmer from **Canterbury** and wise in the ways of bushcraft, could usually be found building a fire—at a safe distance between the aircraft and the hut—to brew the inevitable tea. Christiansen and Cutfield¹ developed the routine of a morning session of 'Acey Deuce', a game very popular with the pilots of the American

Volunteer Group. Other pilots, deciding that an opportunity to sleep was not to be lightly tossed aside, would stretch themselves comfortably on a pile of parachutes and flying gear, while some would make the most of a chance to repair equipment.

Before long the mess truck would arrive with supplies of eggs and bacon, soon to be sizzling in the frying pan. Then a rattle of cutlery and laughter as all gathered round to breakfast from huge sandwiches composed of a fried egg on a slice of bacon held between two planks of bread. The carefree manner, cheery banter, and spirit of comradeship among all ranks gave life something denied to those whose lot is cast in a more peaceful mould.

For the moment the defence of **Rangoon remained the primary task, but No. 67 Squadron also flew occasional photographic reconnaissances to obtain information about Japanese air concentrations in **Thailand**. As a result of one such flight the Buffalos were sent to shoot up Mesoht airfield. The enemy was taken by surprise; buildings were thoroughly strafed, aircraft at the end of the runway hit and a large fire started. A week later, while on reconnaissance over **Tavoy**, Pilot Officer Brewer ² surprised an enemy aircraft and sent it crashing in flames into the hills.**

Some desperately needed reinforcements, which took the form of a squadron of **Blenheim bombers and some thirty Hurricane fighters, arrived in **Burma** during the early part of January 1942. New Zealanders were among their crews—Squadron Leader P. D. Smith ³ and Flight**

¹ Warrant Officer P. T. Cutfield; born Papatoetoe, 28 Jul 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

² Pilot Officer P. M. Brewer; born **Wellington**, 14 Apr 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940; killed on air operations, 20 Jan 1942.

³ Squadron Leader P. D. Smith, DFC; born Radcliffe,

Lancaster, 14 Mar 1916; joined **RNZAF** 5 Apr 1938; transferred **RAF** 15 Mar 1939; retransferred **RNZAF** 16 Mar 1944.

Sergeant Keys ¹ as captains and Sergeants Dingle, ² Beard, ³ Brooking ⁴ and J. B. J. McKenzie ⁵ as navigators of **Blenheim** bombers; Flight Sergeants Beale, ⁶ Campbell, ⁷ Dunkley ⁸ and Fox ⁹ as Hurricane pilots.

The advent of these reinforcements, small though they were, enabled the **RAF** to hit back at Japanese airfields and bases in **Thailand**. The **Blenheims**, on the very night of their arrival after their long flight from the **Middle East**, took off to fly hundreds of miles over strange country and bomb the docks at **Bangkok**. They began operations in earnest ten days later, after a refit at **Lashio**, when their targets included the airfields at Mesoht, Tak and Messareing; they also paid another visit to **Bangkok**. Meanwhile the Hurricanes were in action from advanced bases at **Moulmein**, **Mergui**, **Tavoy** and elsewhere. Their operations, along with those of the **Blenheims**, achieved a considerable, if fleeting, success. For they had soon destroyed or damaged some fifty enemy planes on the ground and by so doing delayed the achievement by the enemy of air supremacy.

During the last week of January the Japanese made a determined effort to overwhelm our small fighter force at **Rangoon**. They made repeated daylight attacks on the city and docks, but after losing some fifty bombers and fighters in six days they gave up the attempt and again reverted to night raids. This second failure on their part to achieve command of the air was a measure of the soundness of the defence and the skill and courage of the Allied fighter pilots.

New Zealanders with No. 67 Squadron were again prominent in the air battles. On the 23rd, Sergeant Christiansen shot down one Japanese fighter and Pilot Officer Cooper ¹⁰ damaged another. The next day Cooper, Bargh, Christiansen and Flight Sergeant Sadler ¹¹ were patrolling over **Mingaladon** when they sighted a formation of enemy

bombers to the south-east. They dived to intercept and in the ensuing

¹ Flying Officer J. Keys; born **London**, 25 Oct 1920; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF** 22 Dec 1940.

² Sergeant A. M. Dingle; born **Hamilton**, 7 Nov 1917; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940; killed on air operations, 24 Jan 1942.

³ Flight Sergeant J. H. Beard; born **Dunedin**, 16 May 1911; furrier; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940.

⁴ Warrant Officer E. Brooking; born **Auckland**, 31 Jan 1922; shop assistant.

⁵ Warrant Officer J. B. J. McKenzie; born **Auckland**, 23 Oct 1919, bank clerk.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant C. G. Beale; born **Wellington**, 10 Jan 1912; civil engineer; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940.

⁷ Flying Officer A. R. Campbell; born **Christchurch**, 9 Aug 1921; student; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940.

⁸ Flying Officer W. D. Dunkley; born **Palmerston North**, 29 Jan 1919; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Jul 1940.

⁹ Flight Lieutenant C. H. Fox, AFC; born **Brunner, Westland**, 9 May 1913; labourer; joined **RNZAF** 27 Oct 1940.

¹⁰ Flight Lieutenant A. A. Cooper; born **Palmerston North**, 11 Sep 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

¹¹ Flying Officer E. L. Sadler; born **Tynemouth, England**, 9 Jun 1916; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940; killed on air operations, 26 Mar 1943.

action shot down every one of them. 'Sadler's first target,' says the record, 'at once fell out of formation and crashed in flames. He then set fire to a second bomber and two other pilots finished it off. Cooper got a long burst into another which blew up; his own engine was hit and caught fire but he dived steeply and succeeded in blowing the flames out. Bargh followed earlier successes by getting a "flamer" after an attack pressed home to 100 yards. He saw all the other bombers in the formation going down, some in flames and some with wings falling off. The last one blew up when he was about to attack and crashed beside the railway line north-east of Pegu.'

This renewal of the air battle over **Rangoon** was accompanied by disturbing news from the south, where the Japanese land assault from **Thailand** had now begun. The British garrison at **Tavoy** had been overwhelmed and **Mergui** evacuated. The airfield at **Moulmein**, our main forward air base, was captured on 30 January and as a consequence the warning system, such as it was, was disorganised. Soon it was no more than a solitary Hurricane which patrolled above **Rangoon**, keeping watch like 'Jim Crow'. As the Japanese pressed on, our few **Blenheim** bombers did their best to aid the Army by attacking vehicles, troop movements and supplies, but their efforts, though gallantly made, were too small to stem the enemy advance. By mid-February Japanese troops had reached the Sittang River, where they inflicted heavy losses on the retreating British Army; most of **17 Division** was cut off and our pilots witnessed the melancholy spectacle of Empire troops drowning in the broad river after the bridge had been demolished. A few days later air reconnaissance reported the enemy in strength near Pegu, only seventy miles north-east of **Rangoon**, which meant that the city might soon be isolated and captured.

On 24 and 25 February the Japanese renewed their air assault on the capital, employing over 150 bombers and fighters. Once again they were met by American, British and New Zealand pilots in their Buffalos, Hurricanes and Tomahawks who, in a series of hard-fought battles, once

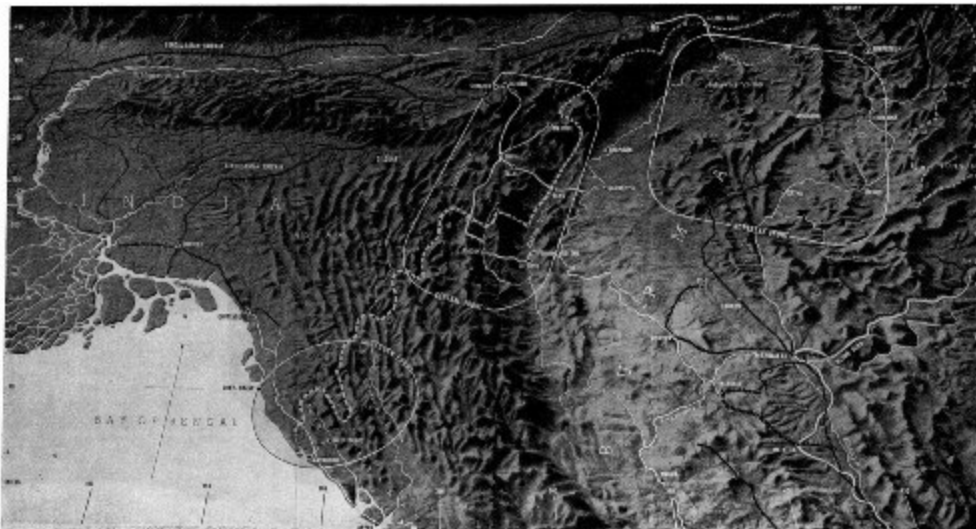
again inflicted substantial casualties. One report states that a fifth of the raiding force was destroyed. But, whatever the actual damage, the fact remains that the Japanese made no further attempt to dominate the air over **Rangoon** until its airfields had been captured. By thus holding off the **Japanese Air Force** until the very end, Allied pilots enabled reinforcements arriving at the last minute to be put ashore unmolested, and when the Army was finally compelled to retreat from **Rangoon** its demolition parties were able to complete the destruction of the oil storage tanks, refinery and port installations—all without interference from the air.

As the fall of **Rangoon** became imminent the remnants of the Allied fighter force—three battle-worn Buffalos, four American Tomahawks and some twenty Hurricanes—were ordered northwards. Abandoning **Mingaladon**, they went to a hastily built dirt-strip cut out of the paddy fields at Zigon, where they stood by to cover the evacuation of Rangoon. So treacherous was the surface at Zigon that one landing in five resulted in damage to the aircraft; invariably tail wheels were rendered unserviceable and bamboo skids had to be fitted as a temporary expedient in order to fly out damaged machines for repair. On 7 March sappers began the work of demolition in **Rangoon**; the last ships left the port and a forty-mile column of vehicles, including newly arrived tanks, began to wend its way northward. Overhead circled our few remaining fighters flying through the heavy haze sent up by burning oil depots and the port. No enemy bombers appeared.

What remained of our air force now moved by successive stages towards **India**, covering the retreat of the Army as best it could. For a few weeks Blenheims and Hurricanes operated from the civil airport at Magwe, or from 'Kutchas' strips cut out of the jungle and on the hard paddy land bordering the Prome Road. There were no dispersal pens and no proper accommodation for pilots at Magwe. Some of the New Zealanders with No. 67 Squadron lived in deserted buildings on a peanut farm, and they were glad to supplement their meagre rations with tinned food and fruit cakes saved from food parcels sent to Rangoon by

relatives and friends back home; and as an alternative to drinking chlorinated water from the Irrawaddy, they ate melons bought in the local villages.

It was from Magwe that our pilots struck their last blow at the **Japanese Air Force**. This was on 21 March after air reconnaissance had reported a large concentration of enemy aircraft on their old base at **Mingaladon**. Blenheims and Hurricanes took off to bomb and strafe the airfield where, after battling their way through a screen of enemy fighters, they succeeded in destroying aircraft both on the ground and in the air, two of the latter falling to the guns of the Blenheims. ¹ This action, however, brought swift and very effective reprisal raids. They began that same afternoon, suddenly and without warning, while our pilots were being briefed and their machines refuelled for a second operation against **Mingaladon**. Four Hurricanes and six Tomahawks got off to intercept the first formation and shot down four of them. But during the next twenty-four hours over two hundred Japanese bombers and fighters came over Magwe; the defences were overwhelmed, the airfield was pitted with craters and sixteen Blenheims and eleven Hurricanes were destroyed on the ground. By night the runways were repaired sufficiently for such machines as could fly to take off and struggle to **Akyab**. But the Japanese at once followed up with a series of raids on the airfield there, and by the end of March they had



Main Battlefronts on the India-Burma Border

Main Battlefronts on the **India**-Burma Border

¹ Contemporary reports give sixteen destroyed on the ground and a further eleven in the air.

virtually wiped out what was left of our **Air Force** in **Burma**. Aircrews and ground staffs were then withdrawn to **India** to reform and re-equip their squadrons, but **Akyab** was maintained as an advanced base in order to keep the **Andaman Islands** and the Arakan coast within range of our reconnaissance aircraft.

Our pilots, with their ground crews performing miracles on engines and airframes, had fought to the end, displaying a spirit and tenacity equalling that shown by the men of Fighter Command in the **Battle of Britain**. Every day for eight weeks at **Mingaladon** and the other airfields, then at **Zigon** and **Magwe**, the pilots had been at two minutes' readiness. This was an intolerable strain but these youngsters—for most of them were little more—had borne it and had flown and fought to exhaustion. It is recorded that one of them was caught at last over **Akyab** and shot down into the sea. In the water he found the nozzle of his Mae West and blew hard, but the life-jacket did not inflate. For a moment he searched to find the defect and, finding none, blew again. Only then did he realise that the air was escaping not through the Mae West but through a hole drilled by a bullet in his cheek and jawbone. Unaided by his lifebelt, he kept afloat for three hours until picked up by natives in a canoe, and before long was flying Hurricanes again. Of such were the pilots of the **Burma** retreat.

Now that they had command of the air the Japanese fighters and bombers ranged over a wide area of northern **Burma**, attacking **Lashio**, **Mandalay**, **Loiwing** and **Myitkyina**. Their assault on **Mandalay**, delivered on 3 April, was particularly devastating; in a few hours three-fifths of the ancient city was destroyed by high explosive and fire and thousands of its inhabitants blasted or burnt to death. The ever-growing stream of refugees making their way northwards through jungle and over mountain to **India** brought the tragedy to its awful climax. Meanwhile

the Japanese ground forces were advancing with great rapidity. Before the end of April they had reached **Lashio** and cut the **Burma Road**; and with their capture of **Mandalay** a few days later all hope of holding northern **Burma** had to be abandoned. The British Army now began its final withdrawal to **India**. It was a melancholy retreat, lightened only by the many individual acts of courage and fortitude that were performed as the tired and weary troops fought their way back across river and mountain and through the jungle.

Great and timely aid to both troops and refugees was given by the unarmed and unarmoured **Dakota** and **Valentia** transport aircraft of No. 31 Squadron from **India**. Flying far beyond the normal limits of endurance for men and machines, they dropped food and medical supplies along the routes and, landing wherever they could in **Burma**, brought out thousands of sick and wounded soldiers and civilians. In this work of succour and rescue it was sometimes necessary to fly as high as 17,000 feet in order to cross the **Naga Hills** between the **Brahmaputra** and the **Irrawaddy**, and at the same time find cloud cover in which to elude Japanese fighters. On more than one occasion the transports were attacked on the ground and their passengers and crews machine-gunned by low-flying enemy aircraft. But the work went on, helped in its later stages by an American troop-carrier squadron. In all 8616 men, women and children were flown to **India** and about fifty tons of supplies delivered to the refugees and the troops.

By 20 May the last British and Indian troops reached **Imphal** on the Indian frontier, just before the monsoon burst, flooding the rivers and sending landslides down to block the roads and tracks over which they had marched. During the last stages of this withdrawal aircraft based in **India**—some **Blenheim** bombers and a few **Mohawk** fighters—gave what help they could. **Lysanders**, small aircraft normally employed only on short-range reconnaissance for the Army, turned themselves into improvised bombers and at least one of their pilots developed the habit of hurling hand grenades at Japanese troops while flying low over their advancing columns. But such gestures of defiance only served to

demonstrate the state to which our airforce had been reduced by the series of disastrous events in **Burma** and by our unpreparedness for war in the **Far East**. It was indeed fortunate that the advent of the monsoon, together with difficulties of supply and communications, prevented the Japanese from pressing their advantage and invading **India**.

Squadron Leader Andrews ¹ and Flight Lieutenant Brian McMillan ² deserve mention here for their work with the **RAF** before and during the retreat from **Burma**. Andrews was administrative officer at **Rangoon** and then at Magwe until it was evacuated. Thereupon he took a mobile servicing party north to **Lashio** so that aircraft which succeeded in flying out might be kept in operation. But it was not long before **Lashio** itself was threatened by the Japanese advance. So, determined that he and his men should not fall into enemy hands, Andrews organised the departure of all **RAF** personnel there, some 340 in all, along with valuable equipment and sent them off in a convoy of 150 vehicles along the hazardous road from **Lashio** to Chungtu in **China**. There, reorganised under the unusual name of 'R.A.F. **China**' they spent a year helping the Chinese at their main air bases and in training Chinese ground crews. They were also able to make their hosts familiar to a

¹ Wing Commander H. L. Andrews, MBE; born Parnell, 4 Feb 1906; served **RAF** 1930–36; rejoined **RAF** Sep 1939; transferred **RNZAF** May 1945; commanded ' **RAF China**' 1942–43; Organisation duties, No. **221 Group, India**, 1943–44.

² Wing Commander B. W. McMillan, DSO, DFC, AFC; born Stratford, 24 Oct 1912; clerk-engineer; joined **RAF** 1937; commanded No. **227 Sqdn**, Pathfinder Force, 1945; killed in flying accident, 30 Jan 1948.

certain extent with the mysteries of radio direction finding, employing the radar unit which they had brought with them from Magwe.

Flight Lieutenant McMillan played a worthy part in the organisation

of the air lift by No. 31 Transport Squadron. He had been with the squadron for nearly two years before war came, operating over the Northwest Frontier. He worked hard in training new crews, and when the squadron was called upon to operate at maximum intensity in support of the retreating army and the refugees in **Burma** his efforts were fully justified. Moreover, his effective organisation of sorties and his example were in large measure responsible for the efficiency and determination which were the hallmark of the squadron's operations.

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During the early months of 1942 New Zealanders also shared in the defence of **Ceylon** and in reconnaissance over the **Bay of Bengal**—both highly important tasks at this time for the sea approaches to **India** and **Ceylon** were now wide open to the **Japanese Fleet**. With the enemy advance into **Burma** the port of **Calcutta**, where a quarter of a million tons of shipping was concentrated, had come within range of air attack.

Reconnaissance over the **Bay of Bengal** was maintained by a few Hudsons based at Cuttack, south of **Calcutta**, and using **Akyab** as a forward refuelling point. While the Army was withdrawing from **Burma**, the Hudsons patrolled down the Arakan coast to guard against surprise attack from the sea and sudden infiltration from behind. They also watched the **Andaman Islands** after their occupation by the Japanese, and early in April their vigilance was rewarded by the discovery of thirteen enemy long-range flying-boats preparing to operate. In two attacks, the second of which was made in the face of stiff fighter opposition, they sank or put out of action the whole of this enemy reconnaissance force, thus depriving the Japanese of knowledge of the valuable shipping target which awaited them farther north. Indeed, it was another three months before any enemy flying-boat attempted reconnaissance flights, and well before that time some seventy British merchant ships had safely left the port of **Calcutta** and dispersed themselves among other Indian ports. Flying Officer Page,¹ Pilot Officer Daniel² and Sergeant Laloli³ were among the small group of men who

flew Hudsons on these various missions.

In **Ceylon**, the port of Colombo with its shipping and our naval base at Trincomalee, where the Far Eastern Fleet was re-forming, both presented attractive targets to the enemy. For their defence against

¹ Squadron Leader E. F. Page; born Eketahuna, 3 Mar 1915; barrister and solicitor; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940.

² Flying Officer N. B. Daniel; born **Christchurch**, 30 Nov 1917; carpenter; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941; killed on air operations, 29 Mar 1943.

³ Flying Officer D. J. Laloli; born **Auckland**, 1 Apr 1920; garage assistant; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

airborne attack some fifty Hurricanes, fourteen **Blenheim** bombers and six Catalina flying-boats had been assembled by the end of March 1942, at which time they represented the main **RAF** strength available in **South-east Asia**. Their presence was opportune for a Japanese naval force, consisting mainly of aircraft carriers, had now entered the Indian Ocean to cover the landing of reinforcements at **Rangoon**. At the beginning of April this force approached **Ceylon**, and during the next week its carrier aircraft launched two heavy attacks, one against the harbour at Colombo and the other against Trincomalee. There was considerable damage to installations and to airfields, but it was much less than it might have been. For on both occasions our Catalina flying-boats gave timely warning of the enemy's approach, so that both warships and merchant vessels were able to leave the harbours and disperse before the attacks developed. Moreover, thanks to the warning received from the Catalinas—in giving which two of them were shot down, one just after sending its sighting report—our fighters were ready to meet the enemy. Over Colombo they shot down eighteen of the raiders and the anti-aircraft defence claimed five more; three days later over Trincomalee another fifteen enemy machines were destroyed and

seventeen more so badly damaged that they probably never returned to the carriers. We lost twenty-three Hurricanes in the air fighting. New Zealanders who took part in these eventful operations included Flying Officer Brandt ¹ and Flight Sergeant Carlaw, ² who piloted Catalina flying-boats, Flight Sergeant Garnham, ³ captain of one of the Blenheim bombers, and Flying Officer Sharp ⁴ and Sergeant Gavin ⁵ as pilots of Hurricane fighters.

The Japanese force did not follow up with further attacks on **Ceylon** but it had notable success at sea, where between 5 and 9 April it sank the British cruisers *Dorsetshire* and *Cornwall*, the aircraft carrier *Hermes* and fifteen merchant ships, and it achieved these successes without loss or even damage to any of its ships. It is interesting to note, however, that in spite of the destruction and damage they caused, Admiral Nagumo's five carriers had lost so many aircraft and trained aircrews in the fighting over **Ceylon** that, a month later, only two of them were able to take part in the all-important battle of the Coral Sea. The other three had to return to **Japan** to renew their complement of aircraft and pilots. Their presence in the Coral Sea encounter with the American

¹ Flight Lieutenant F. W. Brandt; born **Manchester**, England, 15 May 1915; factory representative; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

² Flight Lieutenant A. D. Carlaw; born **Whangarei**, 14 Apr 1916; electrical engineer; joined **RNZAF** May 1940.

³ Flying Officer R. K. Garnham; born **Blenheim**, 3 Nov 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1939.

⁴ Squadron Leader D. J. T. Sharp, DFC, m.i.d.; **RAF**; born Dunedin, 30 Aug 1918; joined **RAF** 24 Jul 1939; transferred **RNZAF** 1 Jan 1944; commanded No. 11 Sqdn, SE **Asia**, 1944.

⁵ Flying Officer L.P. Gavin; born **Gisborne**, 20 Oct 1917;

clerk; joined **RNZAF** 30 Nov 1940.

Fleet might well have turned the scale, with unpleasant consequences for **Australia and New Zealand.**

By the summer of 1942 the Japanese surge of conquest sweeping southwards into the **Pacific and westwards towards **India** had brought a long succession of victories. They had overrun in turn **Malaya**, Hong Kong, **Borneo**, **Java**, **Sumatra** and **Burma**. Their armies were established on the frontiers of **India**, prevented from advancing more by the heavy rains of the monsoon than by any opposition which our forces could offer. At sea their fleet in the **Indian Ocean** had not been brought to action. Their attack on **Burma** had carried all before it and the only remaining supply route to **China** had been cut. Further victories in **South-east Asia** seemed to await the enemy. But these they were to be denied. For plans were now maturing, slowly and inexorably, that were to stem the Japanese advance and eventually turn it back into complete and utter defeat. The success of these plans was to depend largely upon the weapon of air power and its use in novel and daring fashion.**

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 13 – FIGHTING BACK FROM INDIA

CHAPTER 13

Fighting Back from India

IN India the early months of 1942 were the hottest for many years. **Calcutta** residents remembered nothing like them and Indians in unprecedented numbers died in the streets. Out on the airfields where blast pens were being built against the expected Japanese attack it was possible to work only until ten in the morning. At Allahabad, a reinforcement base for Hurricanes and Blenheims, many of the ground staff were stricken by heat exhaustion and several died. At Asansol the temperature reached 127 degrees in the shade and the heat distorted aircraft panels so that they gave in the air. Everywhere men longed for the monsoon, hoping that the rains would bring relief from the misery of the endless stifling heat.

At Alipore, where Hurricanes were based for the defence of **Calcutta**, fighter pilots lay listless waiting for the 'scramble' warning that would send them climbing into the cooler air four miles above. They had arrived before sunrise, walked through the parched grass to the aircraft, unpicketed them and taxied over to the dispersal hut, checked, placed harness ready, and then hastened to find a place among the coco-fibre couches known as 'Charpoys'. There they had their pets—pariah puppies or a baby Himalayan bear—and fondling them they became hotter still for they wore full flying kit to save seconds in case of a sudden alarm. But the weeks dragged by and no Japanese bombers came. At dispersal the atmosphere remained humid and lifeless, and even before dawn pilots sweated as they dressed for readiness. They had to wear long sleeves and long trousers against the danger of sudden flame on skin, and also, in case they baled out, as protection against jungle leeches. So they sat while on patrol with the sun beating through the perspex of their cockpits, their own sweat stinging the prickly heat into red weals. And prickly heat was not the only bane of that torrid summer, for there were other less pleasant torments caused by the myriad flies.

In **Calcutta** itself, where the heat was probably more unbearable

than out on the sultry airfields of the Ganges, these were strange days. The great city was now filled with refugees and there were sailors without ships, aircrew without aircraft, and soldiers awaiting an army. The hotels had become squadron messes and fighter pilots waited at readiness in the shoddy splendour of the Grand Hotel, a few yards from their aircraft parked along the Red Road. For the impressive red-coloured highway which runs down one side of the great open space in **Calcutta** known as the 'Maidan' was now being used as a landing strip—partly because better warning could be received, partly because of the shortage of adequate safe dispersal at nearby airfields and partly for the morale of the local population. Sometimes a squadron 'scramble' would send the green and brown Hurricanes up through the cloud above the baking ant-heap of the city, but on most occasions the pilots would hardly have time to reach the cooler air above before the radar plot would prove 'friendly' and orders would come over the radio telephone for the squadron to land.

At last the monsoon broke and the days of drought were over. To the men on the Indian airfields it came like a grey-blue horizon moving towards them across the Ganges plain, becoming darker each moment as the wind mounted to a gale. For a while it was rainless under the black sky and then the storm burst. Often it came so quickly that pilots who rushed out at the first warning to turn their aircraft into the wind and picket them down were too late and had to struggle in the rain. But the monsoon, they soon found, brought no respite from the heat—only moisture and howling winds. Indeed, in this and the following years, the period from June to October was to prove one of acute and prolonged discomfort—the kind of discomfort that comes from working in a stinging downpour and then finding camp beds and blankets as wet as the air they breathed. For months on end men had to endure such conditions, often with uncooked and almost always with monotonous food, their cigarettes frequently spoiled by musty-tasting damp, with no proper means to dry their clothes and with everything in the tents mildewed. At the outposts there were neither books to read nor hurricane lamps to read them by, so in the long nights men lay sweating under

their mosquito nets, talking across the tent until there was nothing left to talk about.

The storms abated but not the heat. In the intervals there was no wind to disturb the clammy blanket that settled over the land and the overpowering humid heat, the mounting incidence of malaria and the general atmosphere of defeat, all tended to produce a mood of unbearable depression. Yet the men in their flights and squadrons overcame the sense of oppressiveness in various ways. They played cards and wrote letters, they became friends with the native children, made pets of all kinds of animals; they put on plays and revues, sang the old **RAF** songs and made up new ones, argued endlessly about the war, about tactics and about their future prospects. But in all the forward units the story was the same—not enough equipment, too little to drink or smoke and a monotonous diet of bully beef and ‘soya link’—that rather unpleasant kind of sausage made from the soya bean. It was under such conditions that the war in **Burma** was now fought and the achievements of the men can hardly be appreciated unless they are understood and remembered.

While the monsoon of 1942 thus came and went, both Army and **Air Force** were gradually re-forming and re-equipping after the long retreat from **Burma**. Weapons and equipment, however, were scarce, for with the Allies sorely beset in **Europe**, in the **Middle East** and in the **Pacific**, little could be spared for the new front in **South-east Asia**. There were other limitations owing to the very unsettled political situation in **India** at this time, the attitude of the Congress Party in particular being anything but helpful to British arms. In the circumstances, therefore, General Wavell and his air commander, Air Chief Marshal Peirse,¹ were mainly concerned during the next few months with renewing their strength and consolidating the defences of **India**.

And so, while British sappers directed thousands of Indian labourers in the building of roads along the Arakan coast and across the Naga gorges towards the **Manipur** frontier, the **RAF** pressed on with the construction of airfields, the establishment of supply and maintenance

bases and the setting up of wireless and radar units in Bengal and **Assam**. In the air the three light-bomber squadrons brought out of **Burma** were made up to strength with Blenheim IVs, and these were later joined by a few Wellingtons, the nucleus of a night-bomber force.

The fighter defence of north-east **India**, which had previously rested on one squadron of Mohawks, was augmented in June by three Hurricane squadrons from the **United Kingdom**. Catalinas, Blenheims and Hudsons were organised for sea and coastal reconnaissance, and presently it became possible to replace the Blenheims by Beaufort torpedo-bombers. Some photo-reconnaissance Spitfires arrived in November 1942, but another year was to elapse before these modern machines appeared as fighters and changed the course of the war. A few Liberator heavy bombers also came that same month but they were kept grounded for some considerable time by lack of spares. To this modest air strength was gradually added the small Indian Air Force which, after many vicissitudes, eventually reached a strength of six Hurricane squadrons and two armed with Vultee Vengeance bombers.

The number of New Zealanders with the **RAF** in **India** increased steadily during this period as veterans of **Singapore** and **Rangoon** were joined by men from **Britain** and the **Middle East**, and by both aircrew

¹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard E. C. Peirse, KCB, DSO, AFC, Croix de Guerre (It), Order of Polonia Restituta (Pol), Knight Grand Cross of Orange Nassau (Hol), Legion of Merit (US), Order of Cloud and Banner (Ch); **RAF** (retd); born Croydon, 30 Sep 1892; Deputy Chief of Air Staff, 1937–40; Vice-Chief of Air Staff, 1940; AOC Bomber Command, 1940–42; AOC-in-C, **India**, 1942–43; Air C-in-C, SEAC, 1943–44.

and ground staff newly trained under the Empire Training Scheme. By December 1942 there were 250 Dominion airmen serving with units of **India Air Command**. The large majority were aircrew and they included Hurricane and Mohawk fighter pilots, **Blenheim** and Wellington captains, navigators, wireless operators and gunners, together with

crews of Hudson reconnaissance aircraft. Among the thirty-odd men engaged on ground duties there were radar specialists, wireless operators and aircraft mechanics.

Three New Zealanders, Wing Commander L. G. W. Lilly, Squadron Leaders Maling ¹ and Mowat ² commanded **RAF** units throughout this period.

Lilly commanded a Hudson squadron that was formed in June 1942 at Dum Dum, near **Calcutta**. The Hudsons, among whose crews there were sixteen New Zealanders, flew shipping escort and anti-submarine patrols over the **Bay of Bengal**; they also reconnoitred the Arakan coast. Lilly was no stranger to such work. Joining the **RAF** in England a few months before the war, he had flown with **Coastal Command** for over a year and had then taken a flight of Hudsons out to operate from **Singapore** and **Java**.

Maling, who had now been with the **Air Force** for eight years, was in charge of No. 5 Squadron which, equipped with Audax and Wapiti aircraft, had previously been engaged in operations over the North-west Frontier against rebellious tribesmen. When war came it began to re-equip with Mohawks, but before this changeover was completed Maling and his pilots were called upon to cover the retreat from **Burma**. Flying from Tezpur in **Assam**, the Mohawks had been employed on fighter patrols and the Audaxes and Wapitis to drop supplies and pick up messages from the ground, such messages often providing the only information from forward posts about the enemy's advance. Now, however, the squadron was turning to the offensive, bombing and strafing roads, railways and airfields in northern **Burma**.

Mowat led a squadron of Hurricane fighters that was based at Alipore for the defence of **Calcutta**. He had already distinguished himself in operations with Fighter Command, which he joined at the outbreak of war, and had brought his squadron out to **India** early in 1942. He subsequently achieved a fine record in the **Burma** theatre as leader of a Hurricane wing and then as operations officer at Air Headquarters.

New Zealand representation among the fighter squadrons was strong, notably in No. 67 Hurricane Squadron, where two-thirds of the pilots

¹ Wing Commander J. R. Maling, AFC; born **Timaru**, 5 Nov 1913; clerk; joined **RAF** 1934; transferred **RNZAF** 1 Jul 1945; commanded No. **27 Sqdn, India**, 1940–41; No. **5 Sqdn, India**, 1942; No. 619 Sqdn, 1944; prisoner of war, 26 Jul 1944.

² Wing Commander N. J. Mowat, DSO, m.i.d.; born Clydevale, Otago, 18 Sep 1914; joined **RAF** 28 Dec 1938; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1945; commanded No. **607 Sqdn**, 1941–42; No. 166 Wing, **India**, 1942–43; held various appointments **India** and ACSEA, 1943–44; commanded RAF Station, Peterhead, 1944–45; killed in flying accident, 7 Nov 1946.

were from the Dominion; Nos. 135, 136 and 146 Hurricane Squadrons and No. 5 Mohawk Squadron also had substantial New Zealand representation. Many of the men in these units had already fought over **Burma**, and, experienced in the flying conditions peculiar to this part of the world, they provided a valuable nucleus of seasoned pilots for the steadily expanding fighter force. Of the bomber and reconnaissance units, Nos. 34 and 113 **Blenheim** and Nos. 99 and 215 Wellington Squadrons each had a contingent of Dominion airmen, as did No. 217 Hudson Squadron and No. 22 Squadron, the first unit to fly Beaufort torpedo-bombers.

These concentrations of Dominion personnel were, however, largely fortuitous and, despite the efforts of some squadron commanders, did not long persist. No official moves were made to form New Zealand squadrons in the **India- Burma** theatre with the result that, as the campaign progressed, Dominion airmen became widely scattered through the **RAF** organisation. Unfortunately the **New Zealand Government** and **Air Force** took little interest in their men serving with the **RAF** in **South-east Asia Command**. Not until another two years had elapsed was a liaison office established at **Delhi**, and then it was staffed by a single junior officer. Flight Lieutenant Twigge ¹ worked hard to deal

with the many problems involved, but only towards the end of the war did the arrangements approach what was needed.

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The monsoon severely restricted air activity during 1942. Nevertheless, from April to December that year the **RAF** flew 3790 sorties and lost 81 aircraft while so doing. During the torrid summer months, while fighter pilots waited at readiness to defend **Calcutta**, **Blenheims** and **Mohawks** went out whenever possible over **Burma** to bomb and strafe airfields, railways and any military concentrations they could find; **Dakota** crews continued to search for and drop supplies to the groups of refugees still struggling through the dense jungle to the safety of **Assam**; **Lysanders** and **Audaxes** kept in touch with forward army units and **Hudsons** continued their coastwise patrols.

Simultaneously with these activities there occurred two events which heralded the revival of Allied fighting power in **South-east Asia**. The first was the carrying by **RAF Dakotas** to **Fort Hertz**, in the extreme north of **Burma**, of a British team to train local levies, and from this remote outpost, which the **Dakotas** continued to supply, there soon began a successful guerrilla warfare against the Japanese invaders. The second and more important event was the inauguration of an air supply route to **China** across the grim razor-backed **Patkai Mountains**.

¹ Flight Lieutenant T. Twigge; born **Palmerston North**, 3 Aug 1909; accountant; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1939.

This aerial highway, soon to become known as the 'Hump' route, was pioneered by an American airman, Lieutenant-Colonel William D. Old, and American transport squadrons were soon operating a busy two-way service, carrying in many tons of supplies and bringing out some thirteen thousand Chinese troops from their lost battlefields to be trained and re-equipped in **India**. Within a few months **RAF Dakotas** joined in carrying supplies to **China** but the bulk of the work continued

to be done by American aircraft. ¹

Flying over the 'Hump' was extremely hazardous, not only because of the high and treacherous mountains that had to be traversed, but also because of the great cumulo-nimbus clouds which hung in huge masses of brown vapour above them. To enter such cloud formations meant almost certain death, for the currents in their gloomy depths were of unimaginable ferocity and violence. Nevertheless, despite these natural obstacles, the supply aircraft continued to operate intensively and the service grew rapidly until one transport was taking off from **India** for **China** every few minutes of the day. This remarkable achievement greatly reduced the extent of the Japanese victory in **Burma**, for Chinese resistance, instead of withering from lack of sustenance, was now fed and nourished from the skies.

In contrast to this Allied activity the **Japanese Air Force** was remarkably slow in developing operations against **India**. From the end of October there were sporadic raids on our forward airfields in **Assam** and the **Chittagong** area, but they inflicted only slight damage; the enemy fighters did, however, have the better of our defending Hurricanes, which, lacking an effective warning system, were usually caught at a disadvantage of height.

It was not until late December that **Calcutta** had its first raid and then only a few Japanese bombers came over at night. They did little damage except to the morale of the local inhabitants, over a million of whom, including the cleaners, fled the city, leaving piles of uncollected rubbish rotting in the streets. However, the timely arrival from **Britain** of a few Beaufighters, specially equipped for night interception, soon put an end to the nuisance raids. Within four nights in mid-January they shot down all but two of the seven Japanese bombers which came over **Calcutta**. After that there were no more raids and the city returned to normal.

General Wavell had meanwhile been making ready to renew the land battle. His preparations were hindered by the worst malaria

¹ This was because the primary American interest in **South-east Asia** was the support and supply of the forces fighting the Japanese in **China**. **Britain** had no such commitment and her main concern was the reconquest of **Burma** and **Malaya**. These diverse national objectives were, in fact, to have an important bearing on the whole of the subsequent campaign in **Burma**, since they led inevitably to differences of opinion regarding future strategy.

epidemic **India** had known for many years; so bad did it become that in October and November 1942, 20,000 sick had to be evacuated from the **Eastern Army** area alone, in addition to the 15,000 already carried away to hospital soon after the exhausted troops arrived from **Burma**. Further, the attitude of the Indian Congress Party continued to delay the development of airfields and supply services generally, and the climate did not help, nor the monsoon storms which brought down landslides on the road to **Imphal**. Nevertheless, despite these obstacles Wavell persevered with his plans and in December 1942 he made his first moves.

Three vaguely defined 'fronts' or areas of contact with the enemy ground forces had then established themselves. The nearest was in the Arakan, a country of sharp mountains running down to the narrow coastal plain which fringes the west of **Burma**. A middle front lay to the north below the **Imphal** plain, while a third stretched through the fever-stricken valleys north-east of **Mandalay**. The Japanese were most favourably placed to resist any attack on our part or to launch an offensive of their own. They had behind them the entire road system and waterways of **Burma**, the excellent port of **Rangoon** and the comparatively safe bases of Indo- **China**; moreover, they held the driest and healthiest part of **Burma**. The British and Americans, on the other hand, were holding positions in the mountains and in the malaria-infested valleys of the north where communications were most difficult. In the circumstances, and with our ground and air forces still relatively weak, Wavell could not hope to launch any major offensive, but since

the Japanese seemed reluctant to move on **India** he had decided to take the initiative and attempt two minor objectives. The first was the capture of **Akyab** on the Arakan coast; the second was the launching of the first 'Chindit' operation through the Japanese flank on the northeastern front.

In preparation for the attack in Arakan our light bombers, with fighter escort, had already begun to concentrate upon that region. Hurricane squadrons from the **Calcutta** zone, in whose defence they had spent so many months of frustrated waiting, now moved forward across the bay to airstrips in the vicinity of **Chittagong**. There they lived in tents or in 'bashes'—a kind of bamboo hut with overhanging eaves—which were usually tucked away in the jungle alongside the landing strips. Meals were prepared and eaten in the open, with ravenous kite hawks hovering above ready to swoop and carry away in one razor-clawed dive any food left unattended. Before long both fighter pilots and bomber crews were almost continuously in action. The region over which they flew was far from attractive. 'Bad pranging country', they called it. For down the Mayu peninsula runs a range of mountains shrouded in thick jungle, with long valleys to the seaward side and mangrove swamps and low-lying paddy to the east. On the mainland stagnant marsh and mud flats gradually give place to a low coastal shelf, beyond which lie the fierce folds of mountains called 'The Arakan Yomas' and then, towards the Himalayas in the north, come the Chin Hills. Most of this region offered little chance of survival for those unfortunate enough to be forced down, even if they landed uninjured.

Covered by Hurricane and Mohawk fighter patrols, our troops moved forward at the beginning of December 1942 and in a few weeks success seemed within their grasp. They occupied Maungdaw and Buthidaung unopposed and shortly afterwards reached Indin. But then they paused to bring up supplies, and while they were doing so the Japanese reinforced **Akyab** in strength and, what was more serious, began moving other columns from the Kaladan valley towards the British left flank. Bitter fighting developed, and as the enemy began to infiltrate behind

our positions and against our communications it became necessary to withdraw. By the end of April our troops, severely shaken by this first new encounter with the enemy, were back in **India** where they started. They had suffered 2500 casualties in battle and malaria had claimed many more. 'The greatest gain from the campaign,' wrote General Wavell, 'was experience of the enemy's methods and of our own defects in training and organisation. The serious loss was in prestige and morale.'

The RAF did its best to support the Army during these months. Flying ahead, both Hurricanes and Blenheims attacked Japanese transport on roads and waterways and set fire to enemy-held villages. These operations were very effective and soon the enemy was avoiding movement in the open by day. But our close-support bombing, except on a few occasions, was less successful, for the Japanese were adept at concealment and their cleverly camouflaged 'fox-holes' proved difficult to discover and destroy; similarly, their infiltrating movements through the thick jungle were hard to discern even from low-flying aircraft. When our troops were withdrawing, however, bombing certainly helped to keep the enemy immobile and enabled our men to escape from some dangerous situations. Aircraft also evacuated casualties and dropped supplies to isolated columns.

During March and April the **Japanese Air Force** made a determined effort against the airfields from which our squadrons were operating over the Arakan front. They inflicted a certain amount of damage and brought some of our fighters back on to the defensive, but they failed to drive us from the air as they intended; forty-three of the raiders were claimed destroyed or probably destroyed for the loss of fourteen **RAF** fighters. Our Hurricanes then returned to harass the enemy on the ground with renewed vigour. Soon they were making a daily practice of what were known as 'Rhubarbs', searching the tracks and waterways behind the enemy for any sign of movement. Sometimes the Hurricanes would go east over the Arakan Yomas then down to the tree level of north **Burma**. There they might detect a cloud of dust near some such

centre as Shwebo and find a convoy beneath the dust cloud. Cannon and machine-gun sprayed the vehicles and the roadside bushes into which the Japanese hurled themselves. And then came a climb over the mountains and back to base. Sorties along the coast to **Akyab** were often hazardous because of the mirror-like surface of the sea and the thick mists which spilled out from the low-lying valleys of the Arakan. Unable to judge his height accurately, a pilot might fly gently towards the water and then, in a few moments' time, there would be nothing left on the sea; no wreckage, not a sign that the Hurricane had gone in. In fact, the disappearance of several aircraft in the coastal area remained a mystery until one pilot, after escaping from his cockpit beneath the sea and then being picked up by fishermen, returned to tell what had happened.

Air attack on the enemy's road, river and rail traffic reached a climax as the 1943 monsoon approached and the Japanese sought to hurry their last convoys forward before the storms blotted out the tracks. Towards the end of May a concentrated three-day assault was launched against communications and supply centres; every available squadron was employed and a total of 547 sorties, nearly a quarter of them by the now growing American forces, were flown in what appears to have been a very successful operation. The Japanese at once retaliated with three fairly heavy raids, two of which were directed against our main airfield at **Chittagong**. But local warning had now improved and on each occasion the raiders were intercepted and suffered fairly heavy casualties.

Of the New Zealand fighter pilots who flew and fought through this first Arakan campaign, Flight Sergeant Rudling ¹ of No. 136 Hurricane Squadron had more than his share of excitement and adventure. For twice during combats his Hurricane was set on fire and he was forced to bale out, but each time he succeeded in making his way back through the jungle; moreover, on each occasion he succeeded in shooting down or damaging several enemy machines before he baled out.

Rudling was in action when the Japanese raided **Chittagong** towards the end of May. As he closed with one of the bombers its rear-gunner set

his engine smoking and covered the windscreen with oil. At this point, as so often happened when the Hurricanes had to pierce fighter

¹ Flying Officer J. D. Rudling, DFM; born Vavau, **Tonga**, 18 Mar 1922; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** 27 Jan 1941; killed on air operations, 29 Apr 1944.

cover to reach the bombers, a Japanese fighter was on Rudling's tail. He could hear and feel the thudding of shells from the fighter on his armour plate. Flames from the engine had now crept into the cockpit but Rudling continued to fire at the twisting bomber ahead, whose shape alone he could see through the oil. Only when the enemy was well ablaze and he had exhausted his ammunition did Rudling finally bale out from his burning Hurricane. On this day the enemy bombers and fighters, thinking to outwit the defence, had glided in with their engines switched off; but the Hurricanes, warned by radar of their approach, were in the air to meet them and they destroyed or damaged a considerable part of the raiding force.

Also prominent in patrol and attack over the Arakan were men like Flight Lieutenant E. A. Pevreal and Flying Officer T. B. Marra of No. 146 Squadron, Warrant Officers Dean ¹ and McIvor ² with No. 135 Squadron, and Flying Officer Jacobs ³ of No. 136 Squadron. And among those flying with No. 67 Squadron were Flying Officers A. A. Cooper, P. S. Hanan and E. L. Sadler; Warrant Officers E. E. Pedersen and G. A. Williams, and Flight Sergeants Oliver, ⁴ K. A. Rutherford and S. M. D. Wilson. ⁵

Squadron Leader P. D. Smith, flight commander in No. 113 Squadron, with Pilot Officer Davidson ⁶ and Sergeant Gilchrist ⁷ also deserve mention for their part in the **Blenheim** bomber operations during the campaign.

While the Arakan campaign was still in progress Wavell launched his second offensive—the imaginative and daring Chindit operation. Led by

the strange but indomitable General Orde Wingate, who had already distinguished himself as a guerrilla leader in **Abyssinia**, its seven columns, comprising some three thousand men in all, set out from **Imphal** in February 1943. Their purpose was to filter through the jungle and harass the enemy by cutting rail and road communications.⁸ With them went **RAF** liaison officers and radio apparatus, for

¹ Pilot Officer W. H. F. Dean; born Mercury Bay, 21 Aug 1916; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940; killed on air operations, 31 Mar 1943.

² Flight Lieutenant J. V. McIvor; born Hastings, 15 Feb 1920; telegraph cadet; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940.

³ Squadron Leader V. K. Jacobs; born **Auckland**, 18 Sep 1918; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940; commanded No. 1 Servicing Party, **RAF**, 1944.

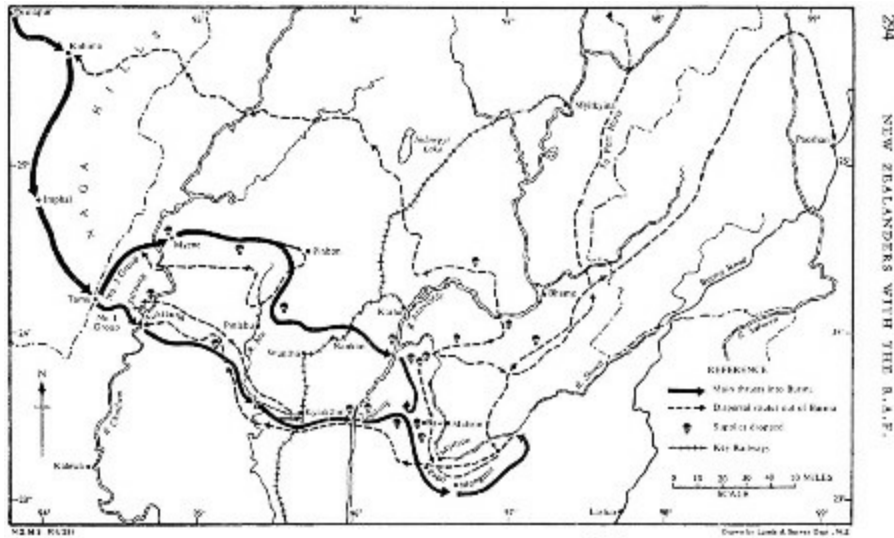
⁴ Flying Officer A. J. Oliver; born **Hawera**, 13 Apr 1920; boilermaker; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

⁵ Flying Officer S. M. D. Wilson; born **Auckland**, 17 Jan 1918; service-car driver; joined **RNZAF** 22 Dec 1940.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant J. Davidson, DFC; born Clyde, Otago, 18 Jun 1920; clerk and orchardist; joined **RNZAF** 21 Mar 1941.

⁷ Flight Sergeant R. A. Gilchrist; born **Invercargill**, 8 Aug 1911; labourer; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941; killed on air operations, 6 Jun 1943.

⁸ Originally the expedition was planned to aid a Chinese army advance but this advance was postponed. Wavell, however, decided to allow the Chindits to proceed because of the experience that might be gained and the fillip it would give to morale. See paragraph 24 of Wavell's despatch, *Operations in*



THE FIRST CHINDIT EXPEDITION, FEBRUARY – JUNE 1943

the novel and important feature of the expedition was that, throughout its march, it would be sustained by supplies dropped from the air; the **RAF** would also do its best to distract attention from the approach and return of the columns.

At first things went well. Five columns penetrated the enemy lines, and in a series of operations against the railway from **Mandalay** to **Myitkyina** they destroyed four bridges, cut the tracks in more than seventy places and brought down many thousands of tons of rock upon another part of the line. They then crossed the Irrawaddy to attack the **Mandalay- Lashio** line. But the Japanese became aware of their movements and this project had to be abandoned; eventually, under growing pressure from the enemy, the expedition was forced to break up and return to **India** in small parties.

During the three months that the Chindits ¹ were behind the Japanese lines their losses were high and their achievements seemed small in proportion to the effort expended. In fact, however, the Japanese were seriously disturbed by their advent and postponed a proposed attack on northern **Assam**. Moreover, the venture did serve to

demonstrate for the benefit of later campaigns that the solution to jungle warfare against the Japanese lay in the air rather than on the ground.

The RAF efforts at supply and protection had indeed attained a large measure of success. Flying by night as well as by day, Dakotas of Nos. 31 and 194 Squadrons made 178 sorties and dropped just on 300 tons of supplies for the Chindits. They 'did us proud,' writes Major Fergusson of the **Black Watch**. 'Their spirit was exemplified by the unknown aircraftman who always dropped the morning paper on us at the end of the last run, and was wildly cheered by the men on the ground.'² The majority of the tonnage was collected by the Chindits, though in the early stages aircraft were less expert at dropping and the troops at receiving than they subsequently became. Towards the end of the campaign there were, however, times when aircraft duly arrived and circled vainly above Wingate's columns, who could clearly be seen in the jungle. These, though they needed the supplies badly enough, dare not signal for them, for to do so would have brought the enemy against them in strength. Nevertheless the transport aircraft returned again and again to seek and aid the heroic bands of men marching back, not along roads or even tracks, but through the thick jungle and over a mass of formless hills. Patrol and attack by Mohawk fighters and **Blenheim** bombers also helped to distract the enemy's attention from movements of the Chindit columns.

¹ Wingate's men came to be known as 'Chindits' from their shoulder-flash depicting a 'chinthe'—the guardian lion of Burmese temples.

² *The Wild Green Earth*, p. 247.

Among the New Zealanders who flew in support of this first Wingate expedition were Flying Officer Mellsop,¹ one of the original pilots of No. 194 Squadron, and Sergeants Garrett² and Jackson³ of No. 31

Squadron. They flew transport aircraft on the supply missions. Flying Officer O'Brien, ⁴ Flight Sergeant McLeary ⁵ and Sergeant Culpan ⁶ piloted Blenheims of No. 34 Squadron, while Flight Lieutenant Buddle ⁷ and Flying Officers Edwards ⁸ and Hunter ⁹ of No. 155 Squadron and Warrant Officer McLauchlan ¹⁰ of No. 5 Squadron were among those who flew Mohawk fighters; they worked hard escorting Blenheims and Dakotas on their missions as well as attacking ground targets.

One New Zealander went into **Burma** on foot as an air liaison officer with Wingate's expedition. He was Flight Lieutenant Denis Sharp, a fighter pilot who had fought over **Singapore** and had afterwards had an exciting escape by way of **Sumatra**. Sharp came through the campaign with great credit. When the Chindit brigade split up he was given command of one of the parties, and in the hard and dangerous march back to **India** kept his men going with fine example and determination, on one occasion walking into a village alone in order to obtain food for them. He took part in a pitched battle at Hinthia, reconnoitred a route to the river and, with his party, fought another action with the Japanese, after which he led a splendid forced march farther than any other party and through most difficult country.

Long-range night bombing and photographic reconnaissance were two other spheres of **RAF** activity in which New Zealanders shared during these months. In the bomber operations, Flying Officer Jenner ¹¹ achieved a fine record as a Liberator captain in No. 159 Squadron; with his earlier service with Bomber Command in England and the **Middle East**, he had now completed sixty bombing missions. Flight

¹ Flight Lieutenant R. G. Mellsop; born **Pukekohe**, 13 May 1911; accounts clerk; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1941; killed on air operations, 11 Apr 1944.

² Pilot Officer J. Garrett; born Te Mata, 6 Mar 1921; motor-body builder; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1941; killed on air operations, 6 Jan 1944.

³ Flying Officer V. R. Jackson; born **Invercargill**, 2 Oct 1914; building contractor; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941.

⁴ Group Captain P. P. O'Brien, OBE; born **Wellington**, 27 Aug 1913; accountant's clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

⁵ Warrant Officer G. J. McLeary; born **Masterton**, 29 Jan 1920; journalist; joined **RNZAF** 4 Jun 1940.

⁶ Flying Officer I. D. Culpan, DFM; born **Auckland**, 23 Dec 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941.

⁷ Flight Lieutenant T. J. Buddle, DFC; born **Auckland**, 19 Oct 1919; insurance clerk; joined **RAF** May 1941; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944.

⁸ Flight Lieutenant M. H. Edwards; born **London**, 11 Oct 1914; motor mechanic; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941.

⁹ Flight Lieutenant L. T. Hunter; born **Richmond**, 16 Jun 1923; marine engineer; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941.

¹⁰ Flying Officer R. R. A. McLauchlan, DFC; born Waimate, 26 Nov 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

¹¹ Flight Lieutenant K. S. Jenner, DFC; born Wadhurst, **Sussex**, 14 Nov 1920; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1940.

Sergeant Palmer, ¹ Flight Sergeant Culleton ² and Sergeant Gunn ³ were other prominent members of Liberator crews. With the Wellingtons, Squadron Leader G. L. M. Schrader, Flight Sergeant Paterson ⁴ and Sergeant Hampton ⁵ did good work as pilots, while Flight Sergeant Phillips ⁶ navigated the leading aircraft on many raids.

At this early stage one squadron of Wellingtons and one of Liberators

were all that was available for night bombing, and they lacked many of the maintenance and operational facilities that existed in **Britain** for operating heavy bombers. Nevertheless, as early as November and December 1942, the two squadrons managed over 180 sorties against airfields in **Burma** and almost as many against communications and military targets. While the Wellingtons concentrated on nearer objectives such as **Akyab**, Taungup and **Mandalay**, the Liberators went farther afield down the Irrawaddy valley as far as **Rangoon**. A New Zealand Liberator crew flew Air Vice-Marshal Stevenson, who was in charge of the **Bengal Air Command**, on one of the first raids against **Mingaladon** airfield at **Rangoon**. And it afforded the bomber men no little satisfaction to strike back at this and other air bases from which our squadrons had been driven during the retreat from **Burma**. Airfields remained a priority target for the Wellingtons and Liberators throughout the first half of 1943, during which time they flew 477 sorties and dropped 762 tons of bombs.

The continual night raids on Japanese air bases, combined with the daylight attacks of our light bombers and fighters, had their effect. For it would seem that the enemy had intended to operate against **India**, not only from second-line airfields in **Burma** but also from advanced landing grounds. Because of our air attacks, however, he was forced to retain his squadrons in rear areas and in **Thailand**, only moving them forward in short periods as, for example, in support of his counter-attack in the Arakan. This made it more and more difficult for the enemy to intercept Allied aircraft over central and upper **Burma**; it also restricted the scale of air attack which he could bring against **India**, and it enabled our own air force to operate with greater security from advanced airfields in north-east **India**, which was important since they were so few.

¹ Flying Officer G. W. Palmer, DFC; born Orari, **Canterbury**, 12 Nov 1915; storeman; joined **RNZAF** 7 May 1940.

² Flying Officer J. N. Culleton; born **Auckland**, 26 Sep 1913; postmaster; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940.

³ Pilot Officer W. T. Gunn, DFM; born **Invercargill**, 22 Jun 1918; farm labourer; joined **RNZAF** 16 Feb 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer E. G. Paterson; born **Dunedin**, 7 Oct 1915; grocer; joined **RNZAF** 2 Mar 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer H. D. Hampton, DFC, Air Medal (US); born **Christchurch**, 29 May 1914; electrical equipment salesman; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant W. C. Phillips; born **Palmerston North**, 5 May 1916; window dresser; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940.

Photographic reconnaissance was now required over a wide area—from **Akyab** in the west over the whole of **Burma**, and far beyond to **Thailand** and the **China** coast. To meet this need valiant efforts were being made by No. 681 Squadron, which was equipped with Hurricanes and Spitfires and a few twin-engined Mitchells for long-range work. Flying Officer C. B. Wareham, who had already done good work over **Malaya**, Flying Officer O'Brien ¹ and Warrant Officers F. D. C. Brown ² and Carpenter ³ were pilots with this unit and Flying Officer Cummins ⁴ navigated Mitchells.

The squadron was based at Alipore, near **Calcutta**. When an operation was ordered, pilots would usually be briefed the night before and then would take off shortly after dawn for one of the forward landing grounds; there they would 'top up' with petrol before setting out to the assigned target, flying usually between 20,000 and 25,000 feet. The single-engined Hurricanes and Spitfires were without radio aids and their pilots had to rely mainly on map reading for navigation. Most sorties involved a double crossing of the Chin Hills and the mountains along the border between **India** and **Burma**; these went up to 12,000 or 14,000 feet, and in the monsoon period when storms raged and thick clouds covered the peaks the photographic pilots faced many hazards.

Such conditions were met by Warrant Officer Brown one day in June 1943 when he was returning from his twenty-third mission. Over the Arakan Mountains, when he was already flying at 23,000 feet, he was faced with a wall of cloud stretching across the horizon as far as he could see and rising another 20,000 feet above him. If he went down below it there was the strong possibility that he would strike the mountains, and he had not sufficient fuel to attempt to fly round or over it. So he decided to plunge through it. What happened next is best told in his own words:

For twenty minutes I was on instruments with flying conditions becoming rougher and rougher with the engine continually icing up and losing power, which could only be overcome by vigorous pumping on the throttle. The aircraft then struck a series of terrific bumps which sent the instruments haywire. I could see my Artificial Horizon up in the top corner of the dial, while the Turn and Bank Indicator appeared, as far as I could see, to be showing conditions of a spin. Deciding then that I must be in a spin I applied correction for it, but that was my last conscious thought. As I pushed the stick forward, there was terrific 'G' pressure which forced my

¹ Flying Officer A. H. O'Brien; born **Foxton**, 6 Apr 1918; van driver; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940.

² Warrant Officer F. D. C. Brown; born **Christchurch**, 26 Oct 1921; tractor driver; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940.

³ Flight Lieutenant E. E. Carpenter; born **Portsmouth**, England, 28 Nov 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant P. L. D. Cummins; born **Dunedin**, 13 Jan 1917; joined **RAF** 1938; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944.

head down between my knees and tore my hands from the controls—

then I lost consciousness. When I came to I was falling head over heels just under the cloud base, with pieces of the aircraft fluttering all round me and the main part of the fuselage two or three hundred feet below me, minus the engine, wings and tail unit. It was turning in a lazy spin and with a big rip right down the back. My first thought and reaction was to pull the ripcord of my parachute, without looking to see what could fall on me. Luckily everything worked out all right, after an anxious moment when I thought the 'chute' wasn't going to open. It did, however, and the pieces of my disintegrated Spitfire went down, leaving me behind. On taking stock of my surroundings, I could see that I was about 2,000 to 3,000 feet above an island which was in the mouth of the Ganges. This put me fairly well on course, which was fortunate, as I hadn't seen land for over an hour. My parachute descent didn't last more than two or three minutes, and after making sure I was going to land in a clump of palms, a strong wind carried me well over them until I finally came down in a paddyfield, to be dragged along through the muddy water before I could release my harness.

Brown managed to reach a native village, where he spent the night, and the next day after a rough journey by bullock cart and native boat he eventually reached an Indian hospital. Not until some days later was it discovered that his spine was injured. Before leaving for home, where he subsequently recovered, Brown heard that a salvage party had discovered pieces of his Spitfire scattered over an area of twenty square miles.

* * * * *

As the monsoon developed and storm clouds gathered again over the mountains in June 1943, roads and tracks through the jungle country along [India](#)'s eastern border became waterlogged and impassable and land operations were brought to a virtual standstill. The [RAF](#), however, although it had to withdraw squadrons from forward landing grounds, continued to operate. Casualties increased and the sorties in soaking, bumpy weather, under brown weeping clouds and over green impenetrable jungles, were anything but spectacular; but all ranks were

sustained by the knowledge that they were doing, as a matter of regular and normal routine, what the enemy, with better airfields and better organisation, could or dared not do.

To the lonely garrison at **Fort Hertz** and to our troops in the Chin Hills and at Goppe Bazar east of Maungdaw, where the pass had been washed away, went a steady stream of supplies. In July alone the Dakotas of No. 31 Squadron flew 286 sorties carrying 784 tons, and General Giffard, in command of **Eastern Army**, afterwards declared that without the maintenance of this air supply, his troops could not have held their positions through the monsoon. Simultaneously, from the wet tree-fringed airfield at Fenny, **Blenheim** bombers continued to fly out and attack chosen points through which the Japanese were bringing supplies to their Arakan front. The Blenheims, although still doing splendid work, were almost worn out and their indomitable ground crews, short of equipment and spares, had to work long hours to keep them serviceable. Because no jacks, and frequently no winches, were available the aircraft had to be armed by hand; bombs were lifted on to backs that, as often as not, were sore from prickly heat and somehow the job was done.

Hurricanes continued with patrol and attack and escorted transports and bombers over enemy territory. Hudsons and Catalinas maintained reconnaissance along the **Burma** coast and over the **Bay of Bengal**; they sighted few targets but their presence did much towards keeping the seas clear of the enemy and ensured the safe arrival of our supply convoys. The Wellingtons and Liberators also kept up their night attacks in between the storms. With few radio aids to help them on their long flights, navigators had to rely partly on the stars, which were not always visible. And strange though it may seem to those unfamiliar with monsoon conditions, the crews sometimes had to fly through icy clouds; there were also freak storms at their base, where at various times a Wellington camp was blown down, damaging the bombers, and Liberators were lifted bodily into the air so that they flew backwards across the airfield.

The monsoon went on; and so did the flying. More squadrons gradually came into the line, some of them equipped with more modern machines such as the Vultee Vengeance dive-bomber and the faster twin-engined Beaufighter. Like so many aircraft untried in this extreme climate, the Vultee Vengeance had at first given trouble and was withdrawn from operations, but it now returned as a most successful and accurate attack aircraft. Pilots soon became adept at finding well camouflaged enemy strongpoints, both in the Arakan and among the Chin Hills. Following one attack at Maungdaw, observers reported back that: 'After bombing six funeral pyres were seen', and on another occasion they noted with grim satisfaction that 'six lorry loads of dead were removed from Razabil.'

The Beaufighters, ranging farther afield than the Hurricanes, attacked road, rail and river traffic. The latter was a highly profitable target since the Japanese were making full use of **Burma's** many waterways. And before long the remains of four river steamers and hundreds of sampans and small river craft littered the banks and sand bars of the Irrawaddy and its tributaries. So successful were the Beaufighters in these operations that they quickly earned the name of 'Whispering Death'; for the Beaufighter had a trick of remaining silent at low level until it was almost upon its target. It is recorded that on one sortie a Beaufighter came upon a full-dress parade of Japanese troops at Myitkyina, on the birthday of Emperor Hirohito. The troops were standing, rigid, round a flagpole from which fluttered the Rising Sun of **Japan**. In front of them were their officers seated stiffly on their horses. By its silent approach the Beaufighter caught the parade unawares and in a few moments it was a shambles. Dead and wounded men lay strewn on the brown earth, riderless horses galloped in panic among the bodies, and the flagpole was hit and the Rising Sun lay drooping in the dust.

During the whole period of the 1943 monsoon, from July to October, the **RAF** flew nearly 8000 sorties. Forty-two aircraft were lost. Nearly all these casualties resulted, not from enemy action, but from the treacherous climate and the bad flying conditions. Some machines

crashed in the mountains and their crews were either killed or lost in the jungle—for a green bomber crashing in the green sea of tropical forest stood little chance of being found. Of the aircraft which came down in the **Indian Ocean**, just over half the crews were rescued, mainly through the efforts of the long-range reconnaissance squadrons since, as yet, an air-sea rescue organisation was not developed. Despite the losses and difficulties, however, air operations during the monsoon had been well worth while. Our troops and outposts had been kept supplied by air transport and valuable experience acquired in the technique of supply by air. Determined attacks on enemy bases had driven the **Japanese Air Force** back and our own army and air bases remained unmolested. And the continuing assault on communications, particularly on such important points as **Akyab** and **Rangoon**, had hindered their use by the enemy.

During this same period the **Japanese Air Force** had flown only 411 sorties from its bases in **Burma** and **Thailand**. Their interception of our bombing raids never presented a serious problem and they showed little inclination to develop strategic operations against **India**. But it is now known that, apart from the pressure exerted by our bombers from **India**, the **Japanese Air Force** was handicapped by calls made upon it from elsewhere. In particular, Allied successes in the New Guinea area had necessitated the withdrawal of both fighters and bombers from **Burma**. The air situation in **South-east Asia** was thus becoming more favourable for the Allies, and during the next few months the **RAF** was quick to seize every opportunity for pressing home its advantage and winning command of the air. Such indeed was the essential preliminary to any military operations aimed at the recapture of **Burma**.

New Zealand airmen had continued to play their part. They flew fighter patrols and bombing raids into **Burma**, transported men and supplies, reconnoitred enemy territory and patrolled over the Indian Ocean from bases in **India** and **Ceylon**. They were also active in various ground duties. It is, moreover, interesting to record that of the 300 aircrew from the Dominion serving with the **India** Command during

1943, nearly 200 were pilots.

Three New Zealanders had the distinction of leading **RAF** squadrons at this time. They were Wing Commanders L. G. W. Lilly, Maddox ¹ and McClelland. ² Lilly continued in command of Hudsons, which did splendid work on sea reconnaissance and then in the carriage of mail and freight; Squadron Leaders E. J. Henry and Hawkins ³ were his flight commanders. Wing Commander Maddox, who had previously served as a flying instructor in **Canada**, was in charge of a squadron of Wellington bombers. During November 1943 his squadron logged over 750 hours' flying, mainly at night, against such targets as **Akyab**, Taungup, Prome and the Irrawaddy port of Sagaing near **Mandalay**. McClelland controlled a Catalina flying-boat squadron which operated from **Ceylon** over a wide area of the **Indian Ocean**, from the Maldiv Islands right across to **Aden** and south to **Mauritius**. During his early service with the **RAF** McClelland had specialised in navigation, and under his guidance the squadron reached a high standard in that difficult art. This was well demonstrated early in May when two lifeboats containing seventy-six survivors from the motorship *Ocean Hope* were located in the vastness of the sea and duly rescued. And it was shortly after McClelland assumed command that the first of a series of record-breaking long-distance flights was made by a Catalina of No. 205 Squadron, bringing the first airgraph letters from **Australia**. The flying boat flew from **Perth** to **Ceylon** in twenty-four hours, covering a distance of 3040 miles, which was no mean achievement for those days, even in a Catalina!

Taking a prominent part in the work of air transport were Flight Lieutenants King ⁴ and McKenzie, ⁵ who captained Dakotas of No. 31 Squadron, and Flight Lieutenants J. Davidson, E. F. Page and Flying Officer R. G. Mellsop, pilots with No. 194 Squadron. King and McKenzie were among the first **RAF** pilots to fly the famous 'Hump' route to **China** and for one period of three months they averaged two trips a week. 'Taking off from Dinjan,' writes one of them, 'the Dakotas climbed steadily and within twelve miles of base we would be over mountain country. Crossing the Patkai hills between **India** and **Burma**, still

climbing high over the Hukawng Valley, we would

¹ Wing Commander R. G. Maddox, AFC; born Dunedin, 24 Jul 1913; fitter and turner; joined **RAF** 28 Nov 1937; transferred **RNZAF** 1 Jan 1944; commanded No. **99 Sqdn, India**, 1943–44.

² Wing Commander N. McClelland, OBE; **RAF**; born Sydenham, 20 Jan 1913; joined **RAF** 1937; navigation staff, AHQ Far East, 1941; navigation staff No. 222 Group, **Far East**, 1941–43; commanded No. **205 Sqdn, India**, 1943–45.

³ Squadron Leader A. O. Hawkins; born **Kohukohu**, 18 Nov 1918; costing clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant T. A. J. King; born **Rotorua**, 22 Sep 1917; chemist; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant J. P. McKenzie; born **Christchurch**, 17 Jul 1917; engineer; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1941.

usually be flying blind as we approached the next range of lofty peaks on the Chinese border. It was a long flight but there was little opportunity for relaxation particularly during the monsoon period when terrific electrical storms would crash round the mountain peaks with lightning slashing through the fearsome clouds beneath us. Neither Indo- **China** nor South China was a pleasant country to fly over. If an aircraft were forced down it was little more than a week before the jungle swallowed it. The wreckage would be overgrown in a matter of days.'

For fighter pilots the monsoon months of 1943 had been less eventful. It was, in fact, a period of restricted activity, since ground operations on both sides were limited to patrolling; moreover, Japanese aircraft had seldom put in an appearance over the frontier. Often the Readiness Flight would be scrambled to intercept approaching aircraft,

but almost invariably 'the bogey' turned out to be friendly. Occasional sorties in support of army patrols and attacks against ground targets helped relieve the monotony, and in such operations No. 67 Hurricane Squadron, still predominantly a New Zealand unit, was able to play a leading part. Typical of the antidotes to inaction was that found by Flight Lieutenant Buddle of No. 155 Mohawk Squadron, who captained the unit's rugby football team which dealt successfully with numerous challenges from army teams in their area.

The Beaufighter and Vengeance crews that ranged widely over enemy territory saw more action. Warrant Officer J. S. **France**, who flew with No. 27 Squadron, was among the first Beaufighter pilots to operate over **Burma**. On a typical sweep along the **Mandalay-Myitkyina** railway, six engines were hit along with several petrol tankers, and at Kawlin enemy trucks were raked with machine-gun fire. On another day **France** and several pilots shot up ten locomotives, between seventy and eighty trucks, as well as numerous buildings and water tanks along the line.

Flying Vengeance dive-bombers on frequent low-level attacks were Flight Lieutenants Metherell ¹ and Sutherland, ² both of whom led flights in No. 82 Squadron. Flying Officer R. A. Turton and Sergeant Matthews ³ also flew regularly with No. 45 Squadron and Warrant Officer McIlroy ⁴ and Sergeant McMath ⁵ with No. 110 Squadron.

¹ Flight Lieutenant D. W. Metherell; born **Auckland**, 9 Jul 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 26 Oct 1939; killed on air operations, 15 Dec 1943.

² Squadron Leader I. A. Sutherland, DFC, m.i.d.; born **Auckland**, 11 Apr 1913; tanner; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940; commanded No. 8 (RIAF) Sqdn, 1944; killed in flying accident, 28 Jun 1945.

³ Flying Officer S. Matthews; born **Hamilton**, 30 Nov 1920; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** 27 Jul 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer D. M. McIlroy; born **Christchurch**, 9 Dec 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 1 Sep 1940.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant J. J. McMath; born **Invercargill**, 30 Jan 1921; clerical cadet; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1941.

The dive-bombers did good work against enemy positions cleverly sited under the shelter of steep ridges, where artillery fire could not always reach them. By attacking such positions from the rear they were often able to cause consternation and casualties among the Japanese.

It was while leading such an attack against bunkers and trenches in the **Akyab** area that Metherell's aircraft was shot down by anti-aircraft fire. 'Metherell's leadership,' wrote his Commanding Officer, 'always showed great skill and determination. He was a great character on the squadron and if any one man was responsible for its success and high morale it was surely this officer who always had a laugh and a joke for everyone.' And it may be added that this was by no means an isolated example of the reputation already established by Dominion airmen in the **RAF** squadrons with which they served.

New Zealanders had also served in various ground duties. Indeed, during this and the following year, nearly one hundred men were thus engaged and they included administrative, planning, operations, equipment, technical and medical officers. Several held senior posts. Group Captain Morshead, ¹ for example, was Officer-in-Charge of Aeronautical Inspection, and as such played an important part in the expansion programme; he subsequently became Senior Engineering Officer on the Research and Supply Staff, where among the many problems with which he grappled was that of damp penetration in equipment and aircraft.

Two other officers who made a useful contribution in the technical field were Wing Commanders Brickell ² and Tiffen; ³ Brickell had served with the **RAF** during the early days in **France** and was later interned in

Algeria for two years. There were also men like Group Captain Mason,⁴ who was on the Planning Staff, and Wing Commander Stewart,⁵ who served as a Senior Medical Officer throughout the campaign.

A more unusual post was held by Wing Commander Baird.⁶ He

¹ Air Commodore V. D. Morshead; **RAF**; born Feilding, 27 Nov 1906; joined **RAF** 1926; permanent commission 1936; engineer duties; MAP, 1940–43; **India** and **SE Asia**, 1943–45; SESO, SE Asia, 1945.

² Wing Commander R. G. Brickell; born Dunedin, 30 Jul 1908; engineer; joined **RAF** Feb 1940.

³ Wing Commander G. M. Tiffen; born **Gisborne**, 9 May 1910; student; joined **RAF** Jul 1940.

⁴ Group Captain R. H. Mason, OBE; born **Weybridge, Surrey**, 10 Sep 1918; joined **RAF** Sep 1938; permanent commission 1945; served with RAF Mission to **Russia** on port equipment staff, 1941–43; staff duty, Admin. Plans, **India**, SEAC, and ACSEA, 1943–45.

⁵ Wing Commander J. G. Stewart, MC, m.i.d.; born **Invercargill**, 7 Aug 1890; medical practitioner; served with the RFC and **RAF** in 1914–18 War; joined **RAF** 18 Sep 1940; President, SMEC, 1941; President, No. 10 CMB, CME, 1941; SMO No. 11 Fighter Group, 1941–42; SMO Nos. 22 and 225 Groups, **India**, 1943; SMO, HQ Bombay, 1943–45.

⁶ Wing Commander R. W. Baird, OBE; born **Wellington**, 10 Aug 1917; solicitor; joined **RAF** Jul 1941; transferred **RNZAF** Oct 1944.

was in charge of Postal Services in **India** for two years and then of a forward mail centre at **Imphal**, where he did much to improve the

distribution of mail to front-line units.

New Zealanders also served as aircraft technicians, radar mechanics and ground wireless operators. These men often worked under conditions of extreme hardship, sometimes at remote outposts that were completely cut off during the rainy season. The work done by the men of the radar or forward signals units on the **India- Burma frontier was amongst the most completely detached that **RAF** men were required to do anywhere in the world. Their posts were spaced at twenty-mile intervals along the Arakan Yomas and in the Chin Hills. Before the monsoon broke the crews would set off to their various assignments— usually places with only a map reference for a name—carrying with them enough supplies to last through the monsoon, together with such books and comforts as were available. At the outposts deer stalking and growing vegetables helped to pass the time, and they discovered that in the humid climate peas could be eaten within three weeks of planting the seeds.**

From time to time pilots were also employed in various non-operational roles. Squadron Leader J. T. Strang, for example, was in command of the **Ferry Control Unit at Allahabad, where aircraft of all kinds flew in from **Karachi**, 900 miles to the west, and were briefed, fitted and despatched as reinforcements to the forward areas. Pilots were posted to ferrying duties for rest between operational tours and they were allotted to aircraft according to their experience with the various types. During 1943 some forty New Zealanders spent periods with the unit. They were kept well occupied as an average of 120 aircraft were ferried across **India** each month. There were many other ancillary units throughout the **India** Command in which New Zealanders served for short periods. For the most part such work went unheralded and unsung, but it all played a part in the build-up of the **RAF** and the eventual turning of the tide against the Japanese.**

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 14 – AIR SUPERIORITY AND THE ARAKAN BATTLE

CHAPTER 14

Air Superiority and the Arakan Battle

EIGHTEEN months had now passed since General Alexander's army, defeated and dispirited, had dragged its exhausted way into **India** to take post on the frontier and await the expected onslaught of the victorious Japanese. Eighteen months had also gone by since the last few bullet-ridden Hurricanes had flown back with bamboo skids instead of tail wheels and pilots who looked as tired as the patched-up aircraft they coaxed into the air. They had been long, hard and difficult months in which it seemed little had been accomplished. Yet, despite a good deal of frustration and disappointment, the foundations were slowly but surely being laid for the eventual resurgence of Allied power in **South-east Asia**.

Nowhere was this more certain than in the air forces. In March 1942, precisely four airfields with all-weather runways and modern operational facilities had been serviceable in the command. Now, in November 1943, there were 285 airfields completed, with more under construction; and on them bomb stocks and petrol, oil and lubricants had been accumulated and communications established. Simultaneously, two organisations had been built of whose work little was said at the time, but without which the fighters and bombers could not have flown. They were the repair and maintenance units, which lay behind the squadrons, and the thin essential web of the early warning system which lay ahead of them like a protective screen. In the peak month of the 1943 monsoon, despite a persistent shortage of equipment, spares and essential tools, the base repair units had accepted and made serviceable 314 airframes and 210 engines. Along the **Assam- Burma** border in the **Calcutta** area and other possible targets along the coast of **India**, a network of some seventy radar stations had been built, with observer posts deployed in front of them; and filter rooms had been established at focal points to accept the information from both these sources and to pass it on to the fighter control. Such development and construction extended to all phases of the operational, supply and training organisations and it had been achieved against a background of

heartbreaking monsoon storms, unskilled native labour, inadequate material and constant setback. The building of airfields had proved particularly difficult, for many of the regions where they were required consisted largely of hills and swamps, with no adequate means of getting material to selected sites; there was also little metal available in the country so cement and road metal had to be imported, or else coal brought in to bake bricks which could be laid to provide all-weather surfaces.

The air forces had expanded with the airfields. In **India** and **Ceylon** the **RAF** now had forty-eight squadrons and these were equipped or re-equipping with more modern aircraft. Mohawk fighters, which had given valiant service but were now out-dated, were gradually being replaced and the number of Hurricanes and Beaufighters was steadily increasing. Ready for the new offensives were several hundred Vengeance dive-bombers, a few more Liberator heavy bombers and, although their special value in this campaign was not yet fully realised, the number of Dakota transport aircraft had risen to near the hundred mark. The Americans had similarly raised their striking power in **India** and by the end of November were ready to operate with seventeen squadrons.

The steady, if rather slow, build-up of Allied strength was not, however, accompanied by rising spirits among our troops and airmen. On the contrary, by the end of the 1943 monsoon there were widespread feelings of despondency and depression; indeed, the main thought of the solitary men at the observer posts, no less than those at the airfields and in the crowded bases, was 'When will the blooming war end?' This was understandable. For in the year and a half that had now gone by since the black days of the retreat we had nowhere succeeded in recapturing territory from the Japanese. During the previous monsoon there had been some glib talk of 'Tokio by Christmas', and it had ended in a fruitless raid in Arakan and the melancholy withdrawal of Wingate's columns after a brief spectacular thrust. Both airmen and soldiers were aware of the steadily growing strength of our forces but they had grown cynical with waiting; they felt they were members of a forgotten army,

which was true enough since, apart from the Wingate expedition, the efforts they had made and the difficulties they faced had received scant recognition. The men also knew that some of our equipment was already out-dated—for example, the best fighter the **RAF** possessed was still the Hurricane and it was no match for the latest Japanese types.

But two things now occurred which changed all this. One was the arrival of the first of many consignments of Spitfires—the **RAF's** best contemporary fighters—which, as presently to be related, soon put an end to Japanese domination of the air. The other was the creation of the **Supreme Allied Command, South-east Asia**, with Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten as Supreme Allied Commander. The Supreme Allied Command was decided on by the British and **United States** Governments in May 1943 at the Washington Conference. In August, at the first Quebec Conference, Lord Louis was appointed, with responsibility over all Allied forces in **South-east Asia**. This brought the promise of new resources, and a sense of greater urgency and cheerful optimism to the conduct of the whole campaign.

Mountbatten—at 43 years of age he was the youngest Supreme Commander in the field since Napoleon—had gone to sea at the age of 16 as a midshipman and saw service in surface ships and submarines. He continued to serve in the **Royal Navy** after the First World War, and during the Battle of **Crete** was commanding HMS *Kelly* and the 5th Destroyer Flotilla. The *Kelly* was sunk but he was one of the survivors. He then commanded the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious*, and later became Chief of Combined Operations and a member of the British Chiefs of Staff Committee. He was thus well-equipped for his task. Now he was to control what was intended to be a united force of British and Americans intent on one object, the destruction of **Japan**. For the device of his new command, Mountbatten chose the Phoenix, that fabulous and fierce bird of Greek mythology which arose from the ashes of the fire which would have destroyed anything less adamant. This choice of emblem was not only touched with a sense of poetry but would also seem to have been inspired by the gift of prophecy.

From the outset, however, many difficulties beset the new commander, not least of which were the incredibly complicated Anglo-American-Chinese command systems with which he had to deal and the divergent national views regarding future strategy in **South-east Asia**. There is here a story of considerable historical interest, particularly in view of subsequent events in the **Far East**, but it lies outside the scope of this narrative. ¹ Suffice to say that Mountbatten achieved a large measure of success in one of the most difficult commands of the Second World War. Like Montgomery in the Middle East, he quickly realised the value of personal contact with his troops as a means of restoring morale and arousing enthusiasm for the coming battles. Within a few days of reaching **India**, he set out to visit front-line units, and there, standing on a lorry or on an ammunition box before assembled battalions or air force squadrons, but more often chatting with a group of men by the roadside, he told them of his plans and declared his confidence in their ability to defeat the Japanese and fling them out of **Burma, Singapore** and the **Far East**. Indeed, the theme of his talk was always to fight. And after eighteen

¹ See Mountbatten's despatch and Churchill's *Second World War*, Vol. V, pp. 493–5. See also United States Official History, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol. IV, Chap. XIII, and the British Official History, *Grand Strategy*, Vol. V.

months of almost continual reverse and frustration his promises of vigorous action came like a cool breeze on a hot, humid day and tired, dispirited men took fresh heart.

With the air forces, this new offensive spirit was at once given practical expression in the combining of all British and American forces in **South-east Asia** under the command of Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse. There was now to be one **Tactical Air Force**, one **Strategic Bomber Command**, and the transport units of both the **Royal Air Force** and the United States Army Air Force would merge in a single organisation known as **Troop Carrier Command**. Operations over **Burma**

were to be controlled by an **Eastern Air Command** and this would be led by an American, Major-General George Stratemeyer, a man of great vigour and with a keen desire to engage the enemy. He was also a forceful exponent of the need for close Allied co-operation. 'We must merge into one unified force,' he declared in a memorable Order of the Day, 'in thought and in deed, neither English nor American, with the faults of neither and the virtues of both. We must establish in **Asia** a record of Allied air victory of which we can all be proud in the years to come. Let us write it now in the skies over **Burma**.' How well and gallantly this exhortation was fulfilled the campaign was soon to show.

The fight for air control on the **Burma** front had already been renewed in October 1943 as forward airfields dried out after the monsoon rains. Towards the end of that month Japanese bombers, escorted by fighters, began a series of intermittent raids on our Arakan bases and airfields along the **Manipur** front; they also increased their reconnaissance flights over **India**, employing the new and fast Dinah for this purpose. Our fighter pilots did their best to intercept and destroy the intruders but they had only limited success. The high-flying Dinahs were in fact more than a match for our Hurricane and Mohawk fighters, which achieved their best performance at low altitudes. When, by nearly bursting its engine, a Hurricane did succeed in shooting down one of them, the Japanese treated it as a lucky chance unlikely to recur and they continued to fly arrogantly above the height our Hurricanes could reach and photograph everything they desired.

Their immunity was, however, short-lived. By the middle of November the **RAF** had re-equipped one of its squadrons with newly-arrived Spitfires. They were only Mark Vs, but within a few days of taking the air they shot down three Dinahs in turn, to the great joy of airmen and soldiers alike. Two more squadrons were soon re-equipped with Spitfire Vs, and along with the Hurricanes they began to take toll of enemy raiders. By the end of December, twenty-two Japanese aircraft had been shot down for the loss of thirteen of our fighters.

An outstanding success was achieved by No. 136 Squadron on New

Year's Eve, when enemy bombers with fighter escort attempted an attack on shipping off the Arakan coast. Twelve Spitfires were scrambled to intercept, and after breaking through the Japanese fighter screen they fell upon the bombers, still flying true and level in a large 'V' formation. One by one they shot them down on each side of the flight until only one aircraft was left, and then there was none. The fighters were dealt with less formally but with equal success, and scarcely a single machine from the enemy force escaped without some damage. Only one Spitfire was lost and its pilot, after baling out, was machine-gunned by an enemy fighter, but so intent was the Japanese pilot on killing his victim that he flew his machine into the ground. Another unusual incident occurred during the battle when two of the enemy fighters collided in mid-air and crashed in flames.

In an effort to recover the initiative the Japanese brought up more fighters. They also introduced new tactics, employing decoys with a mirror finish and conspicuously shiny jet-black aircraft, which flew in low while well camouflaged fighters waited above. In the fierce fighting which followed, one Spitfire leader had an amazing escape. 'On my eighth attack,' runs his report, 'I was on to a decoy when I was jumped by a couple I had not seen. I went into an inverted spin and blacked out completely. I came to and thought I was in hospital. Then I discovered I was about to crash, put the Spit. the right way up and I fainted again. I was very near the jungle when I recovered the second time and found two Japs were firing immediately ahead of me. I darted down some gulleys and so lost them.' ¹

But our pilots continued to hold the advantage they had already won. On 15 January, for example, Spitfires intercepted fifteen Oscars just south of Buthidaung and, without loss to themselves, shot down six of them and damaged several others. A few days later they destroyed seven more enemy machines over Maungdaw for the loss of only two Spitfires. At the end of February 1944, the Japanese admitted the loss of 142 aircraft in their operations against [India](#) during the previous five months.

New Zealand fighter pilots took a prominent part in all this. They flew with the Hurricane and Mohawk squadrons which bore the brunt of the early defensive battles, and they were among the first to operate successfully in the new Spitfires.

Five veterans who achieved a large measure of hard-earned success with No. 67 Hurricane Squadron were Flying Officer C. V. Bargh,

¹ Wing Commander A. N. Constantine, a fine Australian pilot and an inspiring leader, who survived the war only to be killed while flying medical supplies to the Javanese.

Flying Officer E. H. Beable, Warrant Officer Elliott, ¹ Flight Lieutenant A. A. Cooper and Flying Officer G. A. Williams. They were in action towards the end of November when the Japanese raided airfields in the **Chittagong area. Bargh was the first to sight the enemy and led the squadron down to 15,000 feet and in among the enemy fighter cover. In the whirling dogfight which followed, he shot down one of the enemy while Elliott and Beable hit and damaged two more. Brief details of Bargh's combat are thus recorded:**

Bargh made two rolling attacks on the starboard aircraft from astern, starting from 300 yards and breaking away at 50 yards, firing a short burst in each case. On breaking away and upwards from the second attack, he was dived upon head-on by another fighter. Bargh turned sharply to starboard and pulled out clear of his attacker. At this point he noticed a Hurricane being chased by an army O1 a few thousand feet below him. Bargh manoeuvred until he was vertically above the two aircraft and then dived to attack the enemy in another roll from dead astern. The 'O1' pulled sharply to port with pieces falling off each wing tip and from the fuselage. It then spiralled straight into the ground near Barkal Island, where a sudden cloud of black smoke was seen to rise.

No. 67 Squadron was back at Alipore when the Japanese made one of

their rare appearances over **Calcutta**, and although pilots were scrambled to intercept with only short warning, several of them made contact with the enemy. Flight Lieutenant Cooper fired a burst at one Japanese fighter and shot away part of its starboard wing. Flying Officer Williams followed up earlier successes by destroying one and damaging another of the enemy. He first saw the bombers beneath him on his port side, with fighters spread out above and on both sides. Five O1s just below him were evidently quite oblivious of his presence, so he fired a long burst at one of them. Large pieces flew off the enemy machine, which went down in a vertical spin to be later confirmed as destroyed. Williams then fired at another enemy machine which passed through his sights and saw strikes along its fuselage. At this point another enemy fighter appeared on his tail so he flick-rolled away from his attack, but one of his ailerons had been shot away and, as a result, his Hurricane went spinning down for 12,000 feet. Nothing daunted, Williams pulled out and climbed again in time to attack another O1, which was on its back during a roll. Unfortunately by this time, however, he had only a few rounds of ammunition left and saw no result.

Flying Officer Greenwood ² and Flight Sergeant Walker ³ were prominent in patrol and attack with No. 261 Hurricane Squadron.

¹ Flying Officer C. W. Elliott; born Dunedin, 29 Feb 1916; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF** 19 Jan 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant L. H. Greenwood; born **Timaru**, 15 Nov 1922; assistant storeman; joined **RNZAF** 7 Sep 1941.

³ Flying Officer J. P. Walker; born Armadale, Aust, 25 Aug 1921; salesman; joined **RNZAF** 9 Feb 1941.

In one of the early raids on **Chittagong**, while still climbing to intercept, 'they went straight for the Japanese bombers in an attempt to upset their aim before their fighters could get down to help them. Both

pilots got long bursts into the targets they selected. Walker's fell away from the formation and was claimed as a probable. Greenwood was unfortunate in being jumped before he completed his attack and had to dive away with his cockpit full of glycol and the engine belching smoke. He baled out and landed in the hills north of Chittagong and although wounded in the leg got back to his airfield the same evening.'

New Zealand Spitfire pilots played their part with equal skill and courage. One of them, Flying Officer Weggery ¹ of No. 615 Squadron, scored the first Spitfire victory on the Burma front. On patrol at 25,000 feet, he sighted a Japanese reconnaissance Dinah, immediately gave chase and, overhauling the enemy plane fairly easily, shot it down in flames over Chiringa; so close did he approach his target to make sure of a kill that, when he landed, his Spitfire was covered with oil from the exploding enemy machine. A few weeks later Weggery destroyed another Dinah about fifty miles east of his base at Dohazari.

Flying Officer C. G. Beale, Flight Sergeants R. J. Clarke, ² V. K. Jacobs and J. Rudling deserve special mention for their work with No. 136 Squadron, and Flight Lieutenant Verry ³ and Pilot Officer Chandler ⁴ with No. 615 Squadron. John Rudling, already distinguished for his work in Hurricanes, showed a particularly fine aggressive spirit. One day when twelve Spitfires were scrambled to intercept Japanese bombers at extreme range from their base, he and another pilot were the only ones to make contact with the enemy. Rudling made contact literally. He was just about to turn for base when he sighted the bombers, and although his petrol gauge looked 'none too healthy' he immediately turned towards them. Selecting the nearest bomber Rudling dived to the attack. 'I observed strikes on the enemy's wings,' he afterwards reported, 'and then I suddenly realised we were going to collide. I broke sharply away above, but felt my aircraft hit the rudder of the bomber. Thinking I had damaged my aircraft for further attack I turned away but it was all right so I pulled up under another vic of bombers and fired from underneath at the leader. During this attack a fighter was on my tail and put five shells through my wings and oil tanks before I broke away.' Rudling's

dinghy and Mae West were torn by shrapnel but he was uninjured. He also had

¹ Flight Lieutenant S. L. E. Weggery; born **Palmerston North**, 8 Dec 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Feb 1941.

² Flying Officer R. J. Clarke; born **Gisborne**, 23 Dec 1920; gas fitter; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941.

³ Squadron Leader B. T. Verry; born **Feilding**, 13 Nov 1915; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 1 Dec 1940.

⁴ Flying Officer H. A. Chandler, DFC; born **Granity**, 19 Oct 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1940.

the satisfaction of seeing the bomber with which he had collided hit the ground and explode before he force-landed on the nearest strip—without flaps or brakes. His Spitfire ended up on its nose but did not catch fire—possibly because when Rudling landed there was scarcely any petrol left in its tanks. This episode occurred on Boxing Day and only a few hours earlier, on the previous evening, Rudling had played the main part in his squadron's Christmas pantomime, which appropriately enough was 'Aladdin'.

These fighter victories which came at the end of 1943 were the turning point in the struggle for command of the **Burma** skies. More hard battles remained to be fought during the next few months but the ultimate issue was no longer in doubt. For the **RAF** was now strengthened by the arrival during January of two more Spitfire squadrons, both equipped with Mark VIIIs, whose performance was superior to anything the Japanese possessed; American fighters were also beginning to operate with marked success against Japanese attacks on the Indo- **China** air route; and both bombers and long-range fighters were striking at enemy air bases with increasing effect. The importance

of this ascendancy now being gained over the Japanese in the air can scarcely be over-emphasised. It was undoubtedly the most potent single factor in the progress of all subsequent operations in **Burma**. Without it our land forces could not have received such strong and close support during the defensive battles of 1944 and in their final advance; furthermore, our transport aircraft on which so much was to depend could not have delivered their supplies without constant risk of interception.

Looking back, it now seems fairly clear that there was a certain amount of vacillation by the Japanese regarding the employment of their air strength available in **Burma** at the end of 1943. Although they had nearly 100 bombers at their disposal, they mounted few attacks on strategic targets. Their only real success was a skilful raid against **Calcutta** in December 1943, when they eluded the Spitfires based at **Chittagong** by keeping well out to sea and beyond their range. But this episode was not repeated, possibly because their army commanders were generally averse to air operations other than those directly concerned with the situation on the ground. It would also appear that air operations over **Burma** had been given a lower priority by the Japanese High Command, for the bulk of their **Air Force** was now committed to the South-west **Pacific**. Although at the beginning of 1944 they still had some 740 aircraft in **South-east Asia**, these were spread over a fairly wide area from Indo- **China** and **Malaya** to **Burma**. Some of the best pilots were retained in **Sumatra** for the defence of the oil refineries there and for patrol work over the **Indian Ocean**. *Fifth Air Division* in **Burma** had barely 400 aircraft, of which about half were fighters. These were already fighting a losing battle and would soon be unable to give anything like adequate support to their ground forces.

The Allies, on the other hand, continued to build up their air strength. By March 1944 they had about 1000 aircraft of all types in North-east **India**, of which 600 were fighters. Their total force comprised 92 squadrons, and of these 64 were **Royal Air Force**; they included seven fighter units equipped with Spitfire VIIIs, a further twenty armed with

Hurricane fighters and fighter-bombers and seven more equipped with Vengeance dive-bombers and Beaufighters. The others were mainly Liberators, Wellingtons, Beauforts and Catalinas for long-range bombing or sea reconnaissance, along with Spitfires for photographic work. In the transport field, however, the **RAF strength had only just reached five squadrons and one of these had to be used for the maintenance of internal air services.**

New Zealand representation in these various **RAF units continued to increase steadily during 1944. As in previous years it was strongest in the fighter force, where seven **RAF** squadrons were commanded by Dominion pilots for various periods. These included such veterans of the **Burma** campaign as Squadron Leaders Geoffrey Sharp, D. J. T. Sharp and J. M. Cranstone,¹ each of whom led Hurricane fighters. Squadron Leader M. R. B. Ingram, in command of a Spitfire squadron, and Squadron Leader W. H. Stratton, who led Hurricanes, had both brought their units from the **Middle East**, where they had already achieved a notable record of service and also in operations from **Britain**. A squadron of Vengeance dive-bombers was led by Squadron Leader I. A. Sutherland, and in the general reconnaissance force Wing Commander N. McClelland continued in charge of Catalina flying-boats and Wing Commander R. G. Maddox of Wellington bombers. An important contribution to the work of transport and supply was made by the Dakota squadron led by Wing Commander R. T. Chisholm, who had already done good work as a transport pilot in the **Middle East**. And there were men like Squadron Leader Price² who, after long service on ferry work, now commanded a unit engaged on such duties.**

As well as these unit commanders, a number of New Zealanders led flights in the bomber and fighter squadrons. Over one hundred Dominion pilots flew Spitfire and Hurricane fighters and there were fifty more who captained bomber, transport and reconnaissance

¹ Squadron Leader J. M. Cranstone, DFC; born **Wanganui**, 24 Apr 1918; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; commanded No. 5

Sqdn, 1944–45.

² **Wing Commander A. J. Price, AFC; born Napier, 22 Jan 1920; student; joined RNZAF 25 May 1941; commanded No. 21 Ferry Control, 1943–44.**

aircraft, with others flying photographic and air-sea rescue machines. There were also more New Zealanders among the RAF ground staff. During periods of intense fighter activity they and their comrades were up all night, at work under the stars, servicing and refuelling the aircraft and removing the penetrating dust from the engines. Many had had malaria or dysentery, some several times, and most had lost weight; they deserve to share the achievements of the aircrews they served. Life with the squadrons on the Burma front continued to be anything but a picnic, even after long-overdue improvements had been effected in living conditions and in such simple amenities as the delivery of mail from home. But there were compensations. For example, near some of the airstrips in the south there was clear warm sea to bathe in and long firm sandy beaches where men, tired of riding the breakers, could lie in the sun or bask in the shallows. And the brief months of the Indian winter brought cool, bright nights after the monsoon heat, then sparkling days with streamers of mist reaching out from the jungle and over the airstrips.

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At the beginning of 1944 the task ahead of the Allied forces in India was formidable. For the Japanese were still masters of a vast defensive arc covering their early conquests, which stretched from the jungle-covered mountains of northern and western Burma through some of the most forbidding fighting country in the world, then across the sea to the Andamans and the great Dutch islands of Sumatra and Java. Mountbatten, with his experience and enthusiasm for combined operations, was eager to launch an amphibious assault against southern Burma, but shortage of landing craft and pressure from the Americans

caused this project to be postponed. The Americans were in fact much more anxious to establish strong links with the forces fighting the Japanese in **China** than to recapture **Rangoon**. They pressed the importance of reconquering northern **Burma** first, and quickly, so that a road could be built from the existing rail and roadhead at Ledo through the jungle and mountains into Chinese territory. Eventually, after much discussion both in **London** and **Washington**, as well as among the Allied commanders on the spot, three operations were decided upon. They were as follows:

- (1) Allied forces, including the Chinese-American army under General Stilwell, were to advance in the north from the headwaters of the Chindwin River towards Myitkyina. The roadmakers would follow. In the meantime, capture of the three airfields at Myitkyina would enable transport aircraft from **India** to **China** to be routed through them, thus shortening the distance and, by avoiding the 23,000 feet climb over the 'Hump', considerably increasing the tonnage delivered.
- (2) A British force led by General Wingate was to be flown into the interior of **Burma** to disrupt Japanese communications, especially those along which they were operating against General Stilwell.
- (3) British **15 Corps** under General Christison was to advance into the Arakan with the object of clearing the Maungdaw peninsula, at the same time containing Japanese forces in that region of **Burma**.

The Japanese, however, also had their plans. Indeed they were now preparing two separate offensives from **Burma**—the first eastwards across the Salween to drive back the Chinese and prevent the Allies re-establishing land contact with **China**; the other westwards against **Imphal** in **Manipur** in order to cut the Bengal–**Assam** railway on which the 'Hump' air route and General Stilwell's army relied for supplies.

The result of these conflicting Allied and Japanese plans was a series of dramatic clashes along the whole **India–Burma** front during the first half of 1944.

The first clash came on the Arakan front. Here, covered by **RAF** fighters and bombers, 15 British Corps under General Christison had begun its advance down the Arakan coast early in January and, to guard

against any attempt by the Japanese to move round the eastern flank, **81 West African Division** had been sent down the Kaladan valley behind the next range of mountains. During its advance this division was kept supplied entirely by air, a task which No. 62 Squadron, **RAF**, fulfilled with particular efficiency, its Dakotas flying in their loads thrice daily. 'This was the first time a normal formation such as a division was to be committed to complete air maintenance.'¹ Such regular aerial supply would have been impossible had the Japanese been able to maintain fighter patrols over the Kaladan. That they did not do so was due to the constant air guard maintained by the Spitfires and Hurricanes and to the frequent air attacks on enemy airfields by our bombers—in a word, to our air superiority. 'Zeros tumbled out of the sky or scuttled back.'²

The advance of Christison's main force down the Mayu peninsula continued until one early February morning, when Japanese soldiers suddenly came screaming out of the mists near Taung Bazar, which lay nine miles *behind* our lines; there they surprised and slaughtered some of the troops covering a divisional headquarters, whose

¹ Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 165.

² *Ibid.*, p. 236.



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commander and staff had to fight their way out in hand-to-hand conflict. This was the beginning of a determined enemy counter-attack and it came from all directions. For the Japanese, displaying superb skill at camouflage and concealment which defeated even our most vigilant air reconnaissance, had succeeded in passing the best part of a division through the jungle behind our troops, who now found themselves surrounded or with their communications threatened.

As in previous similar situations, the enemy fully expected that our troops would at once begin to withdraw. But they did nothing of the kind. Instead they stood their ground in such places as the famous 'Admin Box' and stubbornly fought it out. They were able to do so because the enemy had overlooked one fact—supply by air. In the next three weeks RAF Dakotas, aided by some American C46 transports lent from the 'Hump' route, delivered over 2000 tons of ammunition, food, petrol, oil and medical supplies to the British forces trapped on the Arakan front; they also flew out more than 5000 casualties; and such was the vigilance of the fighter escort that only one Dakota was lost. This achievement wrecked Japanese plans and turned what might well have proved the beginning of a victorious campaign, ending perhaps only at the gates of **Delhi, into a resounding defeat. For by the end of February the Japanese troops were themselves short of food and ammunition. Unable to overwhelm our forward positions, continually dive-bombed and gunned in their bunkers and then pressed by our relieving forces driving down from the north, they broke up into small parties and began to fight their way back through the jungle. Behind them on the battlefield they left more than 5000 dead. Thereupon 15 British Corps, having put an end to the legend of Japanese invincibility, regrouped its units and resumed its advance.**

Our air superiority was undoubtedly the decisive factor in this Arakan episode. For the struggle between the opposing armies depended upon the maintenance of their lines of supply; the British, having transferred theirs to the air which they now commanded, were secure while the Japanese, because they had lost control of the air, were

vulnerable and their troops were starved into retreat.

In the early stages the enemy air force tried hard to wrest the air advantage from us, sending over as many as eighty fighter sorties in a single day. The enemy formations consisted mainly of highly manoeuvrable Oscars, Hamps and Zekes, but there were also a few of the new Tojo fighters which, at lower altitudes, were almost as good as the Spitfire VIII. The Japanese pilots exploited the manoeuvrability of their machines to the full, often choosing to fly at surprisingly low speeds in order to achieve quick evasive action and then turn on their attackers. But our Spitfires were equal to the challenge and, helped by a greatly improved warning system, they repeatedly intercepted and broke up the enemy formations. On one notable occasion No. 136 Squadron caught fifteen Oscars just south of Buthidaung and, without loss, shot down six of them and damaged several others. By the middle of February, our fighter pilots had destroyed a total of twenty-four Japanese aircraft and damaged a further thirty-eight for the loss of only four Spitfires. Meanwhile Japanese bombers rarely appeared over British positions, while our own cannon-firing Hurricanes and Vengeance dive-bombers were making continual attacks on the enemy's forward positions and Beaufighters and Wellingtons were striking at his communications far behind the area of battle.

Flight Lieutenant Verry and Flying Officer Chandler of No. 615 Squadron, Flying Officers Beale and John Rudling with No. 136 Squadron, and Flying Officer A. M. Peart, Flight Sergeants Ryan,¹ W. J. Robinson and A. F. Swan of No. 81 Squadron were among those who saw action during the campaign as Spitfire fighter pilots. Chandler had a remarkable escape during one of the early air battles when the Hamp at which he had been firing exploded as he pulled up over it. His Spitfire was flung right over on its back by the force of the explosion and for a few moments Chandler thought he had 'bought it'. A more typical combat was fought by Beale when his squadron intercepted a formation of Zekes and Oscars near the battle area during the first week. 'Beale,' says the record, 'went for a Zeke in the centre line but, noticing the

outside rear enemy machines turning outwards and climbing to come in astern, he switched his attack to one of these. Firing two long bursts he saw strikes all along the fuselage but had to break away as another Zeke came in behind him. Beale then climbed and made a second attack on the formation but the outside aircraft again made a stall turn and fired at him. Once more Beale returned to the attack, closing in from astern. This time he saw hits on the engine of the rear enemy aircraft which rolled away and went down. By now several fighters were after him but he was able to shake them off and return safely to base.'

New Zealand pilots played their part in the strafing and bombing of enemy strongpoints and communications; they also escorted the supply dropping aircraft. From the outset Squadron Leader Stratton and his pilots of No. 134 Hurricane Squadron were in the thick of the battle engaged on both these duties; so were men like Pilot

¹ Warrant Officer J. P. Ryan; born Dunedin, 9 Nov 1921; insurance clerk; joined **RNZAF** 7 Sep 1941.

Officers McPhail ¹ and Pirani ² and Flight Sergeant Miller. ³ With No. 82 Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Sutherland proved himself a particularly successful leader of Vengeance dive-bombers; flying with him were Pilot Officers Couttie ⁴ and Parker ⁵ and Warrant Officer McCombie. ⁶

In these ground-attack operations a technique was soon evolved which proved as successful as it was ingenious. When the Army had decided that a position was to be attacked, the **RAF** would bomb it beforehand, sometimes with bombs set with instantaneous fuses, sometimes with delayed action fuses of anything from five minutes to several hours. By mixing these bombs they kept the Japanese constantly under cover for they never knew when one would go off. On the day of our ground attack the **RAF** would drop bombs with no fuses at all, and while the enemy troops were cowering in their foxholes waiting for these to explode, the British infantry would arrive and fall upon them with the bayonet. Another ruse was to make bogus fighter strafes, the fighter

aircraft diving on the Japanese positions but not firing their guns, and thus keeping the enemy down while our own infantry went in. There were variations on these two main themes whose main object was to get our infantry over the last 300 yards where they were most vulnerable.

Thirty-five New Zealanders, seventeen of them captains of aircraft, flew with the Dakota squadrons that carried supplies to our Arakan troops. They included such experienced pilots as Squadron Leader R. D. Daniell with No. 117 Squadron, Pilot Officer Bayly ⁷ in No. 31 Squadron, Flight Lieutenants Voss ⁸ and Hore ⁹ with No. 62 Squadron, and Flight Lieutenants J. Davidson and R. G. Mellsop who flew with No. 194 Squadron.

The Dakota crews worked hard throughout the campaign, often making two or three sorties each in a single day. No. 62 Squadron's missions down the Kaladan valley in support of the West African Division were a severe test, for the jungle in that region is even thicker

¹ Flying Officer J. D. McPhail; born **Wanganui**, 6 Nov 1920; woolclasser; joined **RNZAF** 26 Jul 1941.

² Pilot Officer F. B. Pirani; born **Wellington**, 17 Jun 1923; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941; killed on air operations, 18 Feb 1944.

³ Flying Officer C. R. Miller; born Otakau, 26 May 1922; labourer; joined **RNZAF** 6 Jul 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer G. T. Couttie; born Dundee, **Scotland**, 10 Jun 1922; coppersmith; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer A. E. Parker; born **Motueka**, 28 Mar 1921; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** 22 Dec 1940; killed in flying accident, 20 Oct 1944.

⁶ Warrant Officer K. E. W. McCombie; born **Taihape**, 25 Sep 1915; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939; killed on air operations, 15 Mar 1944.

⁷ Flying Officer J. Bayly; born Waitara, 18 Mar 1917; electrician; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939.

⁸ Squadron Leader P. S. Voss; born Malvern, England, 3 Aug 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 1 Dec 1940.

⁹ Flight Lieutenant R. R. Hore; born Dunedin, 15 Jul 1920; farm cadet; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

than elsewhere in **Burma**, while the air over the mountains is noted for its turbulence and for the presence of treacherous cumulo-nimbus cloud formations. Yet somehow pilots contrived to find their way over the featureless hills and to manoeuvre their machines through the narrow valleys. 'We went at low level down the river bank,' writes one pilot, 'flying in line astern, and then the flight commander would find the dropping zone. Harder than that was trying to find a regular circuit on which we could drop. Usually we each needed to go round about eight times to push out the entire load of supplies and the gorges made it difficult. We had to get low down for the dropping and then if there was a hill in front of us it meant pretty well tearing the guts out of our engines to climb over it. The up and down currents were really terrifying and often we felt that the aircraft was not climbing at all and that we should crash.' When the West Africans reached the lower part of the Kaladan, more open country was encountered where strips were hastily built to take the Dakotas and the task of air supply became somewhat easier. Some landings were made by day under cover of Hurricane escort, but more often the Dakotas landed at night with the help of improvised flare-paths and guiding bonfires. Their loads might be anything from guns and ammunition to live bullocks and bullock carts.

Troops and airmen were soon on terms of mutual friendship and, indeed, affection. On those occasions when it was possible for a Dakota to land, the West Africans would flock around the aircrew with lively expressions of regard, and when landing was impossible they took the greatest care of the supplies that were dropped by parachute. One of them indeed, noting with regret that many of the hundredweight bags of rice burst on landing, went so far as to try to catch a bag as it descended. Unfortunately he succeeded and at once became a passenger in one of the Dakotas detailed to fly out the more severely injured. After the campaign a notable tribute was paid to the crews of both supply and close-support aircraft by the commander of 81 Division. 'No words of mine,' he wrote, 'can do justice to the achievements of the R.A.F. in support of the Division. Their faultless supply dropping, the skill with which they landed their Dakotas on our air strips in rapid succession, the devotion of the Moth pilots in evacuating casualties, the promptitude and accuracy of their air strikes, the plentiful supply of air photographs which they provided, together with the air letter service and daily message dropping, taken together constituted an outstanding effort of co-operation.'

Supply missions to our forces fighting in the Mayu peninsula were carried out with equal skill and courage. Here, during the critical weeks, RAF Dakotas made 440 sorties by day and a further 185 by night. In the early stages there were some anxious moments when enemy fighters were reported in strength over the dropping zone, and throughout the whole period there was constant danger from the characteristically accurate small-arms fire of enemy detachments ensconced nearby.

Flight Lieutenant Voss and his crew had an eventful sortie in mid-February. While making their second dropping run, the Dakota was hit by fire from the ground. An oil tank was holed and a few moments later the port engine seized up. Voss ordered his crew to heave out the remaining supplies and then, on one labouring engine, managed to climb the aircraft sufficiently to scrape over the Mayu Range and land at a forward strip near Ramu. By skilful airmanship he thus saved his crew,

and what was equally important, a precious aircraft, for Dakotas were still scarce in **South-east Asia Command**. How scarce is shown by the efforts made to salvage them. 'After one pilot had run off the flarepath in darkness and damaged his machine,' says a squadron record, 'maintenance men were flown in before daybreak. The starboard elevator was replaced and the other knocked into shape by vigorous use of a hammer as also was the tail plane. The machine was then dragged back on to the strip and taken off with the stick fully back to prevent the elevators trailing on the ground.'

The conditions under which crews operated over the Arakan were certainly arduous. No. 117 Squadron, which had just arrived from the **Middle East**, found that its new spell of work effectively changed two established conceptions. 'In the first place the routine load of 7,500 lbs., plus 500 gallons of fuel was unheard of in our **Middle East** experience and it gave us an unhealthily close acquaintance with the tree tops at the end of the strip. Secondly, our ideas of what constituted a normal dropping zone went by the board when we began dropping in narrow valleys, jungle clearings and the odd hollow in the hills.' Probably the hardest part of these flights came during the half hour or so that the aircraft was over the dropping area. The side door was usually open throughout the sortie, and as they approached their 'target' the despatchers would be busy placing the load in neat piles. As he came over the dropping zone the pilot would bank the aircraft and lift the tail to ensure that the parachutes would not tangle with it, then give the signal to his 'kickers'. One man would lie flat on his back, feet pressed against the load and shoulders pushing on the opposite wall. When the signal came he thrust with his feet against the base of the load while two more men on either side of the door helped the pile out with their hands. As the aircraft made another circuit the despatchers positioned the next load near the door. It was hot work and, in the turbulent air near the ground, often dangerous. Here is a description of a typical sortie written by a navigator of No. 62 Squadron:

Fully laden, the squadron aircraft taxied out to the end of the

runway and in less than a minute all were airborne, heading for the front-line outpost which was our objective. Soon we were well above the clouds and the fierce sun made the interior of the aircraft extremely hot.

After flying steadily for two hours we were met by a squadron of Hurricanes which was to escort us to our dropping point. We now passed over rocky desolate country. As far as the eye could see hills up to 3,000 feet zigzagged awkwardly over the horizon and the jungle beneath, a densely variegated maze of green sprawling between the valleys, was no place for a forced landing. Eventually we broke formation and descended to fly in line astern, playing 'follow my leader' through the valleys and among hills, skimming over ridges and above rivers until our formation leader began circling a hill a few miles ahead. Parachutes in the first two aircraft had already landed where the troops were waiting for them. Our turn came and we began our run.

I sat in the co-pilot's seat and watched our crew in the fuselage, stripped and sweating, as they piled the packages, which contained 47,000 cigarettes, 6,000 boxes of matches, tinned milk, biscuits, cooking oil, salt, beans and peas, oatmeal, sugar, tea, medical supplies, solid fuel, tommy cookers, jam, cheese, curry-powder and onions, at the exit ready for the second run. They worked like coolies. Five packs were poised ready, with another five ready directly behind, each weighing from 80 to 140 lbs. They were usually in tins, with a small parachute on top enclosed in a cover and with twelve feet of rope fastened to an attachment inside the aircraft. The crew were secured by safety belts tied to a longeron.

'Red light on', shouted the flight sergeant near the tail and the crew got ready. A bell rang urgently and everybody heaved like mad to get the thirteen packages out before the bell rang again three seconds later. This process was repeated until the last package had been dropped whereupon we circled to make sure the load had landed safely, and then set course for base.

Before we reached Chandina a radio message ordered us to land at a forward airfield to pick up six urgent casualties. We therefore set course south, still escorted by our faithful Hurricanes, two flying close in to ward off any sudden attack, while four others criss-crossed in and out of the clouds searching for enemy fighters. Soon we saw the landing strip below us with its small wind sock hanging from a bamboo pole. We touched down to pick up our cargo while the Hurricanes patrolled above. Eight stretcher cases were put on board and when they were made comfortable we took off, joined the waiting fighters and set course for base. There, ambulances were waiting to take the wounded to hospital.

During the Arakan fighting, the Dakotas had to supply more than the normal demands of men and weapons. Three times areas of 'Ammunition Hill', which stood in the centre of the 'Admin Box', were blown up by Japanese artillery and the entire stores had to be replaced by air. There were also times when the margin of air supply for ground requirements was perilously fine. One crew who carried tank shells watched their load float down and then, while the pilot made succeeding circuits, saw the shells being raced across the area of the 'Admin Box' to waiting tanks, and before they left on the return flight they saw the ammunition being fired. Such incidents encouraged the aircrews to redouble their efforts, so enabling our troops to withstand all attacks of the enemy and finally drive him back in the frustration of retreat.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 15 – OPERATION THURSDAY AND THE VICTORY AT IMPHAL

CHAPTER 15

Operation thursday and the Victory at Imphal

SCARCELY had the Arakan battle ended when the main scene of activity shifted abruptly to the central and northern fronts. Here, both sides had already begun to press forward with the second phase of their conflicting designs. The Japanese, seeking to drive behind the main British army in **Manipur**, had sent two divisions northwards through the hills and jungle towards Tiddim and Tamu, and a third against Ukhrul. The Allies, bent on an advance that would restore their land link with **China**, had launched an army under General Stilwell southwards from Ledo towards Myitkyina and were preparing to land troops from the air behind the Japanese force that opposed him.

As these various movements developed there came hard fighting along the whole front, but it was in the **Manipur** region that the main clash occurred. Here, on the very threshold of **India**, large Allied and Japanese forces became involved in a desperate struggle, which is best remembered for the bitter fighting which took place around the little town of **Kohima** and the long-drawn-out battle for possession of the **Imphal** plain. Only after four months of stress and strain did the Allies finally emerge victorious, once again thanks largely to the intervention of their air power. This was probably the most eventful and fateful period of the whole **Burma** campaign.

The first main task of our air force was to support Wingate's Second Chindit Expedition in its operations behind the Japanese armies in North-east **Burma**. Wingate's force comprised some 12,000 men, most of whom were to be landed from the air at two remote jungle clearings, ' **Piccadilly**' and 'Broadway', which would at once be converted into fortified bases for large-scale action against enemy roads and railways in the vicinity. This involved flying in not only mobile columns and garrison troops, signal installations, ack-ack and 25-pounder batteries for jungle fortress defence, but also engineer units equipped with bulldozers and mechanical graders to construct airfields capable of

of the upper Irrawaddy. Another eight failed to reach Broadway but several of them staged an admirable, if accidental, diversion by landing near a Japanese headquarters.

At Broadway itself, several of the first gliders to land were wrecked by concealed furrows in the clearing, and whilst strenuous efforts were being made to drag them away other gliders came swinging in to land on top of them. The wreckage piled up and more new arrivals crashed into it. 'The jungle seemed suddenly to go mad,' says an observer. 'At one moment the gliders were silent, graceful black shapes sliding serenely through the night and then there were collisions and great hollow explosions like the pop of paper bags as the box-like structures hit; the rip and tear of trees as bulldozers and graders tore loose and ran amok; and the cries of trapped and wounded men.' One glider loaded with a bulldozer and other heavy equipment whipped over sharply to avoid a wreck, only to plunge into the wall of surrounding jungle. On either side the trees tore off its wings, the fuselage rushed on with its load, by now wrenched loose from its moorings. When the fuselage halted at last the bulldozer continued its momentum and worked the hinge by which the pilot's seat was swung upward to let the vehicle drive out. Pilot and co-pilot were thrown into the air, the bulldozer shot out beneath them and they landed back unhurt. But others were less fortunate and there were grim scenes as the medical teams amputated and bandaged by the light of acetylene flares. Soon the confusion was such that a message had to be sent for the operation to be halted. Not until late the following day, by which time some 400 British soldiers under the expert guidance of American engineers, and using such bulldozers as had survived the initial landings, had succeeded in hacking and stamping a runway, did a message reach anxious, straining ears at Lalaghat reporting that Broadway was ready to receive further aircraft. Thereupon, with early misfortunes overcome and the enterprise saved, the transport squadrons began their task of delivering the main body of troops, the pack animals and equipment.

That night forty-one RAF Dakotas and twenty-four American C47s

flew to Broadway and the gallant band of men waiting on the jungle clearing witnessed an amazing scene as there, far behind the main Japanese army, heavily laden aircraft circled with navigation lights shining and came in to land on an improvised flare-path under the orders of a control set up in a wrecked glider. Air Marshal Baldwin,¹ an early arrival, was so impressed by what he saw that he wrote afterwards: 'Nobody has seen a transport operation until he has stood at Broadway under the light of a **Burma** moon and watched Dakotas coming in and taking off in opposite directions on a single strip at the rate of one take off or one landing every three minutes.' Thereafter the transport aircraft continued to come and go in a steady stream; both gliders and Dakotas also put down in another clearing called 'Chowringhee' beyond the Irrawaddy but after a few days, during which it diverted the enemy's attention, this clearing was abandoned because of its exposed position. The Japanese, however, remained ignorant of the Chindits' presence at Broadway for eight whole days and in that time 9050 men, 175 ponies, 1183 mules and nearly 250 tons of stores were transferred by air from **India** to places 150 miles or more behind the Japanese lines—places which had been reached by the previous Wingate expedition only after two exhausting months of marching. The total casualties amounted to 121, all among the occupants of the first gliders. Not one Dakota was lost. It was an achievement at that time unequalled anywhere in the world.

As the Chindit columns spread out on their work of devastation they continued to rely almost completely upon air power, so that transport, fighter, bomber and light aircraft were kept busy during the following weeks meeting their various needs. The work of the transport crews—it involved the loading and delivery of about 125 tons of supplies daily—was both arduous and difficult. Although three more airfields for landing Dakotas were established in turn, the greater portion of supplies had now to be dropped to parties on the move through the jungle, and because the Chindits were operating in areas beyond the range of fighter cover, most of this had to be done at night. To find even a well-lighted dropping zone in the jungle during darkness required a high degree of

¹ Air Marshal Sir John E. A. Baldwin, KBE, CB, DSO, Order of the Crown and Croix de Guerre (Bel), Order of the White Lion (Czech), Air Medal (US); born **Halifax, Yorkshire**, 13 Apr 1892; joined 8th Hussars 1911; seconded RFC 1915 and **RAF** 1918; permanent commission **RAF**, 1919; AOC No. 3 Bomber Group, 1939–42; AOC-in-C, **India**, 1942–43; AOC 3rd TAF, 1943–44.

was, of course, impossible and there were few landmarks by which to pinpoint one's position. Yet the task was accomplished and no column went short of its essential requirements. This was largely because of the sheer determination and skill displayed by the Dakota crews and the fact that most of them were experienced veterans of night operations, who had flown so long over the country that they were able to distinguish features which no stranger would observe; there was also an efficient and hard-working ground organisation to support their efforts. ¹

Fighters and bombers gave valuable close-support to the Chindits both in their offensive activities and during Japanese counter-attacks. Much of this work was done by American aircraft but **RAF** Vengeance bombers, together with Spitfire and Hurricane fighters, also helped as far as the major battle allowed. One Chindit leader, Brigadier J. M. Calvert, reported that his formation 'could not have taken Mogaung without the assistance of direct air support; the results they accomplished were accurate and decisive.'

This close support, and also the supply dropping, were rendered much more effective by the presence with each Chindit column of an **RAF** operational pilot. Knowing the ground situation and aware of the difficulties facing his comrades in the air, he was able to help select the most suitable landing strips and dropping zones and also to guide the fighters and bombers on to their targets by radio telephone. During an action he would establish himself in a well-sited observation post and then talk to the pilots of the attacking aircraft as they approached, telling them exactly where to place their bombs, and then he would

direct their machine-gun fire; so efficient did this technique become that long before the end no Japanese battery dared fire if an aircraft was anywhere about, and the same fear restrained their infantry.

One further service, of supreme value to the men on the ground, was provided by the air forces. This was the evacuation of casualties. Whenever the Dakotas were able to land with supplies they took back sick and wounded, but most of the ambulance work was done by light aircraft—Tiger Moths, Fox Moths and American Sentinels—which flew just above the jungle and landed on short strips laid out in any suitable clearing. Sometimes they lifted casualties from under the

¹ Each Chindit brigade had a rear headquarters in **India** where requests for air supply were tabulated and passed to the air supply sections. The latter collected supplies from the railhead, packed them and loaded the aircraft. Co-ordination of the supply for all three brigades was carried out each morning at a conference where sorties were allocated.

In the field each column passed its requests to brigade headquarters in the stronghold area and thence to rear headquarters. To reduce the amount of radio traffic each column carried a small booklet in which, under various headings, was listed every conceivable requirement from mortar bombs to obscure medical drugs. Opposite each item was a code number which was quoted in a signal requesting supplies. The supply sections at the air bases did the rest. For food there was a 'standard drop' which never varied. If the column numbered 400 men, this figure was quoted in a signal for a standard drop for that number of men, plus any special items which had been quoted from the booklet.

very noses of the enemy and on one occasion forty wounded were thus brought away, though each of them had to be put on board under fire. At places where the light planes could not land a few helicopters were used with some success, even to the extent of carrying stretcher cases strapped to the outside of the fuselage. Stranger still was the employment towards the end of the campaign of two Sunderland flying-

boats to evacuate sick and wounded. Their normal work was anti-submarine patrol from **Ceylon** but, using the Brahmaputra River in **Assam** as a base, they flew over the mountains to alight on Indawgyi Lake in the heart of the jungle. From there the two Sunderlands, known almost inevitably as 'Gert' and 'Daisy', brought out a total of 537 casualties.

Thanks to patrols maintained by Allied fighters and the enemy's preoccupation with his own offensive farther north, all these various operations were carried through with the minimum of loss. But not without incident. One day a Dakota was set on fire by a Japanese fighter above 'Aberdeen', whereupon the pilot, with no landing gear and only one engine working, took his burning aircraft down and made a successful crash landing without any of his passengers being injured. Another transport was surprised by an Oscar, which drove home its attack so closely that it collided with the Dakota's tail, shed a wing and plunged to earth; the **RAF** pilot landed his own aircraft safely and was awarded 'one destroyed'. In the early stages Japanese aircraft made several raids on the Chindit bases in **Burma** but they caused only slight damage and did not interrupt operations. A flight of Spitfires was based at Broadway to intercept the raiders, but after some success it was put out of action through lack of early warning. Attacks were then made on the airfields from which the Japanese fighters were operating, and about fifty of them were destroyed or damaged on the ground; thereafter enemy air activity was negligible, and with our own fighters constantly on patrol the Chindit leaders were able to plan their moves without fear of attack by hostile aircraft.

Thus, in brief, did the air forces contribute to the Second Wingate Expedition—an operation which eventually accounted for more than 5000 of the enemy many miles behind his main armies, in the heart of a country he had dominated for two years; and although all the objectives were not achieved and the cost in men, material and effort was high, the position of the Japanese forces in the north was, as week succeeded week, rendered more and more serious through the dislocation and

blocking of their supply roads and railways. As the 1944 monsoon approached, some of the Chindit columns moved north to join Stilwell's advance towards Myitkyina. Others were flown back to **India**. On landing there more than one bearded British soldier, worn and tired after months of hard fighting and marching, was seen



THE CENTRAL FRONT, MARCH - MAY 1944

to turn back for a moment to the Dakota which had brought him out and give the fuselage a friendly pat—mute recognition of what he and his comrades owed to these sturdy aircraft and their devoted crews.

Major-General Orde Wingate did not survive the campaign he had instigated. On the morning of 24 March a pilot returning from patrol saw through the rain a brief flame on a Naga mountain. It was Wingate's aircraft. After a visit to Broadway he had insisted on being flown back through the storm. His battered topee was found near the scene of the crash.

Spectacular though they were, the Chindit operations were not the chief concern of our air forces during these months. Their main effort, and especially that of the **Royal Air Force**, was devoted to the support of 4 British Corps in its desperate struggle on the **Manipur** front.

Signs had not been lacking that the enemy was planning to attack

Imphal. Various alternatives were considered to meet this impending threat. The one adopted was ‘to concentrate **4 Corps** in the **Imphal** plain, and fight a major battle there to destroy the Japanese Fifteenth Army.’¹ An important consideration was ‘our supremacy in the air and the ability it gave me to use air supply’.²

On 6 March, the Japanese opened a strong offensive whose ultimate aim was nothing less than ‘definite victory in **India**’. In the first fortnight they captured Tiddim, Tamu and Ukhrul and then, moving through most difficult country with remarkable speed and agility, they cut the main road to **India** by way of Dimapur and laid siege to **Kohima**, the little town which commands the pass to the **Assam** valley. **Imphal**, our main base for the whole central front, was thus completely isolated and its capture became the enemy's immediate objective. This town, built in the midst of the only fertile plain among the border mountains, stood athwart the main line of communication by land between **India** and **Burma** and its possession was vital to any invading force. With the **Imphal** plain in their hands, the Japanese would be able not only to attack our bases and airfields in the Surma valley but also to interrupt the vital **Assam** line of communications on which General Stilwell's forces and the air supply route to **China** depended. Such indeed was the enemy's intention, but he reckoned without the intervention of the Allied air forces.

Immediately the threat to **Imphal** and **Kohima** became apparent, transport aircraft carried out a series of remarkable and highly important operations which, in view of what followed, probably saved the day. The first was the lifting of a whole division—men, guns, mules, vehicles, equipment and all—from the Arakan front far to the

¹ Slim, p. 291.

² Ibid.

south and flying them into **Imphal**; urgently needed reinforcements, which would have taken weeks to travel by road and rail and would almost certainly have arrived too late, thus reached the scene with the minimum of delay. One gunner regiment is reported to have come out of action in the Maungdaw area of Arakan one day, travelled the following day to the airfield at Dohazari, spent the night taking its guns to pieces and the next day was airborne; a day later it was in action east of **Imphal** in the heart of the siege. The whole task required 758 sorties, and these were flown by Dakotas of No. 194 Squadron, **RAF**, and by twenty American Commando aircraft—the latter withdrawn from the ‘Hump’ supply route to **China** to augment Troop Carrier Command's small and already overworked force of transport planes. In similar fashion, transport aircraft took in 50 Parachute Brigade, two strong Indian battalions flown from the Punjab and a brigade from 7 Indian Division. Two other brigades from the latter division went to reinforce **33 Corps** at Dimapur and another infantry brigade was taken from the **Calcutta** region to Jorhat in **Assam**. All were impressive air lifts for those days; the latter, for example, involved the movement of 3056 men, together with nearly 100,000 lb. of stores, 50 motor-cycles, 40 jeeps and 31 trailers, sixteen 25-pounder guns and eight 3.7-inch howitzers.

The timely arrival of these additional troops meant that the Japanese were faced by a much stronger force than they had anticipated; but it also meant that a much larger force was now encircled by the enemy and somehow it had to be fed and supplied. To this task the transport squadrons at once addressed themselves and heavily laden Dakotas began lumbering up the valley from Dimapur to **Kohima** and over the mountains to **Imphal**, where they cast down their loads of ammunition, food and medical supplies to the beleaguered garrisons. At **Kohima** it was also necessary to drop containers of water, for here fierce fighting quickly developed and the aircrews saw with dismay the Japanese steadily closing in until they had captured most of the small straggling town. Soon everything had to be dropped in one very small area known as Summer House Hill, the only possible place still in the hands of the defenders. This made the task of supply both for

those in the air and those on the ground extremely difficult, and before long the pine trees covering the hill were festooned with parachutes, whose containers dangling beneath could only be collected at night by men crawling on their bellies and, as often as not, encountering Japanese intent on the same errand. The only supplies they could be certain of receiving were those which fell near or directly into the slit trenches which began to scar the hill. Yet the garrison at **Kohima** held on courageously, helped in their resistance by Hurricane fighter-bombers and Vultee-Vengeances, which struck hard at the enemy's positions around the town and also at his dumps and camps beyond. 'To see them roaring in low, the whole place rocking with the noise of their engines and then above this sound to hear the loud voices of the bombs, renewed our hearts every time they came,' declared a sergeant of the **Assam Rifles**. The battle for **Kohima** continued until 20 April, when the garrison was relieved by units of 2 British Division pushing up the **Manipur** road from Dimapur.

The struggle for **Imphal** lasted much longer and it became essentially a battle of supply and endurance. At the beginning of April the Japanese had felt certain of victory. 'The investment of **Imphal** is complete,' boasted **Tokyo** radio. 'Owing to lack of ammunition the sound of the enemy's guns is weakening. When the last shot is fired **Imphal** will automatically fall. The fate of IV Corps, supplied by a scared and dwindling air force, is sealed.' But in the first fortnight of April that scared and dwindling air force flew more than 10,000 sorties—one third of them by transport aircraft. At the same time 4 British Corps, dramatically reinforced from the air as it had been, was able to confine the Japanese to the hills surrounding the plain, thus ensuring the delivery of further supplies and, what was equally important, the operation of Spitfire and Hurricane fighters from the six airfields it contained. The enemy was thus cheated of an early victory but the situation of our forces at **Imphal** remained serious. One hundred and fifty thousand men were now surrounded by the enemy with very little hope of early relief, and they would have to be maintained solely from the air. They needed somewhat more than 400 tons of stores a day and

these must be brought into a valley ringed by the guns of the enemy.

In the following weeks, the transport squadrons and their ground staffs did their utmost to fulfil this commitment but they were unable to do so completely. For one thing, the strength of Troop Carrier Command and its ground organisation was barely sufficient to meet current needs which, it must be remembered, included the supply of Wingate's forces in **Burma**, the support of Stilwell's advance in the north and also the Arakan front, where the West African Division in particular was still being sustained almost entirely by air. In March 1944, all this was being done by eight Dakota squadrons—about 130 aircraft—with temporary help from the twenty American Commandos borrowed from the 'Hump' route to **China**. Only with great difficulty did Mountbatten secure approval to retain the twenty Commandos for a few weeks and then the reluctant loan, limited at first to a month, of seventy-nine Dakotas from the **Middle East**. And, even with this additional help, it became necessary towards the end of the siege to bring in bomber aircraft to help carry ammunition.

On top of this the monsoon broke earlier and with greater violence than expected, converting any but all-weather airfields into bogs and covering the vast areas of mountains with dark forbidding cloudbanks. For pilots flying towards **Imphal**, looking for some tiny crack or break in the cloud through which they might descend into the plain, it was a nightmare. A fifty-square-mile plain among 25,000 square miles of hills and valleys is not easy to find on a clear day. Under monsoon conditions it became extremely difficult and at times well-nigh impossible. Pilots sometimes made three or four attempts from different directions, but not infrequently they were unable to penetrate the storms and heavy clouds which hung over the surrounding mountains. A few, fortunately very few, made their descent through a break in the cloud and, misjudging their position, flew into the side of a hill.

In an effort to reduce the frustration and congestion caused by aircraft returning with their loads, an advanced staging post was set up at Kambhigrum, west of the mountains, from where the accumulated

supplies were flown in whenever the weather cleared. Even so the troops, airmen and their ancillary services on the plain consumed more than could be brought in to them by air. Accordingly, it was decided to evacuate from **Imphal** all those not essential to its defence, and during May nearly 30,000 men engaged mainly on administrative duties, together with two entire hospitals and their staffs, were flown out by the Dakotas. At the same time the strength of the **RAF** on the plain was reduced to the minimum—two squadrons of Spitfires, one of ground-attack Hurricanes and two of Hurri-bombers.

These measures relieved the situation considerably, but although our forces at **Imphal** had sufficient supplies to enable them to eat and fight, increasing cloud and storms brought a lean and critical period at the beginning of June, when the garrison was down to only a fortnight's food on reduced rations and barely a week's supply of petrol. Then suddenly the weather improved and a determined effort was made by all concerned. 'The one all-weather airstrip was soon crammed with supply aircraft, queues circled in the air waiting to land and queues waited on the side runs of the strip to take off. As the wheels of the aircraft touched down or those of outgoing aircraft raced along the concrete, great sprays of water covered anything within fifty yards. From dawn to dusk, except on really bad days, the traffic continued and both troops and **RAF** personnel worked without rest to move the supplies.' By mid-June these were arriving at the rate of nearly 500 tons a day, and this was soon increased to 600 tons in operations which continued until, and for a short time after, the siege ended.

Thus was the supply battle finally won, but only by a narrow margin. Yet it was won. And General Giffard, the Army Commander-in-Chief, afterwards declared: 'There is no doubt that if we had not had air supply we should have lost the **Imphal** plain and the position on the eastern frontier of **India** would have been graveIt is with gratitude and admiration that I acknowledge the immense debt which the Army owes to the air.' Altogether during the **Manipur** fighting the air forces had delivered 22,000 tons of supplies; they had also flown in 20,000

reinforcements with their equipment and evacuated 10,000 casualties and 30,000 non-essential personnel from the **Imphal** plain. Having regard to all the circumstances, this was certainly a splendid achievement.

A remarkable feature of the **Imphal** air supply was that, during the whole twelve weeks that the siege endured, only two Dakotas and one Wellington engaged on this duty were shot down. Yet seldom has an air force had the chance of finer targets than were offered to the Japanese with up to three hundred slow, unarmed transports flying daily in full view of them. That they were unable to take advantage of this opportunity was due in large measure to the Allied fighter squadrons whose activities, notably those of the long-range American Lightnings and Mustangs against enemy airfields, made it almost impossible for the Japanese to intervene effectively in the battle at all. Besiegers though they were, the effort of the Japanese Army Air Force amounted to no more than 3 per cent of the British and American, and soon such meagre and sporadic support as it was able to provide had to come from airfields far to the rear.

At **Imphal** the RAF Spitfires and Hurricanes entrusted with its defence were continually on the alert to intercept enemy raiders; they also escorted the Dakotas on their inward and outward flights. These tasks became more difficult as the Japanese overran many of the radar warning posts in the surrounding hills, and it became necessary to bring back the long discarded system of fighter patrols in order to cover the two main entrances to the plain. But their vigilance was rewarded, and on one notable occasion an enemy raid of twenty Oscars was intercepted and ten of them shot down. The Hurricane fighter-bombers went out against a variety of targets. Sometimes these lay in the nearby hills just beyond the perimeter where our troops were engaged in short, fierce skirmishing with Japanese seeking to enter the plain. Then the ground crews had the unusual satisfaction, after rearming and refuelling the aircraft, of seeing them take off, drop their bombs on the enemy only a few miles away and return for their next mission. But more often the

Hurricanes ranged farther afield striking at the roads, tracks and bridges leading to **Imphal**, and at enemy bases and camps in the country beyond. One squadron specialised in night operations and became adept at finding enemy vehicles by the shadows they cast on the roadside when travelling by moonlight. Frequently, however, it was very difficult for pilots to see what damage they were doing, especially when in close support of our troops they aimed at what seemed empty scrubland or unmoving jungle marked only by a smoke shell. Effective close support was indeed far from easy, for the enemy was entrenched in well-prepared positions and the bunkers comprising them were usually strong and extremely well sited and camouflaged. But the Army appreciated their efforts. 'On more than one occasion,' declared Major-General Cowan, commanding **17 Division**, 'you were responsible for enabling our forces to counter-attack in the face of heavy opposition ... I have well over two years' experience of fighting in this country and can assure you that you are producing results.'

The conditions under which the air force lived and fought at **Imphal** were anything but pleasant. It was a tough routine of bare existence, with the added discomforts caused by the monsoon. On each airfield the ground crews and administrative staffs were formed into self-supporting 'boxes' for defence, each with its trenches, bunkers and guns; at night, until the decision to remove some squadrons to airfields outside the plain was taken, pilots and ground crews took turns at guarding their own aircraft against attack from enemy parties infiltrating through the wire; and because of the closeness of the enemy a very strict blackout and complete silence were maintained from dusk to dawn. With the advent of the monsoon, nothing in the bamboo *bashas* or mud and wattle native huts remained dry, and outside gum-booted airmen squelched through the mud to and from their aircraft at the dispersal points. Rations were short and the men had to contend with dysentery, lack of sleep, biting insects and cobras that coiled themselves around wet things like wash-basins in the darkness; yet for the most part men accepted the situation, and while there was much 'binding' on the plain, there was also a good deal of close fellowship.

Occasionally, there were hectic moments as on that evening when a pilot on patrol at dusk reported a Japanese battalion on the move close to **Imphal**. Pilots and ground crews had just dispersed for the night when the call to action came. One and all made at once for their aircraft, some who had been washing, dressing as they ran; within a matter of minutes thirty-three Hurricanes had taken off and were over the area through which the enemy had been seen passing. In the gathering darkness nothing could be seen but the vague outlines of trees and scrub; then the leading aircraft, flying very low, turned on their landing lights and in their beams the Japanese column could be clearly discerned. The Hurricanes went in with bombs, cannon and machine-gun fire, and though they saw little but dust and smoke it was later learnt from captured documents that over 200 Japanese were killed that evening.

The climax of the **Imphal** struggle came in June. By that time the Japanese, with their supply lines from **Bangkok** to the very hills of **Manipur** assailed by our fighters and bombers, were themselves desperately short of food, ammunition and essential stores. Their troops were dying of wounds and disease, especially in the malarial Kabaw valley, while only a few miles away Allied casualties were being carried into air transports and flown out to the hospitals of **India**.

Day after day the frustrated and famished Japanese Army, watching from the peaks above **Imphal**, could see a stream of Dakotas and Commandos flying in an increasing volume of supplies to their enemies. High above them, Spitfires wheeled and circled guarding the entrances to the plain, and every now and then Hurri-bombers went streaking across the hills to attack the Tiddim Road or strafe enemy troops and blow them from their bunkers and foxholes; formations of Vengeance dive-bombers from more distant airfields passed high overhead on their way to blast targets in the rear. On the ground 4 British Corps was beginning to press out from its encirclement, and although the Japanese clung desperately to their positions in the hills, they were unable to prevent either this outward drive or the approach of the strong relieving

force which had been slowly fighting its way up the road from the direction of **Kohima**. The end of the siege and of the battles of attrition came on 22 June when a Sikh battalion of **4 Corps**, thrusting north of **Imphal**, met tanks of 2 British Division moving up along the **Kohima** road.

The Japanese *Fifteenth Army* in **Manipur**, lacking supplies and well-nigh exhausted by its efforts during recent months, was now faced with inevitable retreat. To speed its departure and support the advance of General Slim's British Fourteenth Army therefore became the immediate concern of the squadrons of RAF No. **221 Group** which, under Air Commodore Vincent,¹ were based in that area. Dakotas, Spitfires, Vengeances, Beaufighters and the versatile Hurricanes all joined in the new offensive, and despite the monsoon, during which 175 inches of rain fell in northern **Burma** and 350 inches in **Assam**, they kept up a sustained and indeed remarkable flying effort.

The Hurri-bombers were everywhere. Down the Tiddim and Tamu roads they went, attacking the Japanese in their bunker positions and hideouts, shooting up transport and strafing troops on the move. Strongpoints were blasted, bridges over *chaung* and river smashed and enemy vehicles wrecked where they sheltered in the deep gorges. During the fighting along the road to Kalemyo, where the forty hairpin bends winding down the mountainside were known as the 'Chocolate Staircase', the fighter-bombers literally went from milestone to milestone obliterating enemy pockets of resistance in order to ease the progress of the Army. As the Japanese began to straggle back

¹ Air Vice-Marshal S. F. Vincent, CB, DFC, AFC, Legion of Merit (US); **RAF** (retd); born **Hampstead, London**, 7 Apr 1897; joined RFC 1915; commanded RAF Station, Northolt, 1940–41; North Weald, 1941; Debden, 1941, and Northolt, 1941–42; AOC No. **224 Group**, 1942; AOC No. **13 Group**, 1943–44; AOC No. **221 Group**, SE Asia, 1944–45.

across the Chindwin, Beaufighters attacked the river crossings and

then the roads and railways beyond; in vain did the enemy explode land mines and stretch trip-wires between trees in an effort to destroy these low-flying aircraft. And all the time the Dakotas continued with their task of supply. Indeed, from the end of July onwards our advances along the Tiddim and Tamu roads were sustained almost entirely by air, while the forces operating from positions in the Lushai Hills could not have operated without the supplies dropped by transport aircraft. Individual items were often delivered in record time. A 75-mm pack howitzer for example, weighing 2000 lb., called for by the Army late one afternoon, was dropped a few hours later with ten parachutes attached to it and was in action by the early hours of the following morning. But there were also occasions when it took days of battling through torrential rain, strong winds and thick clouds to achieve one single mission. Yet it was done.

Through the drenching rain and clammy heat of the 1944 monsoon, the squadrons continued to fly and fight, harassing the enemy in retreat and giving invaluable help to Fourteenth Army. 'As it was impossible in the hills to build any landing strips, the **5th Division** became completely dependent on air dropping for all its requirements. It also relied for direct fire support largely on the fighter bombers of **221 Group, RAF**. What this regular air supply and support meant in skill and strain to the aircrews only those who have flown among these shrouded hills can judge. Yet throughout the whole of this monsoon the fighters of Air Marshal Vincent's **221 Group** flew over our troops every single day. I do not think such devotion has ever been surpassed in any air force, and I doubt if it has been equalled.' ¹

In the October fighting round Tiddim, where our troops were delayed by a series of bunker positions and gun posts in the hills astride the road, the Hurri-bombers intervened with particular effect. Many direct hits on bunkers were reported and afterwards verified by **33 Corps**, especially in the Kennedy Peak area and around 'Vital Corner', where the enemy was eventually blasted out of positions hewn in the solid rock of a precipice. Later at Fort White, after an onslaught by four squadrons of

Hurricanes, our troops were able to make their final assault virtually unopposed. The fighter-bombers also gave assistance of another kind to the Army when it reached the terrible Kabaw valley to capture Tamu. The name means 'Valley of Death', and it is reputed to be one of the most highly malarial places in the world. There they sprayed the whole length of the road with DDT and this helped to reduce the casualties caused by disease to a very low figure.

¹ Slim, p. 358.

Many were the hazards that faced our pilots and crews during this astonishing offensive. To reach their objectives they often had to fly through twisting valleys and over jungle-clad hills that were no more distinguishable from each other than the waves of a choppy sea; much of the region was unsurveyed, so men flew on the knowledge that they had acquired of the mountain formations; but with the monsoon came cloud and swirling mists, which altered the shapes they knew quite well, so that piercing a cloud might bring sudden confrontation with hill or mountainside. Aircraft were even wrecked by the turbulence of the clouds themselves. One day five Hurricanes returning over the Chin Hills met cumulo-nimbus clouds of the type which soar from the ground to 30,000 feet or more, and with their fuel running short could find no way round. Two of the five came through in a battered condition, but of the remaining three no trace was found. An even more tragic misadventure befell sixteen Spitfires of No. 615 Squadron while flying out from the **Imphal plain to **Calcutta** in August 1944. When but thirty miles on their journey, they ran into thin cloud which unexpectedly proved to be the outer fringe of a particularly vicious storm. Within a matter of seconds the Spitfires found themselves in the midst of it, and so violent was the turbulence that 'all the aircraft became beyond human control.' One was whirled from 5000 to 11,000 feet and the others were tossed about in the blackness of the clouds like so many leaves. Four pilots, including the squadron commander, were lost when their machines were torn to pieces; four more had to bale out and the remaining eight all arrived at**

their destination badly bruised and cut about the face and hands in their efforts to control their aircraft. One of the survivors reported that he had only just managed to recover after finding himself upside-down at less than 200 feet above the ground.

In the early stages of their retreat from **Imphal** the Japanese still fought fiercely but, harassed from the air and under growing pressure from a much larger British army, their withdrawal gradually became a rout. Even the redoubtable Japanese *33 Division*, one of their finest fighting units, cracked after weeks of merciless fighting and took to the jungle in disorder. Thereafter, scourged by beri-beri, malaria and dysentery, and forced to retreat through sodden forests and across swollen streams and flooded rivers, the plight of the enemy became more and more terrible. What his total losses were will probably never be known, but on the battlefields around **Imphal** over 13,000 dead were counted and these had been slain in battle. The number who died from wounds, starvation and disease can only be guessed. One military observer says that 'the Allied doctors reported groups of dead Japanese, their skin drawn tightly over their bones, with little packets of rice which they could not eat or digest hanging round their necks. Hundreds of bodies were found in Tamu alone. Many of the Japanese were too weak to carry out their normal practice of killing their sick and wounded. Near Tamu a complete hospital full of patients was captured. With a few exceptions they were too weak to commit suicide. They lay in a daze on the ground or on rough bamboo stretchers. Some Japanese gave themselves up while others were captured before they could blow themselves to pieces with hand grenades. All were numbed by the agonies of the last few months.' ¹

So ended the Japanese bid for victory in **India** and with it came the prospect of their eventual defeat in **Burma**. For along with the Allied successes in Arakan and **Manipur**, General Stilwell's Chinese-American Army, helped by the Chindits, had made a notable advance in north **Burma**. Fighting through terrible country where, despite the magnificent achievement of American engineers in building the Ledo road, they had

to be sustained almost entirely by air, Stilwell's troops had cleared most of that region of the enemy and in a sudden brilliant stroke captured the all-important airfield at Myitkyina; then, after a hard and bitter battle lasting eleven weeks, they had taken the town itself, thus securing the main Japanese base and the focal point for road, rail and river communications in that part of **Burma**. And now with the enemy also forced back across the Chindwin by the British Fourteenth Army, the way was open for the reconquest of the central **Burma** plain, from which the strong forces we possessed could take the road to **Mandalay** and thence to **Rangoon**.

* * * * *

Through these eventful months New Zealand airmen had shared in all the various air operations as pilots, navigators, wireless operators and air gunners. It was perhaps typical of the Dominion's contribution that in the first night's supply operations to Wingate's Chindits at Broadway, four of the twelve RAF Dakotas (they were from the famous No. 31 Squadron) should be piloted by New Zealanders, with one of them leading the first flight; that a Spitfire fighter squadron defending **Imphal**, and Hurricane fighter-bombers which harried the Japanese down the Tiddim Road, should be led by Dominion pilots; and that they should fly some of the first **RAF** aircraft to land at Myitkyina.

Their part in the all-important work of air transport and supply was quite substantial, for there were no fewer than thirty-eight New Zealand captains of aircraft in the **RAF**'s five transport squadrons and two of the squadrons were themselves commanded by Dominion pilots. With supply operations ranging over the entire battle area from the Kaladan valley in the south to the northern outpost of **Fort Hertz**,

¹ R. McKelvie, *The War in Burma*.

many of these men achieved a remarkable total of missions successfully completed. Flight Lieutenant J. Davidson of No. 194

Squadron, for example, flew 161 sorties in the months from February to July 1944— 106 of them to **Imphal**, **Kohima** and the Arakan and 55 in support of General Wingate's Chindits, the latter including thirteen landings by night behind the enemy in **Burma**. A similar record was attained in No. 117 Squadron by Flight Lieutenants D. Gale, B. D. New and Stephenson ¹ and Pilot Officer Bridge ² as Dakota pilots, and by Flight Lieutenant Naysmith ³ as the squadron's navigation leader. Other pilots who did fine work were Flight Lieutenant T. A. J. King of No. 31 Squadron and Flight Lieutenant P. S. Voss who, with No. 62 Squadron, had a narrow escape when his Dakota crashed whilst taking off from **Imphal**; and there were navigators like Warrant Officer D. J. Laloli and wireless operators like Warrant Officer Flaus ⁴ who flew consistently over a long period.

Their work was both strenuous and hazardous. 'All our jobs were mixed up,' one pilot writes. 'One day we might take in reinforcements to **Imphal**, the next day go to Comilla to collect flour, ammo, and petrol from the dumps, then pick up a load of men at **Imphal** and fly them out; another time we would take casualties from the **Kohima** battle and the following day be back over the Kaladan. It meant long flying hours day after day and I do not think we could have kept it up except for the feeling of crisis that existed.' Many of the places to which they delivered supplies were fringed with hills that were death traps to aircraft circling low in bad weather; and with a constantly changing crosswind the final touch-down had its own perils. Unprecedented traffic at all the airfields required an exceptional standard of flying discipline in order to keep accidents to a minimum. At **Imphal** there was so little taxi-ing space that incoming aircraft had to land in one direction and outgoing transports take off in the other. The monsoon storms with their treacherous up-currents were also a constant source of danger. One pilot attempting to land at an alternative airfield in such turbulent conditions found his aircraft suddenly whisked from 1000 feet to 9000 feet inside two minutes, the fully-laden aircraft offering no obstacle to the violent up-draughts.

These and other hazards were, however, all accepted as part of the day's work. 'We fulfilled our commitments flying double sorties where necessary until the night of 11 March; then six of our crews

¹ Squadron Leader C. R. Stephenson, DFC; born [Auckland](#), 23 Dec 1919; PWD employee; joined [RNZAF](#) 2 Mar 1941.

² Flying Officer M. C. Bridge; born Te Kopura, 30 Jul 1917; grocer; joined [RNZAF](#) Dec 1940.

³ Flight Lieutenant J. R. Naysmith, DFC; born Bonnyrigg, [Scotland](#), 4 Dec 1914; clerk; joined [RNZAF](#) 13 Oct 1939.

⁴ Warrant Officer C. A. Flaus; born [Invercargill](#), 24 Feb 1918; timekeeper; joined [RNZAF](#) Dec 1940.

finished the jobs by flying in the ground staff, supplies and spares for the flight of Spitfires which was to be based at Broadway.' So runs the record of Wing Commander Chisholm's No. 117 Squadron concerning its part in the initial fly-in of Wingate's Chindits. In seven consecutive nights, crews had flown 106 sorties and carried 1323 troops, 221 mules and 47 horses, together with considerable quantities of barbed wire, petrol, oil, jeeps and other items of equipment. This formidable assortment of passengers and cargo was at first somewhat disconcerting to the men after their more routine work in the [Middle East](#). 'As the strings of mules came walking down the runway,' one of them writes, 'we cast anxious looks at the aircraft remembering the days when they carried generals, film stars and other such delectable cargoes and wondered mournfully what the condition of the cabins would be at the end of this party. Our anxiety was, however, groundless for most of the animals took to the aircraft nonchalantly though they were not above expressing impatience during the period before take-off by smashing the seats and kicking out the odd window. But only one of the 268 animals which we carried actually got out of hand during flight.'

Inevitably in the pressure of relieving a siege while simultaneously supplying the Wingate and Kaladan troops, there were many unusual episodes and incidents. One New Zealand Dakota captain, for example, tells of a remarkable escape when he and another pilot commenced dropping on the same zone in the jungle unknown to each other. In the darkness one made a right-hand circuit and the other, owing to the awkward position of the hills, changed to a left-hand circuit. They met directly over the dropping zone and it was only due to the little light provided by the ground flares that they avoided a head-on collision, one diving almost into the ground and the other climbing vigorously. Next morning in the mess it transpired that one crew had overshot their target and only located it after a search; the second pilot had also arrived late, and both assumed that other aircraft had completed their sorties.

Misadventure of a different kind befell the crew whose Dakota had its rudder caught by a parachute with a heavy case attached; after a crew member had tried, and failed, to shoot off the rigging lines, the pilot made a successful landing with the load still attached to his machine. Another RAF pilot who force-landed with a load of petrol ended up with his wing tip in the open fireplace of a native hut, but the fire did not spread; and there was the despatcher who was hooked out of his aircraft by a parachute and floated to earth on a box of rations.

But the various transport missions were not accomplished without loss. For example, Flight Lieutenant R. G. Mellsop, after achieving a fine record as captain of aircraft in No. 194 Squadron, was killed when his Dakota crashed while carrying reinforcements to the Chindits at 'Aberdeen'. A member of his squadron writes: 'Once a pilot was committed to a landing at "Aberdeen" it was impossible to circuit again, as the strip was in a narrow valley with steep hills on both sides and at both ends. Mellsop attempted a second circuit through being too high on his final approach. The aircraft's landing lights played on the jungle-covered slopes of the valley as he tried in vain to gain altitude to go over the top—he and his crew must have known seconds before the fateful

crash that only a miracle could save them yet Mellsope attempted, in a last valiant effort, to cushion the aircraft on to the hillside; this action undoubtedly saved the lives of thirteen of the troops who were towards the rear of the aircraft.' Another New Zealand pilot, Warrant Officer Shearer, ¹ with his crew failed to return from a supply mission to 'Broadway' and Warrant Officer Orr, ² wireless operator, was killed when his Dakota, carrying a load of 6750 lb. of petrol, crashed on take-off.

Flight Lieutenant Allan, ³ previously of No. 194 Squadron, spent nearly two months in the jungle with one of the Chindit long-range penetration groups. He was attached to 1 Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, as **Air Force** officer to direct the close air support. Allan saw early and successful action with a Japanese patrol while leading a party through the jungle. Later, when his column moved on, he was ordered to remain in the Lamai region to report enemy movements and control air action; he was told that since he had only a small escort he might leave if his position was threatened, but he stayed isolated for six weeks, during which he was able to provide much useful information and also to direct a number of air attacks on objectives in the area. For example, one morning shortly after dawn, he spotted a long Japanese supply train puffing slowly up a valley and within the hour had the satisfaction of seeing it destroyed by the fighter-bombers he summoned. Eventually Allan led his detachment forty miles through hills and jungles to rejoin the Chindit Brigade. The Military Cross which he was subsequently awarded for his exploits was certainly well earned.

Nearly one hundred New Zealand fighter pilots flew and fought with the RAF Spitfire, Hurricane and Beaufighter squadrons through these hard months of the 1944 **Burma** campaign. The records show that in their various missions over difficult country, and often in

¹ Warrant Officer G. H. Shearer; born **Alexandria, Scotland**, 17 Nov 1918; garage assistant; joined **RNZAF** 22 Dec 1940; killed on air operations, 23 May 1944.

² Warrant Officer D. A. Orr; born **Christchurch**, 15 May 1923; storeman; joined **RNZAF** 25 Feb 1942; killed on air operations, 23 Jun 1944.

³ Flight Lieutenant G. Allan, MC; born **Auckland**, 7 Oct 1916; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1941.

treacherous monsoon weather, many of them displayed efficiency keenness and courage of a high order; there are also references to the 'determination, skill and fine offensive spirit' shown by individual pilots, to their 'splendid support for the Army' and to 'distinguished leadership' on the part of squadron and flight commanders.

Squadron Leader Bruce Ingram and Squadron Leader Denis Sharp did particularly good work as fighter leaders. Ingram—he had already distinguished himself with **Desert Air Force** in **Africa** and **Sicily**—commanded a squadron of Spitfires. For the first few months he led his pilots in defensive patrols over **Calcutta** and on sweeps against Japanese airfields in central **Burma**; then they moved up to **Imphal**, where they patrolled over the plain and escorted transports and bombers; later, as enemy air activity faded, the Spitfires turned their attention to the Japanese supply lines and achieved notable success in what were known as 'Rhubarb' operations. It was on return from one such mission that Ingram was forced to make a crash landing short of the strip. He stepped out of his machine with a broken nose and with a badly lacerated face. He was admitted to a field hospital, where he contracted malaria followed by tetanus, and despite the efforts of two nurses specially flown to **Imphal** he died shortly afterwards. Such, it may be noted, were the additional hazards of the **Burma** war.

Denis Sharp led a squadron of ground-attack Hurricanes which scored impressive results against enemy troops, transports and communications, especially during the Japanese retreat from **Manipur**. Sharp himself successfully attacked enemy railway engines on two occasions while operating by night over 150 miles inside enemy

territory. By mid-1944 he had completed a total of 450 fighter sorties, which included operations over **Britain**, **Singapore** and **Ceylon** as well as **Burma**. 'Under his leadership,' writes a senior officer, 'No. 11 Squadron has built up a great reputation in low attack work with a long record of successes achieved by night as well as by day and in the face of the many difficulties of terrain and weather constantly to be met in this theatre.'

Two more men who established fine records as fighter leaders were Flight Lieutenant J. M. Cranstone and Flight Lieutenant Murphy,¹ both of whom commanded flights in No. 11 Squadron. Murphy, 'leading his flight with great vigour and determination', completed the remarkable total of 198 sorties in the five monsoon months of 1944; Cranstone did equally valuable work until the relief of **Imphal**, then went on to lead one of the first **RAF** units to be equipped with American Thunderbolt fighters.

Many and varied were the exploits of individual fighter pilots.

¹ Flight Lieutenant W. J. Murphy, DFC; born Dunedin, 17 Sep 1917; shop assistant; joined **RNZAF** 16 Aug 1941.

Probably the most unusual was that of Flying Officer A. M. Peart who flew with No. 81 Spitfire Squadron. He was pilot of one of six fighters sent to operate from the jungle strip at Broadway shortly after Wingate's Chindits had occupied the clearing. On the morning after the Spitfires arrived, Broadway was attacked by thirty Oscars but, warned in good time, the fighters were airborne and they shot down four enemy machines and damaged several others. Three days later the Spitfires, after surviving a dawn attack while on the ground, took off to intercept another Japanese formation. Peart was the only successful pilot in the combats which ensued. He destroyed one enemy machine and damaged another. That night, with a storm approaching, the Spitfires flew out to **Imphal**, but they were back again early next morning. No sooner had they landed than four Zeros, with a further eight as top cover, swept in

very low on a strafing attack. Only the squadron commander and Peart managed to take off and intercept. The squadron commander shot down one Zero and was then himself shot down. Peart engaged the enemy and sent one fighter down without damage to his own aircraft. Meanwhile, on the ground, the remainder of the detachment had fared badly; all four Spitfires were shot up and one pilot was killed while attempting to leave the ground. Only Peart's Spitfire survived and he flew it out to Kangala. It was then decided that in view of the inadequate warning available at Broadway, the Spitfires should operate from Kangala with the aid of long-range tanks.

Many other men deserve mention. Squadron Leader V. K. Jacobs, for example, completed a long and successful career flying Spitfires over Arakan and **Manipur**, then spent his 'rest' period in charge of the **RAF** servicing party that was sent to take over control of one of the jungle strips. His first task was to resite the radar station, so important to give early warning of the approach of enemy raiders and as a help in 'homing' the transport Dakotas. Jacobs then improved the airfield control and radio-telephone systems. He also did good work in salvaging damaged aircraft, sometimes under the very eyes of the enemy.

Other Spitfire pilots prominent in operations were Flying Officers C.G. Beale, J. D. Rudling and Mathers ¹ and Flight Sergeant R. J. Clarke of No. 136 Squadron, and Flying Officer Allington, ² Warrant Officers Jackson ³ and Turner ⁴ of No. 152 Squadron. Both units operated from **Imphal** during the siege, providing aerial defence and

¹ Flight Lieutenant C. S. Mathers; born **Te Awamutu**, 17 Apr 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 29 Sep 1940.

² Flight Lieutenant K. G. Allington, DFC; born Waipawa, 29 Sep 1916; farm labourer; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

³ Warrant Officer D. M. J. Jackson; born Stratford, 17 Dec 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941.

⁴ Warrant Officer L. J. P. Turner; born **Christchurch**, 22 Nov 1918; salesman; joined **RNZAF** 30 Sep 1941.

giving escort to the transports and bombers. No. 136 was there when the Japanese first attacked, and here is one New Zealander's account of how they prepared to hold out:

The sergeant pilots dug themselves a massive community place, packed about with sandbags and roofed with heavy tarpaulins supported on bamboo poles. Nearby were the hangarettes for the aircraft built in the shape of a letter 'U', fronted on to the air strip; they were defended by trenches and a browning machine-gun mounted to cover a wide expanse of the area towards the hills. Encircling the dispersal area was a ditch which formed a communication trench so that the whole area with its dugouts, trenches and pits looked like a honeycomb.

Most of the officer-pilots split into pairs and dug themselves small below-surface billets. Two of them found an engineer officer renowned for his efficiency in blowing holes and blasting out tree stumps, and they talked him into blowing them 'a nice deep hole'; then they 'borrowed' a few yards of matting to line the walls and flooring, and with a few shelves supported on bamboo, an old box as a cupboard, bamboo rafters and tarpaulin cover—their mansion was complete.

The ground crews put up a magnificent show. While carrying on with their usual daily work—inspection, cleaning guns, testing radios, checking equipment, refuelling, re-arming and so on—they dug their trenches and holes, filled sandbags, carted and piled them up and then at night stood guard from dusk to dawn—not all the men at once certainly, but approximately one-third of the squadron each night.

It was shortly after leaving **Imphal** that No. 136 Squadron lost one of its leading members—Flying Officer John Rudling. The Spitfires were then making long-range attacks against Japanese air bases in **Burma** and, as sometimes happened on such missions, they were intercepted by

enemy fighters. In the mix-up which followed, Rudling saw a fellow pilot being assailed by two Oscars. He immediately dived to help him but, intent on getting to grips with the enemy, he failed to observe a third Oscar closing on his tail. As he turned to open fire the Japanese pilot seized his opportunity and sent the Spitfire down to crash in flames.

Among the New Zealanders who flew Hurricane fighter-bombers, Flight Lieutenants Stout ¹ and Shannon, ² Flying Officers R. R. A. McLauchlan and I. D. Culpan, Pilot Officers Connolly ³ and Sole ⁴ were prominent in operations over and beyond the Imphal area. They took part in beating off the initial Japanese assault and, with their squadrons, subsequently gave most valuable help to the Army in

¹ Squadron Leader R. E. Stout, DFC, m.i.d.; born Wellington, 28 Dec 1920; law student; joined RAF 2 Aug 1940; transferred RNZAF 1 Jan 1944; commanded No. 42 Sqdn and No. 79 Sqdn, SE Asia, 1945.

² Squadron Leader B. T. Shannon; born Feilding, 9 Jul 1913; sheep farmer; joined RNZAF 2 Jul 1940; commanded No. 11 Sqdn, SE Asia, 1945.

³ Flying Officer P. L. Connolly, DFC; born Te Aroha, 23 Nov 1921; law clerk; joined RNZAF Feb 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer H. V. Sole, DFC; born Manaia, 24 Mar 1920; farmhand; joined RNZAF 23 Nov 1940.

defending the plain; they also engaged in low-level attacks on enemy headquarters, bridges, railway engines, motor transport, sampans, mule trains and troops. Shannon had a lucky escape one day while leading a sortie against targets at Merema. One of his cannons exploded and blew a large hole in the wing of his Hurricane; he was forced to bale out but was lucky enough to drift down into friendly territory.

Warrant Officer J. R. L. Campbell, who flew with No. 258 Hurricane Squadron, was less fortunate. On a night patrol down the Kaladan valley, he crashed in the mountains well behind the Japanese lines and it was twenty-three days before he returned to his squadron. For several days and nights he made his way through the jungle until he reached the village of Thawinchaung, where he was sheltered and cared for by a native family. Japanese troops were in the vicinity, and at one time actually in the house where Campbell was hiding, but eventually, after spending a fortnight in a hideout at the foot of some hills, he was rescued through the efforts of that very gallant band of men who, under the code-name of V Force, worked behind the Japanese lines.

By the end of 1944 quite a few New Zealand fighter pilots had completed long and successful tours of operations—three years in most cases. They included men like Flight Lieutenant L. T. Hunter of No. 155 Squadron, who completed his tour by shooting down a reconnaissance Dinah near **Imphal, and such campaign veterans as Flight Lieutenant A. A. Cooper, Flying Officers G. A. Williams and C. V. Bargh in No. 67 Squadron, latterly engaged in the defence of **Calcutta** and in escort and armed reconnaissance over the Arakan front. The work of Vengeance pilots like Squadron Leader I. A. Sutherland, in command of No. 82 Squadron, Royal Indian Air Force, Flight Lieutenant Johns ¹ and Flying Officer Papps ² with No. 84 Squadron, and Flying Officers A. E. Parker and G. T. Couttie with No. 82 Squadron, also deserves mention. After their contribution to the Arakan victory early in 1944, the Vengeance squadrons had moved up to **Manipur**, where they continued to give valuable close support to the Army throughout the fighting in that region.**

*** * * * ***

Throughout 1944 New Zealanders also continued to share in the work of long-range bombing and in both maritime and photographic reconnaissance.

¹ Flight Lieutenant L. S. Johns; born **Christchurch**, 16 Nov 1915; meter clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1940.

² Flight Lieutenant C. E. Papps, DFC; born **Auckland**, 26 Jan 1918; projectionist; joined **RNZAF** 21 Dec 1940.

The Allied strategic bomber force in **South-east Asia** was still relatively small—for most of the year it had only 200 aircraft, one-third of them RAF Liberators and Wellingtons—but the crews worked hard and their achievements, as the Japanese subsequently admitted, were quite substantial. On occasion American Mitchells and British Wellingtons bombed targets in close support of the land forces, but the main effort of the bomber crews was directed against Japanese rail, road and river communications, shipping, ports, airfields, supply and storage depots and small industrial areas. These targets were widely scattered and they often involved flights over great distances; the round trip to **Moulmein**, for instance, was 1800 miles; to **Bangkok** 2200 miles; to the Kra Isthmus 2300, and eventually Liberators flew sorties of 2800 miles to attack targets in the Malay Peninsula.

Fortunately enemy opposition was not severe. Usually the worst hazard encountered by the bomber crews was the weather. To find and bomb their targets they sometimes had to fight their way through banks of cumulo-nimbus cloud or else make wide detours to avoid tropical storms. These storms were not easy to detect on a moonless night, and the first indication of their presence might well be violent turbulence which flung the bomber about the sky and made it dangerous even to attempt a turn. The only thing to do was to try to fly the aircraft through, keeping as far as possible 'straight and level'. There is no doubt that these conditions imposed a heavy strain on both men and machines. As one pilot remarks: 'When in action against fighters or running the gauntlet of flak we knew what we were up against but when confronted with the awesome blackness of cumulo-nimbus storms, one experienced a feeling of helplessness which was difficult to overcome.'

The RAF Liberators flew many notable missions against communication targets—in particular the ill-famed railway linking **Bangkok** with **Moulmein**, constructed by Allied prisoners of war under such appalling conditions that 24,000 of them lost their lives. The line, which was of the utmost importance to the Japanese in supplying their forces in **Burma**, ran through jungle and mountainous country. To span the succession of rivers and ravines, there were almost 700 bridges. The Liberators, operating in daylight, made precision attacks against some of the most important of these bridges and succeeded in cutting the line again and again at vital points. The Liberators also bore the brunt of the offensive against airfields, with the original **RAF** bases at **Mingaladon** and **Magwe** as frequent targets. There were also many minelaying sorties to the harbours of **Rangoon**, **Moulmein**, **Tavoy** and **Mergui** in the **Bay of Bengal** and ports in the Gulf of **Siam**. Altogether 664 mines were laid by the **RAF** during 1944, with results that were exceptionally good, for the enemy lacked efficient mine-sweeping equipment and was unable to prevent continual dislocation and damage to his shipping.

The Wellington squadrons operated consistently in the offensive against communications until August 1944, when the last of these aircraft were withdrawn from operations and replaced by Liberators. Carrying bomb loads varying from a single 4000-pounder to a mixed load of 6700 lb. of incendiaries and delayed action bombs, they attacked railway installations at such places as **Rangoon**, **Prome**, **Bassien**, **Myingyan**, **Shwebo** and **Taungup**. Wellington crews also made an important contribution to the outcome of the **Imphal** battle when, during the most critical period, they undertook transport missions ranging from supply dropping to ferrying bombs to forward airfields. They also bombed roads and bridges leading to the battle area.

There were sixty-eight New Zealand pilots, navigators, bomb-aimers, wireless operators and air gunners with the **RAF** bomber squadrons during 1944. Outstanding among those who flew Wellingtons was Wing Commander R. G. Maddox, who continued in charge of No. 99 Squadron. Under his command were experienced captains like Flight Lieutenant

Beca ¹ and Pilot Officer H. D. Hampton, who won commendation for their work. Beca frequently led bomber formations and in one period of less than four months flew thirty missions. He was then sent on attachment to a Dakota squadron, delivering supplies to the **Imphal** valley. One day when low cloud and almost continuous rain reduced the number of sorties to this area to six, three of these were flown by Beca and his crew. Hampton demonstrated his flying ability during a raid against **Rangoon**. When still a considerable distance from the port, one engine of the Wellington became almost useless. Although the bomber steadily lost height and presented a good target for the defending anti-aircraft gunners, Hampton flew on and pressed home his attack. By carefully nursing his good engine, he eventually reached **Chittagong** to make a safe landing after flying on one engine for four hours and twenty minutes, and for much of this time over enemy territory.

Among other pilots who achieved good records with Wellingtons were Flying Officer B. A. Jones, ² Flying Officer Williamson, ³ Pilot Officer Ross ⁴ and Warrant Officer Trangmar. ⁵ Equally good work

¹ Flight Lieutenant G. S. Beca, DFC; born **Putaruru**, 30 Apr 1921; draper's assistant; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1939.

² Flight Lieutenant B. A. Jones; born **Auckland**, 29 May 1920; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

³ Flight Lieutenant A. S. Williamson; born **Geraldine**, 30 Jun 1915; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

⁴ Flying Officer J. L. Ross; born **Kartigi**, 13 Oct 1909; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 19 Oct 1941.

⁵ Flying Officer R. H. Trangmar; born **Wanganui**, 25 Sep 1922; garage assistant; joined **RNZAF** 19 Oct 1941.

was done by Warrant Officers Wilkinson ¹ and O'Connor ² as navigators, Flight Sergeant Stokes, ³ bomb-aimer, Flight Sergeant McColl, ⁴ wireless operator, and Flight Sergeant McCaughey, ⁵ air gunner. McColl and McCaughey, who flew in the same crew, shared two unenviable experiences. Returning from **Rangoon** one night in April, they were forced to bale out when their Wellington rapidly lost height after its port engine failed. Three months later they were concerned in a crash landing shortly after take-off, when their machine refused to climb owing to faults in its fabric.

Flying Officer Haycock, ⁶ Warrant Officers Stocker ⁷ and Bardell ⁸ were New Zealanders who won distinction with Liberator bombers. On one occasion during a low-level attack against a bridge, Haycock's machine was intercepted by an Oscar fighter. As a result of his skilful manoeuvring and the accurate fire of the gunners, the enemy machine was destroyed without damage to the Liberator. Stocker flew many successful bombing missions as captain and took part in a series of successful long-range minelaying missions to Penang, which involved round trips of more than 3000 miles and flying over the sea for eighteen hours. Bardell was a veteran air gunner who, including his sorties with Bomber Command in England, had completed fifty-five sorties by mid-1944. Good work with Liberators was also done by Flying Officer Clarke, ⁹ Warrant Officers Barr, ¹⁰ Carter ¹¹ and Marwick ¹² as pilots, Pilot Officer J. N. Culleton as navigator, Warrant Officer Tringham, ¹³ wireless operator, and Warrant Officer McKay, ¹⁴ air gunner.

¹ Flying Officer E. G. Wilkinson; born **Wellington**, 12 Feb 1920; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** 21 Mar 1942.

² Flying Officer B. W. O'Connor; born **Timaru**, 24 Nov 1920; civil service cadet; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1941.

³ Warrant Officer F. N. Stokes; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jan 1923; clerical cadet; joined **RNZAF** 7 Mar 1942.

⁴ Warrant Officer C. J. McColl; born **Otorohanga**, 14 Apr 1915; linesman; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940.

⁵ Warrant Officer W. J. McCaughey; born Port Rush, County Antrim, 22 Apr 1922; metal worker; joined **RNZAF** 17 Mar 1941.

⁶ Flying Officer J. E. Haycock, DFC; born **Richmond**, 15 May 1923; baker; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1942.

⁷ Warrant Officer E. P. Stocker, DFC; born Kaikoura, 10 Jan 1924; clerk; joined **RNZAF** May 1942.

⁸ Warrant Officer E. D. Bardell, DFC; born Wisbech, England, 20 Mar 1911; concrete worker; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1940.

⁹ Flying Officer J. M. Clarke; born **Auckland**, 12 Jun 1923; hatter; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1942.

¹⁰ Warrant Officer L. A. Barr; born **Onehunga**, 26 Apr 1917; butcher; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1941; prisoner of war, 6 Oct 1944.

¹¹ Warrant Officer J. T. Carter; born Grey Lynn, 19 Aug 1922; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941.

¹² Flying Officer J. R. Marwick; born **Timaru**, 7 Jul 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 21 Dec 1941.

¹³ Flying Officer J. T. Tringham; born **Napier**, 7 Dec 1921; postman; joined **RNZAF** 29 Dec 1939.

¹⁴ Warrant Officer G. R. McKay; born **Wyndham**, 10 Sep 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

and Liberator bombers of the General Reconnaissance force played an essential if unspectacular part in the war at sea. With only a relatively small number of both German and Japanese submarines operating in the **Indian Ocean**, sightings and attacks were few and far between but the continuous patrols did help to keep enemy submarines submerged and out of range of our shipping. The Allies were thus able to maintain a continuous flow of reinforcements and supplies into Indian ports, without which the land campaigns could not have prospered.

For the sixty New Zealand airmen with these squadrons there was at least plenty of flying, even if their convoy and anti-submarine patrols were long and monotonous and almost completely devoid of incident. Occasionally things were enlivened for men like Flying Officer Dean,¹ Warrant Officer Baker² and Flight Sergeant Skinner,³ members of No. 160 Liberator Squadron, when they took part in bombing missions against Japanese bases in **Sumatra**, the Andamans and the Nicobar Islands. But for the most part it was routine flying— 500 miles or more out to sea, then a long patrol and finally back to base at night. Their area of operations was vast—the **Indian Ocean** itself is more than twice the size of the **North Atlantic**—and their bases varied from a crocodile and mosquito infested lake in the jungle to an azure lagoon bounded by golden (but glamourless) beaches. Their weather was everything from a clear blue sky to a cyclone. ‘Sometimes you could see forty miles (and, of course, be seen) or else you could not see your wing tips. Tropical storms would appear suddenly as from nowhere; one over base could be inconvenient when you were already passed P.L.E.’⁴ The ground and air crews had to be masters of improvisation, especially when on detachment at remote spots where facilities were few and spares scarce. One Catalina did an engine change on an island beach; another flew back with its hull patched up by wood and locally mixed concrete after an encounter with an uncharted coral reef.

It was in such operations and under such conditions that Wing Commander N. McClelland led No. 205 Catalina Flying Boat Squadron for over eighteen months, achieving a fine record both as pilot and

squadron commander. The vast area covered by his crews may be judged from the fact that its main base was at Koggala in **Ceylon**, with forward detachments at Addu Atoll in the Maldive Islands and at Diego Garcia, some 500 miles farther south.

¹ Flight Lieutenant J. D. Dean; born **Auckland**, 1 Nov 1915; dairy farmer; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1941.

² Warrant Officer P. Baker; born **Otaki**, 24 Mar 1911; driver; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941.

³ Flight Sergeant D. H. Skinner; born Dunsandel, 24 Jan 1922; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 25 Jan 1942; killed on air operations, 6 May 1944.

⁴ Prudent limit of endurance.

With other squadrons Flying Officers Ballantyne ¹ and Vowles ² and Pilot Officers Glynn ³ and Beale ⁴ also had good records as aircrew of these flying-boats. With No. 230 Sunderland Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Comrie ⁵ captained a New Zealand crew with Flying Officer Mason ⁶ as his co-pilot. Flying Officer Hayward, ⁷ Flight Sergeant McDonnell ⁸ and Flight Sergeant Dillon ⁹ of No. 203 Squadron were prominent as captains of Wellingtons.

With eight million square miles of ocean to cover, it was not possible for the squadrons to provide complete protection for the numerous convoys and sinkings of supply ships took place at irregular intervals. In this connection an important feature of their work was the search for Allied seamen whose ships had been torpedoed. In July, for example, a concentration of enemy submarines in shipping lanes to the east of the Maldives resulted in the sinking of five ships. Catalina aircraft which took part in search operations were instrumental in the rescue of no fewer than 244 survivors. On one such errand of mercy Wing

Commander McClelland flew a Catalinain search of a raft carrying men from the steamer *Sutlej*, which had been sunk fifty days earlier. He was successful in locating the raft and dropped supplies to its occupants. He then flew away and later guided a naval vessel to the scene. As a result eighteen survivors were picked up to end what had been a particularly grim ordeal.

New Zealand airmen took part in some notable tasks. They flew with the Liberators and Catalinas which provided anti-submarine escort for a floating dock which, in April 1944, was towed from **Bombay** to Trincomalee at the rather heartbreaking speed of four knots. In the same month they took part in the successful escort of the Eastern Fleet in its strike with carrier-borne aircraft against **Sabang** in north-west **Sumatra**. They were also present when the General Reconnaissance squadrons flew fifty sorties in two days to cover the return of the fleet after its attack at **Sourabaya**.

¹ Flight Lieutenant R. F. Ballantyne; born **Christchurch**, 1 Feb 1909; draper; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1941.

² Flight Lieutenant J. C. Vowles; born Ngatea, 4 Jan 1916; dairy farmer; joined **RNZAF** 15 Jun 1941.

³ Flying Officer A. W. Glynn; born **Auckland**, 8 Dec 1920; postal messenger; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1941.

⁴ Flying Officer A. L. Beale; born **Greymouth**, 17 Feb 1913; driver; joined **RNZAF** 21 Dec 1940.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant J. R. Comrie; born **Wellington**, 6 Dec 1919; pay clerk; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1941.

⁶ Flight Lieutenant J. E. N. Mason; born Runciman, **Auckland**, 4 Jun 1923; teacher; joined **RNZAF** 3 Sep 1942.

⁷ Flight Lieutenant H. B. Hayward; born Feilding, 6 Sep 1918; teacher; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1942.

⁸ Flying Officer E. R. McDonnell; born **Greymouth**, 8 Oct 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Sep 1941.

⁹ Warrant Officer R. D. Dillon; born **Auckland**, 29 May 1923; electrical engineer; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1941.

A group of twenty-five New Zealanders served with the Hurricanes and Spitfires engaged on coastal defence and with the Beaufort torpedo-bombers and Beaufighters of the small strike force. Their lot was an unenviable one. For those with the fighter squadrons there was little else but a continuous round of standing at 'readiness' and training, while in the absence of suitable targets for their torpedoes the Beaufort crews flew as escort to coastal convoys. One outstanding success was however scored by the two Beaufighter squadrons which operated against coastal traffic moving along the Tenasserim coast and across the Gulf of Martaban to **Rangoon**. Patrolling at extreme range over the Andaman Sea, they sighted a convoy of Japanese coastal vessels heading for **Rangoon**. During two days they made four attacks with rocket projectiles and cannon fire, during which they succeeded in hitting fourteen ships, the majority of which were either beached or left blazing.

The men of the RAF Photographic Wing flew Spitfires, Mosquitos and Mitchells and they performed a variety of tasks. One of these was to keep a continuous watch on Japanese airfields and lines of communication, another the assessment of damage caused by the strategic bombers; they also made frequent reconnaissances of the Burmese coast, the **Andaman Islands** and the Gulf of **Siam**, and a considerable effort was expended on a photographic survey of **Burma** to provide up-to-date maps, especially of the battle areas. In the course of these duties there were some notable performances. For example, on one day alone no fewer than eighty Japanese airfields were photographed; on another, almost the entire Burmese railway system was covered.

Squadron Leader Newman ¹ did particularly fine work as a Mosquito pilot with No. 684 Squadron. Newman flew a Mosquito out to **India** from the **United Kingdom** towards the end of 1943 and during his first few months on operations made several reconnaissance sorties of over 2000 miles. On one of these, a photographic survey of the Nancoury Islands in the Nicobars, he flew 2256 miles which, at the time, was claimed as a record non-stop flight by the Mosquito Mark IX aircraft. Of his subsequent work, an episode which occurred in late August 1944 deserves to be recorded. Sent to make a high-level reconnaissance of the **Burma- Thailand** railway, Newman found, on reaching his objective, that conditions were unsuitable for high-level photography. But as it was important that the railway should be covered, he decided to carry on at low-level and went down to skim along the winding track for 45 miles at less than 1500 feet. At this

¹ Wing Commander K. J. Newman, DFC and bar; born **Hokianga**, 15 Feb 1912; logging contractor; joined **RNZAF** 7 May 1940; commanded No. 684 PR Sqdn, 1945–46.

low altitude the Mosquito soon became the target for intense anti-aircraft fire, but by skilful flying and violent double-banking in the five-second intervals between the camera exposures he managed to avoid being hit. Eventually, with lowering cloud covering the hills on both sides, he turned back along the line to cover areas he had missed on the outward flight. By this time the enemy gunners had gauged his speed and movements more accurately and very soon a burst hit the Mosquito, damaging one of the propellers and smashing Newman's oxygen regulator. During the long return trip the weather was so bad that he had to fly at 25,000 feet to get above the storm clouds but, sharing his navigator's oxygen supply, he reached base safely with some very useful photographs. Such were his efforts during this period of the **Burma** war that Newman received immediate awards of both the Distinguished Flying Cross and bar.

Other prominent Mosquito pilots were Flight Lieutenants Irvine ¹ and Murray ² and Flying Officer Dent. ³ Flight Lieutenant Parry ⁴ spent a long period flying Spitfires and won distinction for his work; Warrant Officer R. K. Brown ⁵ and Flight Sergeant Prichard ⁶ also achieved good records as pilots of these aircraft.

¹ Flight Lieutenant J. Irvine, DFC; born **New Plymouth**, 20 Oct 1918; student; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1941.

² Squadron Leader W. M. Murray, DFC; born **Mosgiel**, 10 Jan 1914; fat-stock buyer; joined **RNZAF** 1 Dec 1940.

³ Flying Officer C. S. Dent; born **Cambridge**, 15 Mar 1914; accountant; joined **RNZAF** Sep 1940.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant N. L. Parry, DFC; born **Auckland**, 10 Apr 1920; accountant; joined **RNZAF** 25 May 1941.

⁵ Warrant Officer R. K. Brown; born **Rotorua**, 18 Oct 1922; clerical cadet; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1941.

⁶ Flying Officer R. C. Prichard; born **Huntermville**, 27 Feb 1913; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 13 Apr 1941.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

CHAPTER 16 – BACK TO RANGOON—THE LAST PHASE

CHAPTER 16

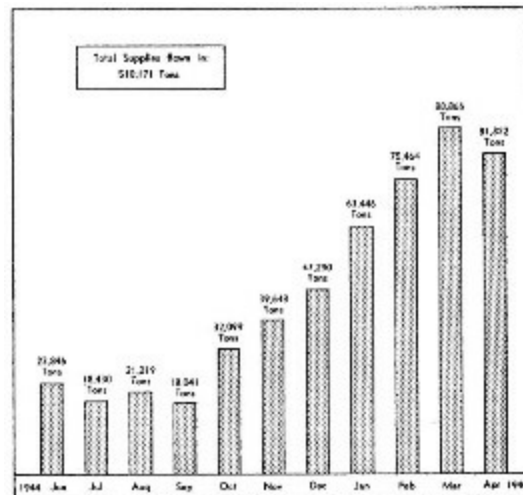
Back to Rangoon—the Last Phase

THE Allied armies were now everywhere on the offensive, fighting their way back into those regions of **Burma from which they had been driven in the dark days of 1942. The reopening of overland communications with **China** was still their main objective, but to this another had recently been added, namely ‘the destruction or expulsion of all Japanese forces in **Burma**.’ And at long last, after years of frustration and disappointment, both these tasks now seemed possible of early fulfilment. For Japanese resistance was becoming noticeably weaker; their air power had withered away and the army, although it continued to make a tenacious stand on a number of occasions, was no longer capable of dealing with the strong formations which now opposed it.**

The Allied air forces were giving powerful support at every stage of the advance; the achievements of their transport squadrons in particular continued to be nothing short of the spectacular. Indeed, as the Supreme Commander points out in his despatch, ‘air operations formed the background and the unceasing accompaniment to the land fighting. Land advances depended for their success on air protection from enemy interference. In most cases the air forces provided the spearhead of the attack; during the operations they fought the enemy in the air and harried him on the ground, and after the battle they continued to attack his communications and bases and to weaken his fighting organisation. It will not be possible to form an authentic overall picture of the land/air campaign if this is not borne in mind.’

During these last months of the **Burma war which saw the final triumph of air power and air supply, a New Zealand airman, Air Marshal Sir Keith Park, was in command of all the Allied air forces in **South-east Asia**. He took over in February 1945, relieving Air Marshal Sir Guy Garrod, ¹ who had been in temporary control since the departure of Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse three months earlier.**

¹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Guy Garrod, GBE, KCB, MC, DFC, Legion of Merit (US), Order of Cloud and Banner (Ch), Order of George I (Gk); born **London**, 13 Apr 1891; served Leicestershire Regiment, 1914–15; joined RFC 1915; Air Member for Training, Air Council 1940–43; Deputy AOC-in-C, **India**, 1943; Deputy Allied Air C-in-C, SE Asia, 1943–45; C-in-C **RAF, Mediterranean and Middle East**, 1945.



AIR SUPPLY IN BURMA
(June 1944 to April 1945)

AIR SUPPLY IN BURMA (June 1944 to April 1945)

Note: In addition to the above supplies, some 515,000 personnel were carried and over 125,000 casualties evacuated by air during this period.

Source: Appendix II of Despatch on Air Operations, June 1944-May 1945, by Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park.

It had originally been intended that Peirse's successor should be Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, ¹ but he was killed in an air crash while flying to take up his appointment. By a queer twist of fate Park thus replaced the man who had so strongly criticised his tactics during the Battle of **Britain** and who had succeeded him at No. 11 Group, Fighter Command.

¹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, KCB, DSO, Order of Polonia Restituta (Pol), Order of Kutuzov (**USSR**), Legion of

Merit (US); born Mobberley, Cheshire, 11Jul 1892; joined Lancashire Fusiliers, 1914; seconded RFC 1916 and **RAF** 1918; permanent commission **RAF**, 1919; AOC No. 12 Fighter Group, 1937–40; AOC No. 11 Fighter Group, 1940–42; AOC-in-C, Fighter Command, 1942–43; AOC-in-C, AEAFF, 1943–44; missing 14 Nov 1944 and death presumed.

In Burma, as in **Britain**, Egypt and **Malta**, Park showed himself a forceful and resolute leader. Under his direction air supply and air support in **Burma** reached their peak, and this was done by imaginative planning and by resource, energy and courage in execution. Park's responsibilities were heavy and his forces spread over a wide area, but it was not long before his lean figure and smiling face were familiar to many of the men serving under him, by whom he was soon regarded with great affection. 'Sir Keith,' writes an **RAF** squadron commander, 'would come over to us at dispersal and squat down with a muster of pilots around him. Within a few minutes he would be freely discussing the minutest details of an operation and displaying an uncanny understanding of our problems. At the same time everybody could ventilate their pet grouch with a sure feeling that if it was possible something would be done to remedy the matter.'

Two other New Zealanders, both of whom had already achieved distinction in the **Royal Air Force**, held senior posts in South-east **Asia** during the closing stages of the campaign. One was Air Vice- Marshal Jarman, ¹ who was in control of No. **229 Group, RAF**, which was concerned with air transport and ferrying aircraft behind the operational area. The other was Group Captain H. N. G. Isherwood. ² He was in charge of a transport wing headquarters that was responsible for one-third of all supplies going forward by air to **15 Corps** in Arakan and to Fourteenth Army in central **Burma**.

As well as these senior officers there were quite a number of New Zealanders holding responsible posts in the air organisation. Some of their names have already been recorded but others now deserve mention. Wing Commander Chrystall, ³ for example, who had flown with No. 27

Squadron in **India** before the war, was now busy organising the dropping of agents and supplies behind the Japanese in **Burma**. Wing Commander Durrant, ⁴ a specialist navigation officer with No. **229 Group**, was responsible for greater efficiency along the airline and ferry routes within **India**. Wing Commander McCarthy ⁵ was an

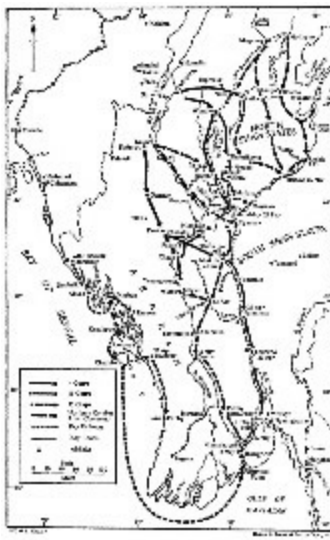
¹ Air Vice-Marshal G. T. Jarman, DSO, DFC; **RAF**; born **Ashburton**, 20 Feb 1906; joined **RAF** 1930; permanent commission 1936; CGI, No. 2 FTS, 1939–40; commanded No. 77 Sqdn, 1940–41; No. 76 Sqdn, 1941; No. 19 OTU, 1941–43; **RAF** Station, Wigtown, 1943; DCAS, **RNZAF**, 1943–44; AOC No. **229 Group**, ACSEA, 1945.

² Group Captain H. N. G. Isherwood, DFC, AFC, Order of Lenin (**USSR**); born **Petone**, 13 Jul 1905; served with NZ Mtd Rifles, 1924–30; joined **RAF** 1930; permanent commission 1936; flying duties, Aeronautical and Armament Experimental Establishment, 1936–41; Sector Commander, No. 9 Fighter Group, 1941; Controller, HQ No. 9 Fighter Group, 1941; commanded No. 151 Hurricane Wing in **Russia**, 1941; commanded **RAF** Stations, Church Stanton, Valley and Woodvale, 1942–44; **RAF** Station, Mauripur, **India**, 1944–45; commanded No. 342 Wing, SE Asia, 1945; killed in aircraft accident, 24 Apr 1950.

³ Wing Commander G. J. H. Chrystall; born Dunedin, 4 May 1918; joined **RAF** 1937; transferred **RNZAF** Jan 1944.

⁴ Wing Commander L. E. Durrant; born Feilding, 17 Feb 1915; joined **RAF** Jan 1940; transferred **RNZAF** Aug 1944.

⁵ Wing Commander F. McCarthy, m.i.d.; born **Auckland**, 2 Jun 1908; joined **RAF** 2 Jul 1941; transferred **RNZAF** 1 Oct 1944.



THE RECONQUEST OF BURMA, NOVEMBER 1944 - May 1945

RAF Provost Marshal, and there were men like Wing Commander Cornford ¹ and Squadron Leader Butement ² who saw long service in equipment and photographic duties respectively.

Nine New Zealanders commanded **RAF** squadrons operating in **South-east Asia Command** during 1945. Wing Commander A. H. Harding, a veteran of **Coastal Command** and the **Middle East**, was in charge of a transport squadron and Wing Commander N. McClelland continued in control of Catalina flying-boats. Wing Commander K. J. Newman led the **RAF** squadron of photo-reconnaissance Mosquitos in its final operations, while Beaufighters were controlled by Squadron Leader A. E. Browne. ³ The others were Squadron Leader J. M. Cranstone, who led Thunderbolt fighters, and Squadron Leaders Humphreys, ⁴ B. T. Shannon, G. S. Sharp and R. E. Stout, each commanding Hurricane squadrons. The veteran Hurricane fighter-bomber which had already proved its worth in **Burma** was still a most exact weapon in the hands of the experienced pilots now flying it, and they enjoyed an immense reputation for their accurate pinpointing of targets within a comparatively few yards of our own positions.

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By the beginning of 1945 our land forces, advancing on three fronts, had made substantial progress. In north-east **Burma**, the army of the

United States General Sultana (Stilwell's successor), which consisted chiefly of Chinese divisions but which also included British and American units, had pushed well south of Myitkyina. During January they linked up with Chinese forces moving westwards of the Salween and on the 27th the famous **Burma Road** was at last reopened. Meanwhile, to the south-west in Arakan, General Christison's British 15 Corps had occupied **Akyab**, and this was followed by a series of amphibious landings, the chief of which was on Ramree Island, which was taken in February. The capture of **Akyab** and Ramree was particularly valuable, for they provided sites for airfields which could facilitate air supply to our forces in central **Burma**. Here the Fourteenth Army had crossed the Chindwin and was fanning out over the central **Burma** plain. Its immediate objective was the capture of **Mandalay**,

¹ Wing Commander A. L. Cornford; **RAF**; born **Napier**, 20 Aug 1914; joined **RAF** Jan 1939.

² Squadron Leader J. C. S. Butement; born Dunedin, 5 Dec 1911; colour film process chemist; joined **RAF** Jun 1940.

³ Squadron Leader A. E. Browne, DFC; born **Auckland**, 14 Jul 1913; factory manager; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940; commanded No. 89 Sqdn, SE Asia, 1945.

⁴ Squadron Leader J. S. Humphreys; born **Greymouth**, 13 Nov 1918; joined **RAF** Apr 1939; transferred **RNZAF** Apr 1945; commanded Nos 11, 60 and 8 (RIAF) Sqdns, SE Asia, 1944–45.

but already the eyes of both the troops and their courageous leader, General Slim, were fixed on a greater prize—the port and capital of **Rangoon**, 450 miles to the south. ¹

The possibility that **Rangoon** might be reached by an army travelling overland and supplied by air had not, as yet, been given serious consideration by the Allied leaders. At the **Quebec** conference a few

months previously when the reconquest of **Burma** was discussed, the general feeling was that supply difficulties would prevent our land forces from occupying southern **Burma** before the monsoon began in the following May. Elaborate plans and preparations had therefore been made for a series of airborne assaults to capture key points and for a large-scale amphibious operation, known as **dracula**, to be directed against **Rangoon** from the south.

But the whole conception of **Burma** campaigning had now been transfigured by air power. In central **Burma**, in the northern area and in Arakan, air supply had given the ground forces a degree of mobility which enabled them to exploit the slightest advantage offered by weakening enemy resistance. Simultaneously the growing weight of the close-support squadrons helped these advances to grow greater and more frequent so that even distant **Rangoon** became possible of early attainment by Fourteenth Army.

February 1945 was the month of decision. Our land forces had by then made such progress that it was decided to shelve the earlier plans, and at an historic **Calcutta** Conference Park agreed that his Air Command would accept the task of supplying and supporting the Fourteenth Army on an overland advance to **Rangoon**. This was an immense undertaking for it involved the greatest air supply operation of the war—the sustaining of an army of more than 300,000 men fighting in a country which in many respects was most unfavourable for air operations. Moreover, the penalty of failure would be severe. If the port of **Rangoon** was not reached before the monsoon broke three months hence, then the transport squadrons would have to continue this unprecedented charge through five months of rain.

Fourteenth Army forged ahead. General Slim's first intention was to bring the Japanese to action in the Shwebo plain, north of the Irrawaddy, but the enemy had now withdrawn behind that river. Slim, therefore, recast his plans and, by a remarkable series of movements, succeeded in outwitting the Japanese and secured a crossing

¹ Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 482: 'We had, in fact, been making plans quietly at Fourteenth Army Headquarters for the capture of **Rangoon** since the previous July, and in November, when our bridges over the Chindwin were either achieved or about to be achieved, we settled down to serious planning.'

over the river below **Mandalay**. Some hard fighting followed, but by the end of March both **Mandalay** and the grey bedraggled town of Meiktila were in our hands—the latter, however, only after a bitter struggle lasting several weeks. The Japanese now fell back, having suffered heavy losses both in action and from hunger, disease and fatigue. They were hampered, more than by anything else, by the almost complete breakdown of their main communications and supply system. For the patient work of our strategic bombers and of our long-range tactical squadrons which had been persistently and unobtrusively carried out over the past year had begun to yield rich dividends.

Fighters and bombers of RAF No. **221 Group**¹ were active in close support. As well as attacking enemy troops and positions, they bombed bridges, installations, headquarters and communication centres far and wide behind the Japanese lines. Frequent attacks were also made on enemy airfields to prevent the Japanese air force from interfering with our advance.

Many units were now moving forward from **Assam** and a transfer of squadrons, together with their ground staff and control centres, was far from easy. The majority were moved by air, but some had to use the indifferent roads of central and southern **Burma** which were then crowded with mechanised transport and armoured vehicles. Then, as the close-support squadrons moved down into southern **Burma**, long-range squadrons moved forward from northern **Burma** and **Assam** into the Shwebo and Meiktila area. All these moves made administration more difficult, especially during April when no fewer than eighty units were moved forward; by the end of that month No. **221 Group** was administering squadrons scattered over 600 miles from northern **Assam**

to southern **Burma**.

All this time the transport squadrons were hard at work. In a single month they delivered over 60,000 tons of food and military supplies to the operational area. Thanks to the activities of our fighters they suffered no loss in flight, but at Meiktila, where they began landing whilst the airfield was still under fire, seven Dakotas were destroyed on the ground. One machine taking on wounded for its return journey had a shell explode inside, causing further injuries to the casualties already placed aboard. As the Fourteenth Army advanced the distances to be flown increased, so that crews of Dakotas flying from **Chittagong**,

¹ **No. 221 Group**, which provided the main close air support for Fourteenth Army, consisted at this time of six squadrons of Hurricanes and three squadrons of Thunderbolts for close support; four squadrons of Spitfires for defence; three squadrons of Beaufighters and Mosquitos for long-range tactical work; two squadrons of Hurricanes for reconnaissance work; a detachment of night-fighting Beaufighters and a detachment of Spitfires for photographic reconnaissance.

Comilla and Tulihal had to take off at first light; and if, as frequently happened, they had orders to make three trips, they did not complete their work until long after dark. The strain on technical, maintenance, flying, and loading personnel was indeed terrific but everyone kept at it, determined that no failing of theirs should let the Army down. They did not fail, and on 20 March when the flag of Fourteenth Army was raised above the high red walls and the wide moat of **Mandalay's** Fort Dufferin, General Slim declared, in his Order of the Day, that 'there could have been no victory without the constant support of the Allied air forces it is their victory as much as ours.'

During April, as the Fourteenth Army continued its advance southwards, the supporting air squadrons redoubled their efforts, greatly helped by the work of airfield engineers who marched with our main spearheads, levelling and repairing captured airstrips with speed. The

Japanese Army Command was now losing touch with the realities of the situation, and to add to its confusion enemy field headquarters were bombed wherever they could be found; as a result there were instances of army commanders being unaware of the location of their units and of units being lost and without orders. At the same time our bombers began the systematic destruction of supplies piled by the Japanese in [Rangoon](#). Of some 1700 well dispersed storage units, more than half went up in flames. Railway yards, rolling stock, radar and gun emplacements, airfields, bridges and enemy camps all received the impact of air bombing; the Japanese headquarters in [Rangoon](#) was blown up and 400 killed; the river was mined by RAF Liberators, preventing its use except for the smallest craft. Meanwhile British and American transport aircraft continued to bring forward their daily loads of food, ammunition and petrol. The tonnage carried now reached an all-time record.

Thus supported and sustained from the air, British troops had, by the end of April, reached the outskirts of Pegu, where the giant figure of Buddha gazed with his strange smile on the efforts of those who scurried and fought about his feet. Our advanced units were now less than fifty miles from [Rangoon](#), and in the face of this threat the Japanese withdrew completely from the city and port they had held so long. A few days later, on 2 May, an [RAF](#) pilot on reconnaissance over [Rangoon](#), perceiving no sign of the enemy on the airfield at [Mingaladon](#), decided to land. He then entered the city and took formal possession on behalf of the Allied forces. And it was fitting that the vital part played by air power in the campaign should be rounded off by the token occupation of [Rangoon](#) by the [Royal Air Force](#).

The first troops to reach the city arrived the following evening. They came, however, from the south. For a few weeks earlier, Mountbatten and his overall land commander, General Oliver Leese, fearful that the Fourteenth Army would not reach [Rangoon](#) before the monsoon broke, had decided to launch a modified Operation dracula. Supported by [RAF No. 224 Group](#) from its Arakan base, the operation began on 1 May with the dropping of a parachute battalion and the landing of 26 Indian

Division to the south of the city. But these troops did not have to fight and their advance into **Rangoon** was more of the nature of a triumphal procession than an assault in force.

Technically, Fourteenth Army, whose forward units were still thirty miles to the north on the Pegu road, had lost the race to **Rangoon**. Nevertheless it was most certainly its drive, helped by the air force, which really won the battle. But it was a near thing. For torrential rain now began to fall as the full fury of the monsoon burst over southern **Burma**.

Japanese military power in **Burma** was now almost completely broken. For while the Fourteenth Army had been driving south towards **Rangoon**, operations had continued successfully on the other fronts. In the northern area, **Lashio** had been captured by the Chinese and the enemy driven back into the Chan States. Simultaneously in the Arakan 15 British Corps, supported by RAF No. **221 Group**, had driven the Japanese from their last stronghold at Taungup.

One more battle, however, had yet to be fought before **Burma** was entirely free. It was known as the Battle of the Sittang Bend. In their lightning thrust south our armies had left large concentrations of Japanese unaccounted for, and these were now biding their time in the rain-soaked ravines of the Pegu Yomas, awaiting an opportunity to escape across the River Sittang into **Thailand**. They eventually decided on a mass breakout in the early part of July but found their way barred by British troops. There followed one of the bloodiest episodes of the whole campaign in which Burmese guerrillas, adequately organised at last, joined to ambush and cut to pieces hundreds of the escaping enemy.

Royal Air Force fighters and bombers took a prominent part in this Sittang battle. Thunderbolt squadrons carrying three 500 lb bombs on each aircraft played havoc among squadrons of moving Japanese troops. Spitfires, too, each carrying one 500 lb bomb, pursued the enemy relentlessly. Just how effective this air action became is shown in a

message sent to Nos. 273 and 607 Squadrons by one guerrilla leader at the height of the battle. 'You are killing hundreds of Japs,' he said, 'and your perfect co-ordination and patience in reading our crude signals is saving the lives of many thousands of defenceless civilians.' Altogether in this final action of the **Burma** war the **RAF** flew a total of 3045 sorties and dropped over 700 tons of bombs. And this was done in appalling weather, with cloud ceiling often down to a few hundred feet and airfields turned into muddy lakes by the monsoon storms.

It was at the Sittang River three years earlier that the British Army had suffered a heavy defeat. Now the wheel had turned full circle. The Japanese were out of **Burma** at a cost of 100,000 dead, not counting the unnumbered skeletons in the inhospitable jungle.

An outstanding feature of the final campaign in **Burma** was that our armies advanced under cover of almost complete Allied air supremacy. This fact was at once evident to all who flew over the battlefields and noted on the enemy side little sign of activity, but saw behind the British front long lines of transport moving in uncamouflaged safety, supply dropping parachutes in use as tents and all the paraphernalia of war left lying in full view by troops who had come to regard our air supremacy as part of the nature of things in **Burma**. But this was not so and, until the end, a steady effort was required in order to keep the **Japanese Air Force** subdued. This effort consisted largely of Spitfire patrols over forward areas and attacks on enemy airfields by long-range Mustangs. A remarkable feat was the destruction of thirty-one Japanese machines on the airfield at Don Muang, near **Bangkok**, by forty American Mustangs in March 1945. This was accomplished after a flight of some 780 miles from the nearest base—a mission which in **Europe** would have corresponded to a raid on Vienna by single-engined fighters based on **London**.

It is unnecessary to record in detail the enormous advantages accruing to our ground forces as a result of this Allied dominance of the **Burma** air. It is, however, worth pausing to consider what would have happened had the enemy been allowed unrestricted use of the sky. The

air supply on which the whole land campaign hinged would have been impossible; the attrition rate of our close-support squadrons which worked with accuracy and effect would have been prohibitive and the disruption caused by our strategic bombers to the enemy's communications far to the rear could not have been such as to have materially influenced the battle.

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New Zealanders shared in all phases of the air operations. Those who flew the transport Dakotas worked extremely hard. In February 1945, for example, Warrant Officer Stent ¹ of No. 117 Squadron achieved the unusual total of 192 hours' flying despite being grounded for four days by bad weather. Remarkably good work as Dakota pilots was also done during this period by Flight Lieutenant Hamilton ² and Warrant Officer Yates ³ of No. 62 Squadron, by Warrant Officer Gifford ⁴ of No. 117 Squadron, and by Warrant Officer Deegan, ⁵ Flight Sergeants Anderson ⁶ and Mackenzie ⁷ of No. 238 Squadron.

During the crucial months while the Allied advance through central **Burma** was in progress the transport crews usually operated in good weather. It was, however, a different story after the arrival of the monsoon in May. The task of supplying the Army then became, as Group Captain Isherwood puts it, 'more dangerous than any other type of operation.' 'The crews,' he says, 'would go out two or three times daily in violent storms, frequently returning to find their own airfields flooded. Diversion was useless as all fields were flooded together so that hazardous landings in a sea of mud were a frequent experience.'

In June 1945 twelve Dakotas were lost in bad weather. It is on record that one aircraft flying over **Burma** at that time actually found itself upside-down in a storm, and it was only the skill and presence of mind of the pilot which averted disaster. Another example of the hazards crews faced during the monsoon is provided by the experience of the pilot who found himself completely closed in with cumulo-nimbus clouds during a return flight from Meiktila to **Akyab**. After three

attempts he found a break in the cloud and brought his Dakota out on to the coast opposite Ramree Island. He then descended to 300 feet, but cumulo-nimbus again closed in and, after making several unsuccessful attempts to climb out, he was eventually forced down to sea level. For almost an hour the aircraft circled, during which time the radio compass became unserviceable. Eventually the machine was turned on a reciprocal course and a small gap found, but once again the cloud closed in. In the face of this predicament the pilot

¹ Warrant Officer J. H. Stent; born **Nelson**, 26 Aug 1920; carpenter; joined **RNZAF** 16 May 1942.

² Flight Lieutenant S. W. Hamilton; born Takapau, 16 Jun 1923; railway cadet; joined **RNZAF** May 1942; killed on air operations, 13 Jul 1945.

³ Flying Officer G. R. V. Yates; born **Wellington**, 9 May 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 7 Mar 1942.

⁴ Flying Officer W. W. Gifford; born **Taihape**, 25 Sep 1920; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** May 1942.

⁵ Flying Officer T. G. Deegan; born Gulgong, Aust, 30 Mar 1911; motor engineer; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1942.

⁶ Pilot Officer R. A. L. Anderson; born Mangonui, 24 Feb 1924; student; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1942.

⁷ Pilot Officer T. D. Mackenzie; born Balclutha, 16 Jun 1923; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1942.

decided there was no alternative but to risk a blind forced landing. He therefore descended and succeeded in bringing the aircraft to rest in a paddy field without injury to his crew.

Flight Lieutenant Hamilton and his crew, however, were less fortunate. While returning through a storm one day in July, their machine crashed near **Akyab** and all perished. No message was received from the aircraft but another pilot saw it spinning out of low cloud, almost certainly after instruments had failed while in the cumulo-nimbus turbulence.

The weather was not the only difficulty with which the transport squadrons had to contend. For the ground organisation both of the Army and the **RAF**, although it improved considerably towards the end, was by no means wholly efficient. For one thing there was a certain tardiness in providing forward airfields, both for the landing of Dakotas and for the operation of fighters to protect them. Depots were not always kept fully stocked by the Army 'Q' staff, for there were never enough lorries either in the rear or forward areas. And since it was the practice to keep each main type of commodity at separate airfields, the supply crews had to fly from field to field if they were to carry a mixed freight. Again, at forward airfields, controllers often kept the transport Dakotas circling while tactical aircraft took off on routine operations, and until late in the campaign very little provision was made to feed and rest the crews of the supply aircraft.

As the Army advanced southwards transport crews were also subjected to the unnecessary strain of longer and longer flights from bases in **India**. This was because of the delay in restoring the airfields at **Akyab** and Ramree after their capture in order to shorten the air supply route to central **Burma**. Ramree Island was occupied towards the end of January 1945, but not until mid-April were its airfields in use for transport operations. At **Akyab**, captured several weeks earlier, these were not in full progress until 1 April. 'Had it not been for continual pressure by the Air Command,' writes Sir Keith Park in his despatch, 'it is probable that the development of these bases would have lagged interminably and the supply of forces in central and southern **Burma** have been insufficient to exploit the victories around **Mandalay**. It is difficult to describe the urgency and frequency of the representations

that were necessary to awaken the Army to the part they must play in developing an air line of communication.'

Altogether, though easy to condemn in retrospect, it is difficult not to agree with Park's conclusion that 'the campaign in **Burma** would have been rendered easier had the engineering resources that were poured into less profitable projects been directed towards timely building of forward airfields, more efficient supply depots and stronger lines of communication to the air haulage centres. The Ledo Road, for example, is surely the longest white elephant in the world. Had the wealth of ability and material that went to its building been employed in strengthening the air supply system the recapture of **Burma** could probably have been advanced by an appreciable period.'

New Zealand fighter pilots flew Hurricanes, Spitfires, Thunderbolts, Beaufighters and Mosquitos and they operated over two main regions—the Arakan and central **Burma**. Spitfire pilots were employed mainly on defensive patrols to intercept sneak raids by Japanese fighters on our forward areas. The Hurricanes and Thunderbolts, on the other hand, were mainly concerned with attacking ground targets in support of the Army, but along with the Spitfires they also escorted Dakotas on their supply missions. Beaufighter and Mosquito crews ranged farther afield to bomb and strafe Japanese shipping, supply dumps and railways.

While British forces were engaged in clearing the Arakan, Thunderbolts led by Squadron Leader Cranstone and Hurricanes led by Squadron Leader Geoffrey Sharp took a prominent part in the supporting air operations. Both men proved themselves skilful leaders in attacks that had frequently to be delivered at low level and against well-defended enemy positions. The Nigerian Regiment presented Sharp with a Japanese sword in token of his squadron's co-operation. Flight Lieutenant Simpson ¹ of No. 67 Squadron, who had flown in the defence of **Rangoon** in 1942, Flight Lieutenant Jenkins, ² a flight commander with No. 5 Squadron, and Warrant Officer Craighead, ³ flying Thunderbolts with No. 258 Squadron, also saw action over the Arakan.

The effectiveness of the fighter pilots' work is seen in messages received from the Army. 'Successful air strike this morning enabled our troops to occupy feature without opposition,' runs one signal from **26 Division**, and from 82 Division came the more cryptic but equally enthusiastic: 'Strike very successful. Many thanks. Infantry on all objectives. Vive le Sport.' These were typical of the day-to-day operations, and to them was added General Oliver Leese's congratulations to the squadrons of No. **224 Group** on 'the wonderful support given to **15 Corps** during the operations leading to the capture of **Akyab**.'

¹ Squadron Leader C. McG. Simpson, DFC; born **Auckland**, 10 Feb 1922; clerical cadet; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

² Flight Lieutenant R. H. Jenkins; born Warkworth, 21 Sep 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Nov 1940.

³ Warrant Officer J. W. Craighead; born **Christchurch**, 11 Nov 1919; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1941.

Akyab was, in fact, taken unopposed following sustained air action against the Japanese there. A large-scale amphibious assault had been prepared, but on the day before it was due to be launched two Hurricane pilots reported signals from the islanders that the Japanese had gone. A few hours later **Akyab** was 'occupied' by its own former judge, Wing Commander Bradley, **RNZAF**, ¹ who landed in a light aircraft and was greeted by his friend the local doctor.

Fighter pilots of No. 67 Squadron were in action over the island a few days later when six Oscar fighter-bombers attempted a surprise attack. All but one of the intruders were shot down. Flight Lieutenant Simpson accounted for two of them and Warrant Officer McQuarrie ² destroyed another. In so doing, the two New Zealanders avenged the loss of a gallant fellow countryman, Warrant Officer Horan, ³ rear-gunner in

an air-sea rescue Otter that was shot down by the Japanese fighters. The Otter, a slow and vulnerable machine, had been airborne when the Japanese came over. All six Oscars attacked it. Horan returned their fire, was hit in one hand but continued to operate his gun with the other. Then he was hit again and mortally wounded, but his pilot was able to beach the burning aircraft and the rest of the crew were saved. By remaining at his post to fight on against heavy odds, Horan certainly upheld the finest traditions of the service.

Fighter operations over central **Burma** in support of the Fourteenth Army were remarkable for their intensity and for the high degree of success achieved. When, for example, **33 Corps** was attempting to cross the Irrawaddy, north of **Mandalay**, Hurricane squadrons moved forward to Onbauk, only a few miles from the battle, and gave decisive close support. They did similar good work against the Japanese holding out at Fort Dufferin, in **Mandalay** itself, but their most valuable contribution was the day-to-day 'basha-busting' and the attacking of enemy bunkers and trenches cleverly hidden in *chaung* or among trees. 'Bombing exactly where we wanted it,' runs a typical signal from the Army. 'Direct hit on 105 mm. gun Morale effect terrific.'

In making their attacks the fighter pilots were now often helped by what were known as Visual Control Posts—experienced observers flying in light aircraft who pinpointed targets often concealed from ground observation and passed directions to the fighter-bombers. These then swooped to the attack and the liquid napalm fire-bombs

¹ Wing Commander J. B. G. Bradley, CBE; born **India**, 12 Mar 1899; sessions judge; joined **RNZAF** May 1942; deputy Chief Civil Affairs Officer, **Burma**, 1944–45.

² Flying Officer P. M. McQuarrie; born Bluff, 25 May 1922; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 19 Oct 1941.

³ Warrant Officer J. S. Horan, m.i.d.; born **Onehunga**, 12 Apr

1920; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** 13 Feb 1940; killed on air operations, 9 Jan 1945.

they used, in conjunction with high explosive, had an appalling effect on the enemy. Indeed, Army reports noted a tendency on the part of troops 'to watch the exhibition rather than to get on with the attack.' Certainly this well-controlled air support helped to reduce our casualties and on occasion the infantry were able to occupy enemy positions unopposed.

Squadron Leaders J. S. Humphreys, R. E. Stout and B. T. Shannon each commanded Hurricanes thus engaged in support of the Fourteenth Army. All three men achieved fine records. Stout, for example, was now on his third tour, having commenced operations with Hurricanes during the retreat from **Burma**; he completed a total of 221 sorties. Some idea of the sustained effort these leaders and their pilots made in support of the Army may be gleaned from the fact that Humphreys' squadron alone flew over 1300 sorties during February and March 1945.

Another successful Hurricane pilot at this time was Flight Lieutenant J. D. McPhail, who commanded a flight in No. 20 Squadron. McPhail took part in a remarkable operation near Myinmu in mid-February. Here the enemy had concentrated most of his precious tanks and with great cunning concealed them in what appeared to be small native huts, camouflaged with the boughs of trees. One pilot, his suspicions aroused, fired his gun and ripped off the roof of one hut to reveal a tank. Other Hurricanes soon joined in and twelve tanks were quickly uncovered and destroyed. This feat brought an exuberant signal from a nearby British division. 'Nippon Hardware Corporation has gone bust,' it read. 'Nice work. Tanks a million.'

Thunderbolt fighter-bomber pilots did equally good work. Flying with No. 79 Squadron was Squadron Leader Vanderpump, ¹ a distinguished pilot who had formerly commanded Kittyhawk and Corsair squadrons in the **Pacific**. He had come to **Burma** to study close-support tactics and it

was typical of him that he should do this from the cockpit of a Thunderbolt.

New Zealand Spitfire pilots flew during this period of the campaign with Nos. 17, 152, 273 and 607 Squadrons. In the latter unit there were eight New Zealanders, and Flight Lieutenant G. W. W. Smith ² commanded one of the flights. The Spitfires played a notable part in the battle of the Sittang Bend when, in addition to ground strafing, they dropped supplies to our troops engaged in close fighting in difficult country and at the height of the monsoon.

¹ Squadron Leader M. T. Vanderpump, DFC, DFC (US); born **Auckland**, 14 May 1920; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 9 Apr 1940; commanded No. 19 RNZAF Sqdn, 1944, and No. 24 RNZAF Sqdn, 1944–45; killed in aircraft accident, 2 Apr 1955.

² Squadron Leader G. W. W. Smith; born **Wellington**, 25 Oct 1921; insurance clerk; joined **RNZAF** 24 Nov 1940.

Beaufighters operating on night intruder missions over **Burma** were led by Squadron Leader A. E. Browne, a former night-fighter pilot over **Britain**. Beaufighters also ranged far and wide over **Burma** by day, attacking enemy communications by road, rail, river and sea. Flying Officer Bennett ¹ and Warrant Officer McPherson ² both lost their lives in such operations; another pilot, Warrant Officer Osboldstone, ³ was shot down behind the enemy lines but was uninjured; he was taken prisoner but was fortunate enough to be sent to **Rangoon**, where he was released when that city was captured shortly afterwards.

Mention must also be made of the work of the men who flew Mosquito light-bombers. Squadron Leader I. A. Sutherland, for example, commanded a flight in No. 110 Squadron and made many attacks against long-range targets. He was lost only a few weeks before the end, his burnt-out aircraft being found in the foothills near Magwe. Flight Lieutenant Buchanan, ⁴ who had previously completed a tour of

operations with Hudsons at **Guadalcanal**, suffered a similar fate after a very successful period with No. 110 Squadron.

Another Mosquito pilot, Flight Lieutenant Emeny ⁵ of No. 45 Mosquito Squadron, survived a harrowing experience. On 9 November 1944, he took off with six other Mosquitos to attack Meiktila airfield. Over the target the Mosquitos met determined opposition from both fighters and flak. Emeny's aircraft was hit, burst into flames and crashed with such force that he and his navigator were reported 'missing believed killed'. But both men somehow managed to hack their way out of the wreckage and, although injured and suffering from burns, they crawled to a native village near Meiktila. Here they were robbed by Burmese and then betrayed to the Japanese. The two airmen were taken to an army post, where they were kept standing for four nights and three days without food in an unsuccessful effort to make them divulge information. They were then removed to **Rangoon** jail. Emeny had severe burns about the head and severe skin injuries to one leg, but the Japanese gave him no medical attention and he was forced to doctor himself with his first-aid kit. Emeny, who in civilian life had had some experience of veterinary work, later assisted in the medical care of prisoners, who received little, if any, such attention from the Japanese.

¹ Flying Officer H. J. Bennett; born Tuatapere, 11 Oct 1915; farmer; joined **RNZAF** 17 Aug 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Feb 1945.

² Warrant Officer E. W. McPherson; born **Onehunga**, 25 Apr 1923; clerk; joined **RNZAF** 9 Nov 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Feb 1945.

³ Flying Officer E. J. Osboldstone; born **Wanganui**, 27 Dec 1919; customs clerk; joined **RNZAF** 10 Mar 1941; prisoner of war, 14 Dec 1944.

⁴ Flight Lieutenant J. G. Buchanan; born **Auckland**, 12 Mar

1920; teacher; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1942; killed on air operations, 2 May 1945.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant C. S. Emeny; born **Wellington**, 11 Jan 1920; farmhand; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1940; prisoner of war, 9 Nov 1944.

Liberator heavy bombers played an important part in the final stages of the campaign. Japanese supply routes into **Burma**, especially the **Bangkok- Moulmein** railway, remained a primary target and continued to receive repeated attacks by day as well as by night. Mines were also laid in enemy waters, a task in which the crews of No. 160 Squadron, based on **Ceylon**, operated regularly; their longest sorties were to **Singapore**, a round trip of 3350 miles which involved twenty-one hours' flying.

During this period the Liberators were also frequently employed in close support of our ground forces. Indeed, while the Fourteenth Army was fighting its way south towards **Rangoon**, over half the heavy bomber missions were directed against targets on or near the battlefield. These included storage dumps near the Japanese railhead at Madaya and the district of Yenangyaung and, later on, villages lying in the path of our troops moving against Meiktila. During the assault on **Mandalay**, the Liberators joined in to smash Japanese strongpoints and kill about a thousand of the enemy. 'We got a great kick out of helping the Army right on the spot,' writes Flying Officer J. A. Wilkinson, who flew as wireless operator with the Commanding Officer of No. 99 Squadron. 'Much of our work took us right into **Siam**, hitting at Japanese communications but it had not the same thrill as we experienced in close support.'

Some forty New Zealanders—pilots, navigators, wireless operators and air gunners—flew RAF Liberators over **Burma** during 1945. Of the pilots the work of Flying Officer 'Johnny' Haycock was more or less typical. Operating first with No. 99 and then with No. 159 Squadron, he took part in raids on targets in the Arakan, in central **Burma**, **Bangkok** and **Rangoon**. He had a narrow escape on one daylight raid against

Rangoon. Caught in a cone of intense flak, his Liberator was repeatedly hit; rudder and elevator controls were badly damaged and the rear-gunner seriously wounded. Pulling out of the resulting dive, Haycock managed to retain control while his flight engineer repaired the damaged cables with cord. When he landed back at base four hours later over 150 holes were counted in the aircraft. It did not fly again.

Other pilots who flew consistently with the RAF Liberators were Flying Officer Knewstubb,¹ Pilot Officer Lee² and Warrant Officer E. P. Stocker of No. 99 Squadron, and Pilot Officers Appleby³ and

¹ Flying Officer R. M. Knewstubb; born Dunedin, 24 May 1921; carpenter; joined **RNZAF** 23 Jul 1942.

² Flying Officer R. Lee; born Westhoughton, Bolton, England, 20 Jul 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1942.

³ Flying Officer A. D. Appleby; born Waimate, 8 Aug 1917; fruitgrower; joined **RNZAF** Mar 1942.

McPhee¹ with No. 215 Squadron. Pilot Officer Bullen² captained a Liberator of No. 358 Squadron on many sorties to drop supplies to underground organisations in **South-east Asia**.

Warrant Officer Stewart,³ a rear-gunner with No. 99 Squadron, was probably the oldest member of aircrew in **Burma**. He was thirty-seven years of age, almost double that of most air gunners. In the early days of the war he had been turned down for the Army because he had lost two fingers and for the **Air Force** because he was married. Then the **RNZAF** announced that it would take married men. Stewart enlisted at once, trained in **Canada** and finally arrived in **India** in August 1943, where he subsequently flew over 220 hours on operations over **Burma** and **Thailand** as an air gunner.

Some remarkably fine work was done by the crews of the **RAF's** two

photographic reconnaissance squadrons during 1945. Indeed, not even in **Europe** were individual sorties surpassed in daring and execution. **Bangkok**, in distant **Thailand**, was regularly photographed by the Mosquitos of No. 684 Squadron, and they also provided a detailed picture of targets as far away as **Sumatra**, southern **Malaya**, **Singapore** and **Java**. Towards the end of August 1945, a Mosquito based on the Cocos Islands made a round trip over Penang and Taipang of 2600 miles in just over nine hours. Apart from the distances they flew the photo-reconnaissance pilots, perhaps more than other branches of the service, had to combat the weather in order to achieve success. More than once did Mosquitos return with torn fabric or ominous evidence of the severe climatic conditions through which they had passed. For these aircraft, in the construction of which wood and adhesives were much used, were not altogether suitable for operations in the tropics, remarkable though their performance was.

Six New Zealand pilots deserve special mention for their part in these photographic missions. They are Squadron Leaders K. J. Newman and W. M. Murray, both of whom commanded flights in No. 684 Squadron; Flight Lieutenants C. G. Andrews,⁴ J. Irvine and J. W. S. Clark,⁵ senior pilots with the same unit, and Flight Lieutenant C. E. Papps who led a flight in No. 681 Spitfire Squadron. Both Murray and Andrews had previously flown Hudsons in the South-west **Pacific**, while Papps had already done two tours in **South-east Asia** on bombers.

¹ Flying Officer J. C. McPhee; born **Wellington**, 21 Jun 1918; accountant; joined **RNZAF** 9 Nov 1941.

² Pilot Officer R. M. Bullen, DFC; born **Christchurch**, 8 Jan 1918; carpenter; joined **RNZAF** May 1942; killed on active service, 26 Jul 1945.

³ Warrant Officer D. McK. Stewart; born **Dundee, Scotland**, 5 Jun 1908; wood machinist; joined **RNZAF** 18 Apr 1942.

⁴ Squadron Leader C. G. Andrews, DFC; born Dunedin, 28 Jun 1917; draughtsman; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

⁵ Flight Lieutenant J. W. S. Clark, DFC; born **Auckland**, 29 Jun 1918; clerk; joined **RAF** Apr 1940.

Several interesting incidents must be recorded. In May 1945, Squadron Leader Newman was appointed to take over command of a squadron detachment based at the Cocos Islands in the **Indian Ocean**. Before so doing he went to England to collect a Mosquito aircraft, which he flew back to **India** in what was then a record time of 13 hours 25 minutes. That same month, in between operations, Irvine and Andrews made a flight over **Mount Everest** and took what were probably the first motion pictures of the world's highest mountain.

Andrews had an unusual experience towards the very end of the campaign. While on a photographic mission over **Singapore** an engine failed, and rather than attempt the long flight back over the ocean he decided to land on **Kallang** airfield. He was met by armed Japanese, but to his surprise they offered every assistance. Andrews was motored to Changi prison camp, where the Senior British Officer was able to make arrangements for **RAF** ground staff to effect repairs to the Mosquito. Andrews spent the night with the prisoners. The next morning, with 150 gallons of Japanese aviation fuel in the tank, he took off and returned safely to base.

* * * * *

After the fall of **Burma** preparations continued for the invasion of **Malaya**—Operation ZIPPER as it was known. To support the landings more than 500 aircraft of strategic, tactical and general reconnaissance units of the **RAF** were assembled at airfields in **Burma**, **Ceylon** and the Cocos Islands. At the same time the supply of arms and equipment to the underground organisation in **Malaya** was intensified and photographic aircraft worked hard to provide advanced information for

all three services. One of their tasks was to secure detailed pictures of the proposed landing areas, and most of this was done by a detachment of four Mosquitos from the Cocos Islands under the control of Wing Commander Newman of No. 684 Squadron.

The assault, however, was never carried out; instead it became an occupation. For the Japanese homeland was already under heavy attack by American bombers from **Pacific** bases. Then, on 6 August, the first atomic bomb fell on **Hiroshima**; over four square miles of the city were destroyed and more than 100,000 people perished. Three days later a second bomb was dropped on **Nagasaki**, and on the 14th the Japanese accepted the Allied demand for unconditional surrender. The war in the **Far East** was over.

Had Operation ZIPPER proceeded as planned, there is little doubt that it would have succeeded. With our ascendancy in the air the invasion forces would have received powerful and continuous support from the outset, with a result similar to that achieved in the **Normandy** landings in **Europe**. All the same, it is worth noting that the Japanese intended to put up a stiff fight. For example, they planned to use all their remaining aircraft, including training and transport machines, as suicide aircraft against the Allied invasion. They had already had some experience in making suicide attacks during the **Philippines** campaign and had seen how effective they could be against concentrations of shipping and, in particular, against battleships and carriers. Nor were pilots lacking, inexperienced though many of them were. Indeed, it is important to observe that this final attack corps of suicide pilots was made up of ardent volunteers determined to proceed to their doom, elated in the thought that they were dying for their Emperor.

The actual surrender of the Japanese in **South-east Asia** was signed at **Singapore** on 12 September 1945, but before that date pilots and crews of the **RAF** were already engaged on the tasks of peace. They spread news of the enemy's surrender by dropping millions of leaflets on the principal towns and the known prisoner-of-war camps; they warned prisoners that they would shortly be freed; they dropped medical

supplies, teams of medical officers and wireless operators whose task it was to signal the most urgent requirements of the camp in which they landed; they dropped quantities of food, clothing and other necessities, including millions of tablets of atebirin for use against malaria; and finally, in what has been described as one of the greatest mercy missions of the war, they brought out many thousands of prisoners from **Malaya, Thailand, French Indo-China, Sumatra and Java.**

New Zealand crews shared in these tasks, which were carried out in the main by Liberators from bases in Bengal, **Ceylon**, and the Cocos Islands, by Dakotas flying from **Rangoon** and by Sunderland flying-boats from the Cocos Islands. In the first week of September, the Dakotas alone dropped or landed over 400 tons of stores and brought back 4000 prisoners of war; the second week they delivered 600 tons and brought back another 3700 men. By the middle of the month, 9000 prisoners had been flown from **Bangkok** to **Rangoon**, most of whom, gaunt and emaciated, were survivors from the ordeal of working on the notorious **Burma- Thailand** railway.

To achieve these results crews worked extremely hard, sometimes to the point of exhaustion. Many of their flights were equivalent to an **Atlantic** crossing, and such great distances and the adverse weather then prevalent were not easily overcome. But they completed their mission—a mission which speeded the reunion of thousands of men, who had suffered much at the hands of the enemy, with their waiting families in **Britain**, in the Dominions and, indeed, in **Holland**. Its successful accomplishment was a fitting conclusion to the part which the **Royal Air Force** had played during the long campaign in South-east **Asia**.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

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NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

APPENDIX I – PRINCIPAL EVENTS OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN CAMPAIGNS 1940-45

Appendix I

PRINCIPAL EVENTS OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN CAMPAIGNS 1940-45

(With particular reference to Air Operations)

1940

JUNE

- 10 **Italy** declared war on Great Britain and **France**.
- 11 **Malta** raided by Italian aircraft. First sorties by 'Faith', 'Hope' and 'Charity'.
- 11 East African campaign began.
- 11 RAF Blenheim bombers made dawn attack on Italian airfield at **El Adem**.
- 28 Sunderland flying-boat operating from **Malta** attacked and sank first Italian U-boat to be destroyed by aircraft during the war.
- 28 Hurricanes made their first sorties from **Malta**.

AUGUST

- 5 Italians invade **British Somaliland**.
- 18 Evacuation of **British Somaliland**.

SEPTEMBER

- 5 The first consignment of aircraft for delivery over the West African reinforcement route arrived at **Takoradi**.
- 13 Italian forces advanced across Egyptian border.
- 18 The first convoy of erected aircraft took off from **Takoradi** for the **Middle East**.

OCTOBER

- 28 **Italy** invaded **Greece** from **Albania**.

NOVEMBER

- 1 **RAF** and Fleet Air Arm began attacks on Italian and Albanian ports from **Malta**.
- 11 First RAF offensive operation over **Greece** – attack on **Valona** airfield.

DECEMBER

9 First British offensive in the **Western Desert** began.

16 British offensive opened in Italian East Africa.

16 Egypt cleared of all Italian forces.

1941

JANUARY

3 Strong *Luftwaffe* contingents transferred to **Italy** and **Sicily**.

9 German and Italian air attacks on convoy in Sicilian Channel. HMS *Illustrious* damaged. HMS *Southampton* lost.

10 Beginning of the *Illustrious* blitz on **Malta** which continued for ten days.

22 Australian troops captured **Tobruk**.

FEBRUARY

6 British forces entered **Benghazi**.

8 **El Agheila** occupied by British forces.

MARCH

Enemy air raids on **Malta** continue.

4 British forces from Egypt disembark in **Greece**.

28–29 Naval battle at **Cape Matapan**. RAF aircraft from **Greece** take part.

29 South African troops supported by SAAF occupied **Diredawa**, **Abyssinia**.

30 Enemy counter-offensive in **Western Desert**.

APRIL

3 British forces evacuated **Benghazi**.

6 Imperial forces entered **Addis Ababa**.

6 Germans invade **Greece** and **Yugoslavia**.

12 Siege of **Tobruk** began.

18 Yugoslav Army surrendered to German forces.

27 Germans entered **Athens**.

27 Axis forces crossed the Egyptian frontier and occupied **Halfaya Pass**.

28 German forces captured **Sollum** – front line stabilised at **Halfaya- Capuzzo**.

MAY

1 First attacks by **Blenheims** based on **Malta** against enemy shipping in transit to North Africa.

2 Evacuation of Imperial forces from **Greece** completed.

8	Siege of RAF Habbaniya began. Iraqi rebels driven from Habbaniya.
17	Italian forces in East Africa surrendered.
20	Germans invaded Crete – first large-scale airborne invasion.
28–31	British and Dominion troops evacuated from Crete.
31	End of hostilities in Iraq.
JUNE	
8	Imperial and Free French forces entered Syria.
15–18	Operation BATTLEAXE to relieve Tobruk failed.
JULY	
11	Hostilities in Syria ceased.
25	British convoy arrives at Malta after two-day battle.
25–26	German air/sea attack on the Grand Harbour of Malta repulsed with heavy enemy losses.
30	AVM Arthur Coningham assumes appointment as AOC Desert Air Force.
AUGUST	
25	British and Russian forces entered Iran.
NOVEMBER	
18	British CRUSADER offensive in Western Desert began.
DECEMBER	
10	Siege of Tobruk raised.
24	British forces retake Benghazi.
1942	
JANUARY	
11	AVM Keith Park takes up appointment as AOC Egypt.
21	Second counter-offensive in the Western Desert by Rommel, east from El Agheila.
29	German forces retake Benghazi and advance on Barce.
FEBRUARY	
	RAF operates intensively in support of ground forces. Bombers attack airfields in Sicily; and in North Africa the ports of Benghazi and Tripoli and enemy shipping are the main targets.
20	Western Desert battle line stabilised at Gazala.
MARCH	
	Heavy German air attacks on Malta.
10	First operations by Spitfires from Malta.
APRIL	
	Peak of enemy air attacks on Malta.
MAY	

- 7-10 Spitfire reinforcements, flown off the aircraft carriers *Wasp* and *Eagle*, arrived in **Malta**.
- 26 Axis offensive opened at **Gazala**. Beginning of the Battle for Egypt.
- JUNE
- 10 **Bir Hacheim** evacuated by Allied forces.
- 11-12 First USAAF attack in the **Middle East/ Mediterranean** theatre. Fifteen Liberators raided **Ploesti** oilfields.
- 17-18 **Eighth Army** withdrew to the Egyptian border, leaving a garrison at **Tobruk**.
- 21 **Tobruk** captured by the Germans.
- JULY
- Further enemy attempt to neutralise **Malta** by air attack.
- 1 German forces advancing into Egypt halted at **El Alamein**.
- 15 AVM Keith Park becomes AOC Malta.
- AUGUST 31 Battle of Alam el Halfa. Rommel's final attempt to break through at **El Alamein** defeated.
- SEPTEMBER
- 6 OCTOBER
- 11-19 Final enemy attempt to subdue **Malta** by air attack is defeated.
- 23-24 **Eighth Army** offensive opened at **El Alamein**. **RAF** provides maximum air support.
- NOVEMBER
- RAF** makes a great contribution to the defeat of Axis forces in the desert and to the success of the Allied invasion of North-west **Africa**.
- 3 In Egypt Axis forces began retreating westwards from **El Alamein**.
- 8 Allied forces landed in French North Africa (Operation TORCH).
- 11 Admiral Darlan ordered cease fire of French forces in North **Africa**.
German occupation of **Tunis** and **Bizerta**.
- 13 **Tobruk** recaptured by Allied forces.
- 14 **Tunisia** entered by British First Army from **Algiers**.
- 20 **Benghazi** entered by British Eighth Army.
- DECEMBER
- 13 German forces withdraw from **El Agheila**.

1943

JANUARY

23	British forces entered Tripoli .
29	Advanced units of Eighth Army crossed into Tunisia from Tripolitania .
FEBRUARY	
14–22	Battle of Kasserine Pass .
17	Re-organisation of Allied Command. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder assumed command of Allied Mediterranean Air Forces.
27	Eighth Army took up positions on the Mareth Line .
MARCH	
20–28	Eighth Army broke through the Mareth Line .
29	El Hamma occupied by British forces.
APRIL	
10	Sfax occupied by British forces.
21	British forces captured Enfidaville .
MAY	
7	Allies captured Tunis and Bizerta .
13	Allied campaign in North Africa ended.
JUNE	
11	Pantellaria occupied by Allied forces.
12	Surrender of Lampedusa .
JULY	
9–10	Allied invasion of Sicily by air and sea.
AUGUST	
16	Messina , Sicily , captured by Allied forces.
17	End of Sicilian campaign.
SEPTEMBER	
3	British and Canadian troops landed in southern Italy .
3	Armistice signed with Italy but not declared until 8 September.
9	British and American troops landed on Salerno beaches.
14	Allied landings in Sardinia .
23	Allied forces landed in Greece .
27	Foggia captured by Eighth Army .
OCTOBER	
1	Naples occupied by Fifth Army .
4	Corsica captured.
18	Volturno River line cleared of enemy forces.
23	Formation of Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Force.
DECEMBER	
1	German line on Sangro River broken.

1944

JANUARY

22

Fifth Army troops landed at **Anzio** and **Nettuno**.

FEBRUARY

Battle for **Cassino** began.

15

Allied Air Forces bombed **Montecassino** monastery, dropping some 450 tons of bombs.

MARCH

15

Cassino attacked by Allied Air Forces; 1100 tons of bombs dropped.

19

Operation **STRANGLE** – the rail interdiction programme in **Italy** – began and continued until 11 May 1944.

APRIL

2

Russian forces entered **Rumania**.

5

First of a series of twenty-four day and night attacks by American and British aircraft from the **Mediterranean** on the oil refineries at **Ploesti**.

8–9

RAF bombers flew the first minelaying mission to the Danube. Mines laid near Belgrade.

MAY

11–12

Allied aircraft opened attacks against the **Gustav Line** in **Italy**.

18

Cassino and the monastery captured by the Allies.

JUNE

1

Formation of the **RAF Balkan Air Force**.

4

Fifth Army captured Rome.

6

Allied armies landed in **Normandy**.

JULY

12–16

Twenty bridges across the **Po River** put out of use by Allied air attacks.

17

Eighth Army crossed the **Arno**.

AUGUST

1

Polish Underground Army began the **Warsaw** rising. Allied aircraft dropped supplies and incurred heavy casualties before the fighting ended on 3 October.

11

Eighth Army liberated Florence.

15

Allied invasion of southern **France**, preceded by an intensive four-day air bombardment and attacks by airborne troops.

30

Ploesti captured by the Russians.

SEPTEMBER

2

Eighth Army broke through the **Gothic Line**.

OCTOBER

- 4-5** **RAF** aircraft flew their last minelaying operation to the Danube.
- 14** Liberation of **Athens**.
- NOVEMBER
- 2** Greek mainland cleared of German forces.
- DECEMBER
- 3** Beginning of civil war in **Greece**.
- 4** **Eighth Army** entered **Ravenna, Italy**.
- 1945**
- JANUARY
- 14** End of civil war in **Greece**.
- 17** **Warsaw** occupied by Russian forces.
- APRIL
- 10** Final offensive by Fifth and Eighth Armies in **Italy** began.
- 20** **Bologna** captured by Allies.
- 27** Genoa occupied by Americans. In this month the Mediterranean Allied Air Force dropped its record bomb load for one month – 56,296 tons.
- MAY
- 2** Surrender of German forces in **Italy**.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

APPENDIX II – CHRONOLOGY OF PRINCIPAL EVENTS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Appendix II

CHRONOLOGY OF PRINCIPAL EVENTS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

1941

JULY **Japan occupied southern Indo- China.**

DECEMBER

- 7** **Japan launched air attacks on US bases in Hawaii, including Pearl Harbour.**
- 8** **Japanese forces landed in Malaya – Singapore had its first air raid. Great Britain and United States declared war on Japan.**
- 9** **Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the Netherlands declared war on Japan. China declared war on Germany, Italy and Japan.**
- 10** **HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* sunk off Kuantan, Malaya, by Japanese aircraft.**
- 19** **British forces evacuated Penang.**
- 23** **First Japanese air raid on Rangoon.**

1942

JANUARY

- Japanese forces continue to advance southwards in Malaya.**
- 19** **Burma invaded by Japanese forces from Siam. Mergui and Tavoy evacuated.**
- 31** **All British units now withdrawn into Singapore Island from the mainland.**

FEBRUARY

- 5** **Japanese forces cross Salween River, Burma.**
- 8–9** **Japanese forces landed on Singapore Island.**
- 11** **Japanese forces invaded Java.**
- 14** **Japanese paratroop attack at Palembang, Sumatra.**
- 15** **Singapore surrendered to Japanese forces.**
- 21** **Allied forces withdraw across Sittang River, Burma.**
- 27** **Java Sea naval battle.**

Japanese forces cut the Rangoon- Mandalay railway.

MARCH

- 6** **Batavia** captured by Japanese forces.
- 7** **Rangoon** evacuated by British forces.
- 8** **Surrender of Java.**
- 23** **Andaman Islands**, Bay of Bengal, occupied by Japanese forces.

APRIL

- 2** **British forces withdraw from Prome, Burma.**
- 4** **British cruisers *Dorsetsbire* and *Cornwall* sunk by Japanese bombers off Colombo.**
- 5** **Japanese air attack on Colombo.**
- 9** **Japanese air raid on Trincomalee, Ceylon.**
- 9** **Aircraft carrier *Hermes* sunk by Japanese aircraft off Trincomalee.**
- 29** **Japanese captured Lashio – southern terminal of the Burma Road.**

MAY

- 1** **Japanese captured Mandalay.**
- 5** **Japanese troops cross Chinese frontier on the Burma Road.**
- 8** **Japanese captured Akyab on Bay of Bengal. Myitkyina, North Burma, occupied by Japanese.**

JUNE

Allied forces begin reorganising in India.
Air supply route from India to China ‘over the Hump’ now in operation.

DECEMBER

- 10** **Construction of Ledo Road commenced.**
- 14** **British forces open first Arakan offensive.**
- 20** **First Japanese air raid on Calcutta.**

1943

FEBRUARY

- 16** **First Wingate expedition entered Burma.**

MAY

- 7** **British forces withdraw from the Arakan.**

AUGUST

- 27** **Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten appointed Supreme Commander South-east Asia.**

OCTOBER

- 30** **Renewal of battle for air supremacy over Burma. RAF fighter squadrons begin re-equipping with Spitfires.**

NOVEMBER

- 16** **Formation of Air Command, South-east Asia, under Air Chief**

Marshal Sir Richard Peirse.

DECEMBER

- 21** General Stilwell's forces began advance towards Myitkyina.
- 31** RAF Spitfires score notable success against Japanese raiders off Arakan coast.

1944

JANUARY

British forces begin second Arakan campaign.

- 10** Maungdaw, Arakan, recaptured.

FEBRUARY

- 4** Japanese counter-attack in Arakan.
- 23** Japanese offensive in Arakan defeated – Allied air supply and support a decisive factor.

MARCH

- 5** Wingate's second Chindit expedition (Operation THURSDAY) began.
- 8** Strong Japanese offensive launched in central front in **Manipur**.
- 31** Japanese forces cut Dimapur- **Kohima** road. Start of siege of **Imphal**. Allied forces there now supplied entirely by air.

APRIL

- 16** **Kohima** relieved.

MAY

- 11** Chinese forces crossed Salween River and commenced drive to free the **Burma Road**.
- 17** American and Chinese forces recaptured Myitkyina airfield.

JUNE

- 20** Japanese forces in retreat from **Imphal**.

AUGUST

- 3** Myitkyina town captured by Allied forces.
- 19** Japanese forces now driven from **India**.

OCTOBER

- 15** Allied offensive from Myitkyina towards **Mandalay** began.
- 18** Tiddim recaptured by Fourteenth Army.

NOVEMBER

- 9** Fort White recaptured by Fourteenth Army.
- 13** Kalemyo recaptured by Fourteenth Army.

DECEMBER

- 2** Kalewa occupied by Allied forces.
- 15** Bhamo recaptured by Allied forces.
- 24** Last Japanese air attack on **Calcutta**.

1945

JANUARY

3 **Akyab** occupied unopposed by Allied forces.
7 **Shwebo** occupied by Fourteenth Army.

21 Allied assault on Ramree Island

MARCH

3 Meiktila captured by British forces.

6 **Lashio** captured by Chinese forces.

20 **Mandalay** recaptured by Allied forces.

APRIL

19 Magwe recaptured.

MAY

1 Pegu occupied by Fourteenth Army. Allied forces landed south of **Rangoon**.

2 **RAF** pilot lands at **Mingaladon** airfield and enters **Rangoon**.

3 **Rangoon** occupied by Allied forces.

AUGUST

6 First atomic bomb dropped on **Hiroshima, Japan**.

9 Second atomic bomb dropped on **Nagasaki, Japan**.

15 **Japan** accepted Allied demand for unconditional surrender. Allied aircraft begin dropping medical teams and supplies to PW camps in **Burma** and **Siam**.

SEPTEMBER

2 Surrender of **Japan** signed at **Tokyo**.

10 Allied aircraft begin evacuation of prisoners of war. **Singapore** reoccupied by Allied forces.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

APPENDIX III – PRINCIPAL OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT OF ROYAL AIR FORCE IN MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Appendix III

PRINCIPAL OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT OF ROYAL AIR FORCE IN MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

[*Note: The performance figures given in these appendices are those achieved in still air. It should be remembered that aircraft were often modified in various ways and adapted for special tasks, when their performances varied from those shown.*]

RAF FIGHTERS AND FIGHTER-BOMBERS

<i>Aircraft Name and mark</i>	<i>Maximum Speed</i>	<i>Service Ceiling</i>	<i>Rate of Climb</i>	<i>Armament</i>
Beaufighter IF	324 m.p.h. at 11,750 feet	27,000 feet	9-4 minutes to 15,000 feet	Six 303 in. Four 20 m.m.
Blenheim IVF	266 m.p.h. at 11,800 feet	26,500 feet	10 minutes to 15,000 feet	Seven -303 in.
Buffalo	292 m.p.h. at 20,000 feet	30,650 feet	6-1 minutes to 13,000 feet	Four -50 in.
Gladiator	245 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	32,500 feet	7 minutes to 15,000 feet	Four -303 in.

Hurricane I	316 m.p.h. at 17,500 feet	33,200 feet	6-3 minutes to 15,000 feet	Eight -303 in.
Hurricane IIA	342 m.p.h. at 22,000 feet	37,000 feet	8-2 minutes to 20,000 feet	Eight -303 in.
Hurricane IIB	342 m.p.h. at 22,000 feet	36,500 feet	8-4 minutes to 20,000 feet	Twelve -303 in. (two 250 lb. bombs).
Hurricane IIC	339 m.p.h. at 22,000 feet	35,600 feet	9-1 minutes to 20,000 feet	Four 20 m.m.
Hurricane IID Tank-buster	316 m.p.h. at 19,000 feet	33,500 feet	-75 minutes to 2000 feet	Four 40 m.m. Two -303 in.
Hurricane IV (R/P)	284 m.p.h. at 13,500 feet	34,000 feet		Eight 60 lb. R/P. Two -303 in.
Kittyhawk I	350 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	29,000 feet	8-7 minutes to 15,000 feet	Four or six -50 in.
Mohawk	323 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	32,700 feet	5 minutes to 16,000 feet	Various combinations of -30 in. and -50 in.
Mosquito II	370 m.p.h. at 14,000 feet	35,000 feet	7 minutes to 15,000	Four 20 m.m. Four -303 in.

			feet	
Mosquito XII (N/F)	370 m.p.h. at 14,000 feet	35,000 feet	7 minutes to 15,000 feet	Four 20 m.m.
Mustang III	450 m.p.h. at 28,000 feet	42,000 feet	10-5 minutes to 20,000 feet	Four -50 in. (two 500 lb. bombs).
Spitfire I	355 m.p.h. at 19,000 feet	34,000 feet	6-2 minutes to 15,000 feet	Eight -303 in.
Spitfire V	375 m.p.h. at 20,250 feet	38,000 feet	7 minutes to 15,000 feet	Two 20 m.m. Four -303 in.
Spitfire IX	408 m.p.h. at 25,000 feet	43,000 feet	6-7 minutes to 20,000 feet	Two 20 m.m. Four -303 in. (one 500 lb. and two 250 lb. bombs).
Spitfire IX (H/F)	416 m.p.h. at 27,500 feet	44,000 feet	6-4 minutes to 20,000 feet	Two 20 m.m. and four -303 in. or two 20 m.m. and two -50 in. (one 500 lb. bomb and two 250 lb. bombs).
Spitfire IX (L/F)	404 m.p.h. at 21,000 feet	41,500 feet	6-4 minutes to 20,000 feet	As above.
Tomahawk I	338 m.p.h. at 16,000 feet	30,500 feet	7-8 minutes to 15,000 feet	Two -50 in. Four -303 in.

Vultee 273 22,000 15 Six -30 in. (two 500 lb. bombs
Vengeance m.p.h. at feet minutes and two 250lb. bombs.)
(divebomber) 11,500 to
feet 15,000
feet

RAF BOMBERS

<i>Aircraft Type and Mark</i>	<i>Normal Cruising Speed</i>	<i>Radius of Action with Associated Bomb Load</i>	<i>Typical Bomb Load</i>	<i>Armament</i>
Baltimore III	190 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	475 miles with 2000 lb.	Eight 250 lb. or four 500 lb.	Ten -30 in. Four -303 in.
Blenheim I	165 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	460 miles with 1000 lb.	Four 250 lb	Three -303 in.
Blenheim IV	180 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	730 miles with 1000 lb.	Four 250 lb.	Five -303 in.
Blenheim V (Bisley)	170 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	615 miles with 1000 lb.	Four 250 lb.	Five -303 in.
Bombay	120 m.p.h. at 10,000 feet	350 miles with 2000 lb.	Eight 250 lb.	Two -303 in.
Boston III	200 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	500 miles with 2000 lb.	Four 500 lb. or two 1000 lb.	Eight -303 in.
Halifax II	195 m.p.h. at	950 miles with 3000 lb. or 250 miles with	Two 2000 lb. and six 1000 lb.	Eight -303 in.

	15,000 feet	13,000 lb.		
Liberator II	180 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	1215 miles with 6000 lb.	Twelve 500 lb. or six 1000 lb.	Seven -50 in. or eleven -303 in.
Liberator VI	195 m.p.h. at 20,000 feet	1150 miles with 4000 lb. or 500 miles with 12,800 lb.	Twelve 500 lb. or eight 1000 lb.	Ten -50 in.
Marauder	190 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	780 miles with 1200 lb.	Eight 500 lb.	Two -30 in. Three -50 in.
Maryland I	176 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	600 miles with 1500 lb. or 540 miles with 2000 lb.	Four 250 lb. and one 500 lb.	Eight -303 in.
Wellesley	135 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	1000 miles with 1060 lb.	Eight 112 lb. and eight 20 lb. bombs. 250 lb. and eight 25 lb. bombs	Two -303 in.
Wellington 1C	165 m.p.h. at 10,000 feet	1200 miles with 1000 lb. or 600 miles with 4500 lb.	One 1000 lb., four 500 lb. and one 250 lb. or six 500 lb. and one 250 lb.	Six -303 in.
Wellington 111	175 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	1100 miles with 1500 lb. or 750 miles with 4500 lb.	One 4000 lb. or one 1000 lb., six 500 lb. and three 250 lb.	Six -303 in.
Wellington X	180 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	1050 miles with 1500 lb. or 600 miles with 4500 lb.	Sixteen 250 lb. or two 2000 lb.	Six -303 in.

RAF COASTAL AIRCRAFT

<i>Aircraft Type</i>	<i>Cruising Speed and Endurance</i>	<i>Associated Bomb Load or Depth-charge Load</i>	<i>Armament</i>
Beaufighter 1C	180 knots - 5 hours	1000 lb.	Four 20 m.m. Six -303 in.
Beaufighter X (R/P)	180 knots - 4 hours	400 lb. or eight 60 lb. R/P	Four 20 m.m.
Beaufort 1	150 knots - 6 hours	1500 lb. or one 18 in. torpedo	Four -303 in.
Catalina 1 F/B	100 knots - 17 ½ hours or 25 hours	2000 lb. Nil.	Six -303 in.
Hudson 1	125 knots - 6 hours	750 lb.	Seven -303 in.
Sunderland 1 F/B	115 knots - 12 hours	2000 lb.	Seven -303 in.
Sunderland 11 F/B	110 knots - 11 ½ hours	2000 lb.	Seven -303 in.
Sunderland 111 F/B	110 knots - 10 ½ hours	2000 lb.	Seven -303 in.
Vildebeeste	82 knots - 4 ½ hours	One 18 in. torpedo or 1000 lb.	Six -303 in. Two -303 in.
Wellington 1C	125 knots - 10 ½ hours	1500 lb.	Six -303 in.
Wellington VIII L/L	120 knots - 8 ½ hours	1000 lb.	Six -303 in.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

APPENDIX IV – PRINCIPAL OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT OF GERMAN AIR FORCE IN MIDDLE EAST

Appendix IV

PRINCIPAL OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT OF GERMAN AIR FORCE IN MIDDLE EAST

GERMAN FIGHTERS

<i>Aircraft Type and Mark</i>	<i>Maximum Speed</i>	<i>Service Ceiling</i>	<i>Rate of Climb</i>	<i>Armament</i>
Focke-Wulf 109A3	385 m.p.h. at 19,000 feet	36,000 feet	6-5 minutes to 18,000 feet	Four 20 m.m. Two 7-9 m.m.
Focke-Wulf 190D	435 m.p.h. at 25,000 feet	39,000 feet	6-5 minutes to 20,000 feet	One 30 m.m. Two 20 m.m. Two 13 m.m.
Junkers 88 C5	347 m.p.h. at 20,000 feet	30,200 feet	10.3 minutes to 18,500 feet	Six 7-9 m.m. Three 20 m.m.
Messerschmitt 109E	355 m.p.h. at 18,000 feet	35,000 feet	6-2 minutes to 16,500 feet	Two 7-9 m.m. Two 20 m.m.
Messerschmitt 109F	395 m.p.h. at 22,000 feet	36,500 feet	5-75 minutes to 17,000 feet	Two 7-9 m.m. Three 20 m.m.
Messerschmitt 109G	400 m.p.h. at 22,000 feet	38,500 feet	6 minutes to 19,000 feet	Two 7-9/13 m.m.
Messerschmitt 110G	368 m.p.h. at 19,000 feet	36,800 feet	7-3 minutes to 18,000 feet	Six 7-9 m.m. Four 20 m.m. One 37 m.m.
Messerschmitt 210	370 m.p.h. at 21,000 feet	29,000 feet	11-8 minutes to 19,000 feet	Two 20 m.m. Two 13 m.m. Two 7-9 m.m.
Messerschmitt 262 (jet aircraft)	500-550 m.p.h. at 29,000 feet	39,500 feet	5 minutes to 32,800 feet	Four 30 m.m. Three 20 m.m. or six 30 m.m.

Arado 234B 490 m.p.h. at 38,000 feet 8 minutes to 20,000 feet
(jet aircraft) 25,000 feet 20,000 feet

GERMAN BOMBER AND RECONNAISSANCE AIRCRAFT

<i>Aircraft Type and Mark</i>	<i>Normal Cruising Speed</i>	<i>Radius of Action With Associated Bomb Load</i>	<i>Typical Bomb Load</i>	<i>Armament</i>
Dornier 217E	240 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	585 miles with 4400 lb.	Four 1100 lb. or two 2200 lb. and four 110 lb.	Four 7-9 m.m. Four 13 m.m. One 15 m.m.
Focke-Wulf 200 (Condor)	210 m.p.h. at 16,000 feet	1350 miles on recce without bombs or 1075 miles with 3600 lb.	Three 1100 lb. or five 550 lb.	Three 15/20 m.m. and three 13 m.m.
Heinkel 111	210 m.p.h. at 17,000 feet	760 miles with 2200 lb.	Four 550 lb.	Seven 7-9 m.m. Two 20 m.m.
Heinkel 177	260 m.p.h. at 17,000 feet	550 miles with 12,100 lb. 1300 miles with 2200 lb.	Six 550 lb. and four 2200 lb. or four 1650 lb. torpedoes or two HS293 glider bombs	Five 13 m.m. Four 13/20 m.m.
Junkers 88 A4	254 m.p.h. at 16,400 feet	640 miles with 4400 lb. 655 miles with 2200 lb.	Ten 154 lb. and four 550 lb. or ten 154 lb. and four 1100 lb.	Seven 7-9 m.m. One 20 m.m.
Junkers 88 B3	277 m.p.h. at 18,000 feet	640 miles with 2200 lb.	Four 550 lb. or four 550 lb. and ten 154 lb.	Six 7-9 or two 7-9 m.m. and two 13 m.m.
Junkers-S1	290 m.p.h. at 18,000 feet	350 miles with 1980 lb.	Eighteen 110 lb. or eighteen 154 lb.	One 7-9 m.m. One 13 m.m.

Junkers 87B (Stukadive- bomber)	200 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	180 miles with 1100 lb.	One 1100 lb. or one 550 lb. and four 110 lb. or one 1100 lb. and four 110 lb.	Three 7-9 m.m.
Junkers 87D (Stukadive- bomber)	200 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	360 miles with 2200 lb.	One 1100 lb. and four 110 lb. or one 2200 lb. or one 2200 lb. and four 110 lb.	Four 7-9 m.m.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

APPENDIX V – PRINCIPAL OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT OF ITALIAN AIR FORCE

Appendix V

PRINCIPAL OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT OF ITALIAN AIR FORCE

ITALIAN FIGHTER AIRCRAFT

<i>Aircraft and Type</i>	<i>Maximum Speed</i>	<i>Service Ceiling</i>	<i>Rate of Climb</i>	<i>Armament</i>
Fiat CR 32	233 m.p.h. at 10,000 feet	28,000 feet	5-3 minutes to 10,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m.
Fiat CR 42	270 m.p.h. at 13,100 feet	32,000 feet	5-5 minutes to 13,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m. or one 12-7 m.m. and one 7-7 m.m.
Fiat G50	300 m.p.h. at 14,500 feet	32,000 feet	6-4 minutes to 15,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m. or two 7-7 m.m. and two 12-7 m.m.
Fiat G55	380 m.p.h. at 20,000 feet	38,000 feet	5-8 minutes to 20,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m. Three 20 m.m.
Macchi C200	310 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	32,000 feet	6-25 minutes to 15,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m. or two 7-7 m.m. and two 12-7 m.m.
Macchi C202	345 m.p.h. at 18,000 feet	32,000 feet	8-2 minutes to 18,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m. or two 7-2 m.m.

ITALIAN BOMBER AND RECONNAISSANCE AIRCRAFT

<i>Aircraft and Type</i>	<i>Maximum Speed</i>	<i>Service Ceiling</i>	<i>Radius of Action With Associated Bomb Load</i>	<i>Armament</i>
Cant Z506 (Seaplane bomber)	230 m.p.h. at 13,000 feet	19,000 feet	840 miles with 1750 lb. or 730 miles with 2640 lb.	One 12-7 m.m. Three 7-7 m.m.
Cant Z1007b	280 m.p.h. at 13,000 feet	27,500 feet	825 miles with 1100 lb.	Two 7-7 m.m. Two 12-7

	feet			m.m.
Caproni Ca 312b	230 m.p.h. at 13,120 feet	23,000 feet	1000 miles without bombs	Four 7-7 m.m.
Fiat BR 20	255 m.p.h. at 13,500 feet	25,000 feet	675 miles with 2200 lb.	One 12-7 m.m. Two 7-7 m.m.
Savoia Marchetti SM79	255 m.p.h. at 13,000 feet	21,500 feet	785 miles with 1100 lb. 595 miles with 2750 lb.	Three 12-7 m.m. Two 7-7 m.m.
Savoia Marchetti SM81	210 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet	24,500 feet	515 miles with 2200 lb. or 450 miles with 4400 lb.	Six 7-7 m.m.
Savoia Marchetti SM82	205 m.p.h. at 7000 feet	17,000 feet	1100 miles with 3200 lb.	One 12-7 m.m. Four 7-7 m.m.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

APPENDIX VI – PRINCIPAL OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT OF JAPANESE AIR FORCE

Appendix VI

PRINCIPAL OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT OF JAPANESE AIR FORCE

JAPANESE FIGHTERS

<i>Aircraft Type</i>	<i>Maximum Speed</i>	<i>Service Ceiling</i>	<i>Rate of Climb</i>	<i>Armament</i>
Nakajima Army-1 (Oscar)	358 m.p.h. at 21,900 feet	37,400 feet	7-4 minutes to 20,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m.
Kawasaki Army-2	346 m.p.h. at 21,100 feet	35,000 feet	8 minutes to 20,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m. One 7-9 m.m. One 20 m.m.
Kawasaki Army-3	361 m.p.h. at 15,800 feet	35,100 feet	8-5 minutes to 20,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m. and two 7-7 m.m. or four 12-7 m.m.
Nakajima Army-4	427 m.p.h. at 20,000 feet	38,800 feet	5-8 minutes to 20,000 feet	Two 12-7 m.m. Two 20 m.m.
Nakajima-Mitsubishi Navy-O (The Zero)	358 m.p.h. at 22,000 feet	35,100 feet	7-8 minutes to 20,000 feet	Two 13-2 m.m. Two 7-7/13-2 m.m. Two 20 m.m.
Kawanishi Navy 'Shiden'	416 m.p.h. at 19,000 feet	39,100 feet	6-1 minutes to 20,000 feet	Four 20 m.m. Two 7-7 m.m.
Mitsubishi Navy 'Raiden'	417 m.p.h. at 16,600 feet	38,800 feet	5-1 minutes to 20,000 feet	Four 20 m.m.
Nakajima Navy 'Gekko'	333 m.p.h. at 19,700 feet	32,740 feet	12-1 minutes to 20,000 feet	Five 20 m.m.

JAPANESE BOMBER AND RECONNAISSANCE AIRCRAFT

<i>Aircraft Type</i>	<i>maximum Speed</i>	<i>Service Ceiling</i>	<i>Radius of Action With Associated</i>	<i>Armament</i>
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Bomb Load

Mitsubishi Army-4	346 m.p.h. at 18,700 feet	30,100 feet	920 miles with 1875 lb.	Four 12-7 m.m. One 20 m.m.
Mitsubishi Army-97	294 m.p.h. at 15,500 feet	30,500 feet	815 miles with 2200 lb.	Four 7-7 m.m. One 12-7 m.m. One 20 m.m.
Kawasaki Army-99	228 m.p.h. at 19,900 feet	34,300 feet	750 miles with 880 lb.	One 12-7 m.m. Three 7-9 m.m.
Nakajima Army-100	312 m.p.h. at 16,900 feet	30,900 feet	800 miles with 2200 lb.	Three 7-9 m.m. Two 12-7 m.m. One 20 m.m.
Mitsubishi Army - 100 (Dinah 3)	420 m.p.h. at 10,700 feet	40,600 feet	865 miles on reconnaissance	One 7-7 m.m.
Nakajima Navy-1	283 m.p.h. at 13,800 feet	30,500 feet	1535 miles with 2200 lb.	Four 7-7 m.m. Four 20 m.m.
Nakajima Navy-96	270 m.p.h. at 19,600 feet	34,250 feet	1060 miles with 1100 lb.	Four 7-7 m.m. One 20 m.m.
Mitsubishi-Nakajima-Aichi Navy-97	225 m.p.h. at 8000 feet	27,500 feet	320 miles with one 1765 lb. torpedo	Four 7-7 m.m.
Aichi Navy - 99 (divebomber)	281 m.p.h. at 20,300 feet	33,600 feet	480 miles with 550 lb.	Three 7-7 m.m.
Aichi Navy 'Susei' (divebomber)	377 m.p.h. at 19,300 feet	36,400 feet	1220 miles with 550 lb.	Three 7-7 m.m.
Nakajima Navy 'Ginga'	367 m.p.h. at 17,200 feet	35,500 feet	1215 miles with 1875 lb.	Two 20 m.m.
Nakajima Navy 'Saiun'	396 m.p.h. at 16,600 feet	34,100 feet	905 miles on reconnaissance	One 7-9 m.m.
Nakajima Navy 'Tenzan'	327 m.p.h. at 15,100 feet	35,400 feet	870 miles with one 1765 lb. torpedo	Two 7-7 m.m.

NEW ZEALANDERS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE (VOLUME III)

GLOSSARY

Glossary

AC-in-C	Air Commander-in-Chief
ACMB	Aircrew Medical Board
ACSEA	Air Command South-east Asia
AEDF	Allied Expeditionary Air Force
AFC	Air Force Cross
AHQ	Air Headquarters
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
AOC-in-C	Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief
ASR	Air-Sea Rescue
BAFO	British Air Forces of Occupation
BCOF	British Commonwealth Occupation Force
Bel.	Belgium
BEM	British Empire Medal
BOAC	British Overseas Airways Corporation
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CB	Companion of the Bath
CBE	Commander of the Order of the British Empire
CFI	Chief Flying Instructor
CGI	Chief Ground Instructor
Ch.	Republic of China
CI	Chief Instructor
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CMB	Central Medical Board
CME	Central Medical Establishment
Czech.	Czechoslovakia
DCAS	Deputy Chief of the Air Staff
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
DFM	Distinguished Flying Medal
DGMS	Directorate-General of Medical Services
DG of P	Directorate-General of Personnel

D of AT	Directorate of Air Tactics
DPMO	Deputy Principal Medical Officer
DSC	Distinguished Service Cross
DSO	Companion of the Distinguished Service Order
EFTS	Elementary Flying Training School
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
F/B	Flying Boat
Fr.	France
FTC	Flying Training Command
FTS	Flying Training School
GBE	Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire
GCB	Knight Grand Cross of the Bath
Gr.	Greece
H/F	High Flying
Hol.	Holland
HQ	Headquarters
It.	Italy
KCB	Knight Commander of the Bath
KBE	Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire
L/F	Low Flying
L/L	Leigh Light
MAAF	Mediterranean Allied Air Forces
MAP	Ministry of Aircraft Production
MBE	Member of the Order of the British Empire
MC	Military Cross
Med. ME	Mediterranean and Middle East
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
N/F	Night Fighter
Nor.	Norway
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
NWAAF	North-west Africa Air Force
NWACAF	North-west Africa Coastal Air Force
OBE	Officer of the Order of the British Empire
OTU	Operational Training Unit
PR	Photographic Reconnaissance
Pol.	Poland
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force

RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RIAF	Royal Indian Air Force
RN	Royal Navy
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
R/P	Rocket Projectiles
Rus.	Russia
SASO	Senior Air Staff Officer
SEA	South-east Asia
SEAC	South-east Asia Command
SESO	Senior Engineer Staff Officer
SFTS	Service Flying Training School
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force
SMEC	Special Medical Examination Centre
SMO	Senior Medical Officer
TAF	Tactical Air Force
USAAF	United States Army Air Force

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