

Wing Commander Lord Forbes, Intelligence Officer on the Staff, who carried out many special missions in his Q.6 aeroplane, some of which were of an unusual and hazardous nature.

Italian East African Campaign.

49. The successful land operations against I.E.A., which resulted in the complete collapse of Italian resistance in that area except for a small "pocket" in the region of Gondar, were supported by Air forces from Sudan, Aden and Kenya. In deciding on the actual strength of the Air force required to give full support to the Land forces operating from the North and South, it was necessary to take into account the fact that:—

(i) It was still possible for the Italians, and Germans if they so decided, to send reinforcements of aircraft direct by air from Tripoli to I.E.A.

(ii) To meet the commitments in Libya and Greece the release of Air and Mechanised forces from this front was important. There was, therefore, need for speed if the campaign was to be completely successful before the rains started in April.

(iii) The majority of our aircraft were of obsolete or obsolescent type which needed the cover of a few modern fighters to enable them to operate by day in face of the Italian C.R.42 fighters which were still active until towards the close of the campaign.

(iv) Patriot activities required constant air support to maintain enthusiasm and morale.

(v) The Red Sea shipping route still remained potentially a very vulnerable line of communication. Its security was the more important since traffic through the Mediterranean had virtually ceased.

50. In the Sudan, at the beginning of the year the R.A.F. under Air Commodore L. H. Slatter, O.B.E., D.S.C., D.F.C., consisted of five Squadrons and one Flight. No. 1 South African Air Force (F) Squadron—Hurricanes and Gladiators, No. 237 Rhodesian (A.C.) Squadron—Hardys, No. 47 (B) Squadron—Wellesleys, No. 223 (B) Squadron—Wellesleys, and No. 14 (B) Squadron—Blenheim IV's. In addition, "K" Flight's (Gladiators) move to Egypt was cancelled pro tem. and they were retained in the Sudan. These Squadrons were mainly used during the whole period to defeat the Italian Air Force and to support the advance of the Army into Eritrea. Other commitments which were met included the Air defence of Port Sudan, occasional special convoy escort work in the Red Sea, attacks on the harbour of Massawa and support of the increasing activities of the Abyssinian Patriots further South, Haile Selassie having entered Abyssinia on the 20th January, 1941.

51. Pressure by General Platt's force on the Kassala area resulted in the fall of the town on January 19th and the retreat of the Italian Forces into Eritrea. Steady progress by two parallel columns continued, Agordat and Barentu falling on the 1st and 2nd February. Early in March the advance was halted in front of the formidable defences on the Keren

heights. Here the Italians made a determined stand until March 27, when they were forced to withdraw Southward.

In these operations at Keren the R.A.F. played a prominent part in the close support of the Army. Wellesleys, Vincents, Lysanders, Gauntlets and Hardys were employed for continuous bombing of targets both in and behind the enemy's battle positions. Without doubt this heavy and continuous bombing, combined with the effect of artillery fire, seriously weakened Italian morale and contributed very largely to the capture of this formidable position.

Meanwhile, the offensive against enemy aerodromes, lines of communication and aircraft in the air was continued by Blenheims, Hurricanes and Gladiators. Enemy fighters, whose appearance became less frequent as time went on, continued to "shoot up" our aircraft on the ground, occasionally with success, but their air effort gradually dwindled until by the time Asmara was occupied on March 31st it had virtually ceased.

The Hurricanes of No. 1 South African Squadron were especially prominent in these operations. In two attacks on enemy aerodromes they destroyed 6 C.A.133's, 4 C.R.42's and 6 S.79's, besides damaging a further 3 S.79's.

During the attack on Keren a particularly successful bombing attack on lines of communication resulted in the destruction of an ammunition train reported to be carrying over 20,000 shells.

52. Further South bombing attacks were made in support of the Patriots to help in sustaining their morale; Gubba, Gondar, Asosa, Burye and Debra Marcos being among the places attacked. Blenheims of the Free French Flight took part in these operations. Pilot Officer R. A. Collis, D.F.C., of No. 47 (B) Squadron (Wellesleys), made a series of 19 flights up to a distance of 200 miles into Abyssinia, carrying at various times ammunition, money and supplies for the Patriot forces, and on other occasions representatives of the Emperor and Army Officers.

North of Lake Tana the Italians contrived to maintain themselves in the Gondar area, but South of the Lake the Patriots succeeded in capturing Burye and Debra Marcos and in reaching the Blue Nile.

53. After the occupation of Asmara on the 1st April, the advance continued on Massawa. As our threat to that objective developed, five Italian destroyers based at Massawa left harbour in a Northerly direction on 2nd April. This force was located and attacked on 3rd April by Swordfish of the F.A.A. (H.M.S. Eagle) by No. 14 Squadron (Blenheims) and No. 223 Squadron (Wellesleys). The Swordfish torpedoed two of the destroyers, sinking one of them and leaving the second in a sinking condition, the latter being subsequently bombed and sunk by a Blenheim. A further two destroyers were driven aground on the Hedjaz Coast twelve miles South of Jedda, where they were bombed and destroyed by Blenheims and Wellesleys operating in conjunction with H.M.S. Kingston. The surviving destroyer escaped and returned to Massawa, where she scuttled herself.