

23rd April in which the enemy employed a total of 100 bombers and about 150 fighters, Hurricanes destroyed 12 enemy aircraft and probably destroyed a further 2 with a loss to themselves of 3 Hurricanes.

The scale of our attack against enemy aerodromes was somewhat increased from about 20th April to the end of the period under review. More than 60 sorties by Wellingtons and Blenheims were made during this particular period, the main weight of this effort being directed against the enemy's forward aerodromes at Derna and Gazala, and the base aerodrome at Benina.

By this time our squadrons in the Western Desert had been further reinforced by detachments of No. 274 (F) Squadron—Hurricanes and No. 39 (B) Squadron—Marylands, the latter being employed mainly for strategical reconnaissances. No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. was withdrawn from the Western Desert on 21st April and moved to Aboukir for rest after continuous fighting since 7th November, 1940.

27. Towards the end of the period under review, military activity increased, both in the frontier area and at Tobruk. The enemy's forward troops on the Sollum escarpment after being heavily reinforced with A.F.V's. advanced Eastwards on the 27th April and occupied Halfaya Pass. This appeared to be his main objective for, after establishing a forward line between Halfaya and Sidi Omar he made no attempt to continue his advance.

At Tobruk the enemy made a further determined attack on 1st May, employing 60 tanks supported by infantry and accompanied by heavy air attacks on our troops and defences. The enemy succeeded in breaking the outer defences of the perimeter but failed to pierce our main defences. Fighting continued for two days and on the 1st May, Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons maintained fighter patrols to protect our troops and artillery against enemy fighter and bomber action. The Hurricanes encountered enemy fighters, in greatly superior numbers but shot down 4 Me.109's in flames, with the loss of 1 Hurricane. Our troops successfully counter-attacked, destroying 11 enemy tanks and inflicting other heavy losses. The enemy however, retained a hold on 5,000 yards of the outer perimeter and our line was adjusted accordingly. A further attack by the enemy on the 2nd May was repulsed, after which the enemy effort there appeared to be temporarily spent.

28. A feature of the operations of this period was the high scale of effort maintained by a comparatively small air force working under the difficult conditions imposed by the enemy's rapid advance. From 1st April to 3rd May more than 400 bomber and fighter sorties were made against enemy M.T. convoys and concentrations, A.F.V's. and troops. Over 70 Wellington and 80 Blenheim sorties were made against enemy aerodromes and 64 Wellington and 12 Blenheim sorties were made against Benghazi. In addition, Hurricanes on several occasions machine-gunned aerodromes and in the course of numerous patrols destroyed 73

enemy aircraft in combat and probably destroyed a further 16, with a total loss of 22 Hurricanes.

It would be true to say that the German-Italian success in regaining Cyrenaica was due more to the number, efficiency and mobility of their ground forces than to their numerical air superiority. At no time did the German-Italian Air Forces completely dominate the situation on this front.

29. From January to Mid-February Air Commodore R. Collishaw, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., D.S.C., D.F.C., continued in command of No. 202 Group, R.A.F. in these successful operations which culminated in the occupation of Cyrenaica. He maintained the high standard of resource and initiative which I had grown accustomed to expect from him, and he was an inspiration to all those under his command. At Appendix "H" will be seen a tribute to the work of his Group by Lieutenant-General O'Connor, Commander of the XIII Corps (not reproduced).

Group Captain L. O. Brown, D.S.C., A.F.C., continued to render most valuable service on the Staff of the G.O.C. in arranging the tasks of the reconnaissance Squadrons under the operational control of the Army. On February 25th he assumed command of the reduced Air Force in Cyrenaica and remained in command during the subsequent withdrawal, during which time he contrived to operate his small Force to the best advantage under most difficult conditions.

The work of No. 3 Royal Australian Air Force, under the command of Squadron Leader I. D. MacLachan, D.F.C., was outstanding. They were continuously in the Western Desert or Cyrenaica for six months, first with a mixture of Gladiators, Gauntlets and Lysanders and later with Hurricanes. Their high morale and adaptability to Desert conditions were remarkable.

Other Squadrons which particularly distinguished themselves on this front were No. 73—Hurricane—Fighter Squadron and No. 55—Blenheim—Bomber Squadron, which did most of the long distance strategical reconnaissance.

Mention must also be made of No. 2 R.A.F. Armoured Car Company which remained working with the Armoured Division throughout the successful phase of the operations, attached to the XI Hussars.

#### Greece.

30. The Greek advance had lost its impetus by the beginning of the year as the result of increased enemy resistance, lengthened lines of communication and severe winter conditions. The Greeks still retained the initiative, however, and after operations had apparently become static, they made a further advance, capturing Kelcyre on the 8th January, 1941, and thereafter making slow progress along the Northern side of the Kelcyre-Tepelene gorge. There was little activity in other sectors.

The R.A.F. Squadrons based in Greece, under the command of Air Vice-Marshal J. H. D'Albiac, D.S.O., on the 1st January, 1941, were:—

- No. 30 (F) Squadron (Blenheim Fighters).
- No. 80 (F) Squadron (Gladiators).
- No. 84 (B) Squadron (Blenheims)
- No. 211 (B) Squadron (Blenheims).