

on the other hand, had not a single aerodrome or landing ground fit for use. The enemy thus had complete mastery in the air, except on the somewhat rare occasions when the Fleet Air Arm were able to intervene with carrier-borne aircraft. The vigour and daring of the pilots of the Fleet Air Arm when they were able to engage the enemy earned the admiration of the whole Force, but even their strenuous efforts could not compensate for the absence of land based aircraft owing to the unavoidable relative weakness of performance of carrier-borne aircraft.

38. Shortly before Group Capt. Moore, R.A.F., who had been selected to command the Air Component, and I arrived in the theatre of operations, an energetic and inspiring start in the selection and preparation of possible landing grounds had been made by Wing Comd. Atcherley, R.A.F., who carried out this difficult task with great energy and perseverance.

Group Capt. Moore pushed on the work with the utmost determination and was ably assisted by Brigadier Pyne, my Chief Engineer. The work of preparation was hampered by much of the country being still under deep snow, making it impossible to determine whether expanses of a reasonable size and flatness would prove suitable for landing grounds in respect of their surfaces. The mountainous nature of the country forced upon us the selection and development of the most unlikely sites, of which that at Skaanland was an example. Few laymen would have thought it possible that this site could possibly be made into a landing ground for Hurricane fighter aircraft.

39. The need for some support in the air for both the sea and land forces was urgent, particularly for H.M. Ships which were suffering heavily from the daily and almost continuous attacks made on them in the narrow waters round Narvik by the thoroughly efficient enemy bomber aircraft. Nevertheless, Group Capt. Moore rightly, in my opinion, resisted all pressure to induce him to call for the aircraft to be sent before he was quite satisfied that the landing grounds could be said to be reasonably ready to receive them.

The existing landing ground at Bardu Foss, 50 miles north of Narvik, was selected to be the main air base and work to make it fit for fighters was pressed on with the utmost energy and in face of considerable difficulties, not the least of which was the conditioning of the road to it from Sorreisa at which place all stores, vehicles and equipment had to be disembarked from the ships in landing craft.

The preparation of the new landing ground at Skaanland also presented great difficulties and even the laying of a specially prepared mat brought out from the United Kingdom failed to overcome the softness of the surface caused by the peaty nature of the soil.

Another possible site was found at Elvenes near Salangen, north-east of Harstad, and was put in hand as an alternative landing ground, while work was also commenced at Elvegaard, near Bjerkvik, as soon as the enemy had been ejected from this area by the successful French landing on 13th May.

The possibility of operating aircraft from Lakelvn on Forsanger Fjord, east of Hammerfest was also considered as there is an excellent

landing ground there capable of taking two squadrons and relatively free of snow, but it was too far from the scene of active operations.

40. Eventually the first Squadron of Gladiator Fighters flew off one of the aircraft carriers on the 21st May and was safely established at Bardu Foss, with the loss of two aircraft from crashes into the mountain side in bad weather. Just before their arrival anti-aircraft artillery, heavy and light, had been installed at Bardu Foss after much labour and energy had been expended in their disembarkation and subsequent transport by road from the sea. The importance of giving this one and only aerodrome the maximum degree of protection against air attack was so great that its defence was given priority over all other needs. Twelve heavy and sixteen light anti-aircraft guns were installed there.

It was not until 26th May, that is two days after the orders to evacuate Norway had been received, that it was possible to receive the second squadron, consisting of Hurricane fighters, at Skaanland. Even then, this landing ground proved unequal to the weight of these aircraft and they too had to be operated from Bardu Foss which remained the sole landing ground in regular use until the final evacuation.

41. At the cost of a great amount of skill and energy on the part of Wing Commander Maxton, R.A.F., an advanced landing ground was got ready at Bodo and used with great effect by our aircraft in support of the troops in that area until it was so heavily bombed by enemy aircraft as to be unusable without extensive repairs.

42. Once established, the R.A.F. soon proved their superiority over the enemy bombers and fighters, and I have no doubt that the comparative immunity from air attack enjoyed by the forces during the later phases of the campaign was due to the severe losses inflicted by our aircraft on those of the enemy. The effect on the morale of the force as a whole of their vigorous and successful operations was most marked.

In general terms, my instructions to Group Capt. Moore for the employment of his fighter aircraft were:—

(a) To protect from hostile air attack the following:—

- (i) The Naval anchorage at Skauland and its approaches.
- (ii) The base at Harstad.
- (iii) Allied sea and land forces in contact with the enemy.
- (iv) Airfields occupied by the R.A.F.

(b) The primary aim of fighter aircraft should be to destroy enemy aircraft approaching the areas to be protected.

(c) To co-operate closely with the land forces operating against the enemy when required.

#### *Organization of the Base.*

43. A Maintenance Project had been prepared by my Administrative Staff whilst waiting in London before we sailed. This envisaged the creation of a main Base Area at Skaanland with a Hospital Area at Harstad, and personnel on the coast road running South. Skaanland would have come under the same A.A. protection as the Naval Anchorage.