

enemy A.F.V's. and M.T. moving towards Msus. Whether this column was, in fact, an enemy one still remains uncertain, but according to the pilot the lorries were Italian and the personnel inside them opened fire on his aircraft.

23. On the 4th April, enemy armoured forces threatened to outflank the Australian Division holding the Benina-Tocra position, necessitating their withdrawal to new positions on the Barce escarpment.

In the meantime, as the Army withdrew to new positions, our Squadrons moved to landing grounds further East. On the 4th April, No. 3 Australian Squadron, No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron and Advanced H.Q., Cyrenaica, moved to Maraua, No. 55 Squadron to Derna and H.Q., Cyrenaica to Tobruk. On the same day 8 Blenheims of No. 45 Squadron reinforced No. 55 Squadron.

The Australian Division withdrew to the Barce escarpment on the 5th April, covered by Hurricane patrols of Nos. 3 and 73 Squadrons. The Hurricane patrols were also extended to cover elements of our troops retiring towards Mechili. In these operations, on 5th April our fighters destroyed 14 enemy aircraft for a loss of 2 Hurricanes.

By the 7th April the Australian Division and support group had withdrawn, first to Derna and then to Gazala area. Meanwhile, our armoured forces, which had already suffered heavy losses, had fallen back on Mechili and joined up with the Indian Motor Brigade. At this stage R.A.F. Squadrons had withdrawn to aerodromes in the Tobruk area, and further movements were necessary on the 8th April when the Blenheim Squadrons and No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron withdrew to landing grounds East of the Cyrenaica-Egyptian frontier, and the Wellingtons to their bases in the Fuka area. No. 6 (A.C.) and 73 (F) Squadrons continued to operate from landing grounds within the Tobruk perimeter.

The Australian Division withdrew to the outer perimeter of Tobruk on the 10th April. The following day enemy A.F.V's. cut the road between Tobruk and El Adem and our support group retired towards Sollum. From Mechili the enemy's forward troops continued their advance, and by the 13th April they had occupied Bardia and the Sollum escarpment where their advance was temporarily halted.

24. The situation by 13th April had become more stabilised and was as follows:—

The enemy's thrust in the forward area at Sollum had lost momentum and there were indications that his troops there were experiencing administrative difficulties as a result of their rapid advance.

Tobruk was held by a strong force of our troops and was invested by the enemy whose troops were concentrated West and South of the perimeter, with armoured forces astride the El Adem road.

H.Q. No. 204 Group, which formed at Maaten Bagush on the 12th April under the command of Air Commodore R. Collishaw, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., D.S.C., D.F.C., had taken over the control of the Squadrons in the Western Desert from H.Q. Cyrenaica.

The tasks of the R.A.F. at this stage were:—

(a) To continue to attack lines of communication to aggravate the enemy's existing M.T. difficulties.

(b) To provide close support for the Army by attacking enemy A.F.V's., M.T. concentrations and troops both in the forward areas and at Tobruk.

(c) To attack enemy aerodromes, primarily with the intention of destroying his transport aircraft which he was using to supply his forward troops.

(d) To bomb harbour facilities and shipping at Benghazi in order to interrupt the use of the port by the enemy and thereby prevent him from shortening his long lines of communication from Tripolitania.

(e) To provide the fighter defence of Tobruk.

25. Soon after the investment of Tobruk it became evident that it would no longer be possible to maintain No. 6 (A.C.) and No. 73 (F) Squadrons on the aerodrome within the perimeter. In addition to frequent dive bombing attacks, which were liable to destroy or damage the aircraft beyond repair capacity available, the landing ground was within range of enemy artillery fire. These Squadrons were accordingly withdrawn to aerodromes in the vicinity of Maaten Bagush, with advanced landing ground near Sidi Barrani for re-fuelling.

Owing to the distance of Tobruk from these aerodromes and even from the advanced landing ground at Sidi Barrani (120 miles from Tobruk), the task of maintaining fighter defence over Tobruk Harbour at such long range became extremely difficult. In addition, the depth of enemy penetration to the East put Tripoli out of range of our Wellingtons operating from the Western Desert, and made it most difficult to provide fighter escorts to our ships supplying the Tobruk garrison. On the other hand, it enabled the enemy to develop repeated bombing attacks on Tobruk without regular fighter interference, and it reduced the distance for his bombers operating against Alexandria or ships in the Eastern Mediterranean.

26. After a German-Italian attack on Tobruk on April 14th, during which No. 73 (F) Squadron shot down 9 E/A for loss of 2, there followed a period of comparative inactivity from a military standpoint. In the Sollum area, patrols of our mobile forces made raids well behind the enemy's forward troops. The enemy, however, continued to supply his forward areas by means of M.T. and transport aircraft, although harassed by the activity of our mobile patrols and the continued attacks of our aircraft on his lines of communication and forward aerodromes.

Enemy air activity at this stage was concentrated largely on Tobruk, apparently with the primary intention of denying the port to us. Hurricanes of No. 73 Squadron, providing the fighter defence of Tobruk, on several occasions engaged greatly superior numbers of the enemy with success, although not without loss to themselves. As an example, in a series of raids on Tobruk during 22nd and