

34. Owing to enemy fighter activity Blenheims taking part in these operations were on most occasions escorted by Gladiators or Hurricanes. Several combats with large enemy fighter formations took place, to the marked advantage of our own fighters. As an example, during a particular week of activity ending 3rd March, 33 Italian fighters were destroyed and a further 8 probably destroyed, against which our own fighter losses were only 1 Gladiator destroyed, the pilot being safe, and 2 other fighters damaged. Such successes were by no means limited to this period and further reference is made later to the activities of our fighters.

By the beginning of March the continued arrival of enemy reinforcements by sea and air had built up the strength of Italian forces in Albania to an estimated total of 29 divisions. The Greeks, however, retained the initiative, repeatedly repulsing counter-attacks and inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. On the 7th March, the Greeks, taking advantage of improving weather conditions, resumed their offensive against Tepelene, again assisted by our bombers which with fighter escorts continued their attacks against enemy troop positions and lines of communication. The Greeks made local progress.

35. The Italians launched their counter-offensive on the 9th March on a front of about 20 miles, extending from Tepelene in the Southern Sector to the Greek lines West of Corovode in the Central Sector. The enemy forces, which were estimated at about 10 divisions, supported by large numbers of bomber and fighter aircraft, made continuous attacks until the 14th March, but the Greeks, defending resolutely, repulsed all attacks and inflicted very heavy losses on the enemy. The Italians were unable to gain any ground and on the 14th March the Greeks made a successful counter-attack, taking some prisoners.

Throughout these operations, which continued at maximum intensity between the 9th and 14th March, Blenheims escorted by fighters made 43 sorties against enemy troops, gun positions and M.T. columns, concentrating largely on objectives in the Buzi-Gilave area. At the same time Hurricanes and Gladiators engaged on escort duties and offensive patrols made 15 and 122 sorties respectively. They fought several successful combats with enemy fighters during which they destroyed 35 enemy aircraft and probably another 9, with a total loss of 2 Gladiators and 1 Hurricane, the pilots of which escaped.

By the 15th March the Italian offensive was reduced in intensity, although the enemy continued to make local attacks without success until the 27th March. Air operations continued against enemy positions and lines of communication in all sectors although on a somewhat reduced scale as the result of a further deterioration of weather conditions.

36. During the period under review, Wellingtons made 4 sorties and Blenheims 30 sorties against shipping and port facilities at Valona. Against Durazzo Wellingtons made 11 sorties. This effort was augmented by F.A.A. Swordfish operating from Paramythia which made bomb and torpedo attacks against shipping at these objectives, comprising 7 sorties against Durazzo and 12 against Valona. A feature of these operations was the effectiveness of the

F.A.A. Swordfish torpedo attacks in which five direct and two probable hits were claimed on shipping. Much damage was inflicted on port facilities, warehouses, military buildings and barracks by the Wellingtons and Blenheims. In Southern Italy, Brindisi was twice attacked by Wellingtons, the railway station being the objective on the first occasion and the aerodrome on the second. A further attack in the Brindisi area was made when fighter Blenheims successfully machine-gunned grounded aircraft at the aerodrome at Lecce (S. Italy).

37. One of the most outstanding features of the campaign in Albania was the marked superiority which our fighters gained over those of the Italians. In a series of combats during the first three months of the year (1941) our fighters destroyed 93 enemy aircraft and probably destroyed another 26, the greater proportion of the total being fighters. Against this our own fighter losses in combat amounted to 4 Hurricanes and 4 Gladiators destroyed, from which 6 of the pilots escaped by parachute.

Enemy aircraft operating from aerodromes in the Dodecanese periodically mined the Suez Canal and also attacked our sea convoys sailing to Greece. It became necessary, therefore, to divert a portion of the available bomber forces in Greece to attack aerodromes in the Dodecanese, with harbours and shipping as an alternative.

The main objectives were the aerodromes at Rhodes, viz. Maritza, Cattavia and Calato, against which 20 Wellington sorties and 25 by Blenheims were made from Greece. Blenheims also made a further 9 sorties against the aerodrome at Scarpanto and shipping at Stampalia. Many fires were started at the aerodromes, and damage was caused to aerodrome buildings and dispersed aircraft. Direct hits were also obtained on one ship at Stampalia.

Other attacks on the Dodecanese were made by Wellingtons operating from Egypt, the total effort from Greece and Egypt combined during the period under review amounting to 70 Wellington sorties and 34 Blenheim sorties.

38. A further operation of note was the combined Naval and R.A.F. action against enemy Naval forces at the Battle of Matapan on 28th March.

Acting on Sunderland reconnaissance reports, Blenheims operating from Greece made five attacks comprising 24 sorties against enemy warships, reporting direct hits with S.A.P. bombs on two cruisers and one destroyer. One cruiser which was hit with a 500 lb. S.A.P. bomb was apparently seriously damaged. At Appendix "J" is a copy of a Signal conveying appreciation by the Board of Admiralty on the part played by the R.A.F. in this action (not reproduced).

39. Towards the middle of February it had become clear that the German infiltration into Roumania was likely to develop into a "drive" through Bulgaria, with Salonika as the preliminary objective. The Greek Government recognised this as a very real threat, but they were anxious to avoid any action originating from their territory which might precipitate events. Though they were continually calling for more air support, they did not accept the offer of British Troops until 22nd February when at a Conference held at Tatoi, attended by the King of Greece, Prime Minister Korysis (who had succeeded the late General Metaxas),