

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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