

25 miles of it consisted of field telephone wire, and the utmost difficulty was experienced in using this line. The force line or Fullerphone to the main exchange was used whenever possible. Similarly, communication to Almyros was not possible from Elason. It was therefore decided to establish a system of relaying operation orders in code by telephone from the wing commander at Elason to Larissa, where they were further transmitted as appropriate either direct to the fighter squadron at Larissa or by telephone to the bomber squadrons at Niamata or Almyros. For this purpose, an officer was permanently standing by at Larissa to relay operation orders.

Communication from Larissa to Niamata only twelve miles away was reliable, but to Almyros it was most unsatisfactory, largely due to the fact that the Air Defence Centre used the Almyros line for reporting enemy aircraft. As the campaign proceeded, so the demands both of the wing and of the Air Defence Centre augmented until finally it took as much as five to six hours to pass a priority telephone message from Larissa to Almyros. Thus it was decided to use the squadron at Niamata for any fleeting targets which presented themselves, while the squadron at Almyros carried out direct support operations, the need for which could be foreseen some hours previously.

Organisation of Fighter Defence.

37. The Greek observer system consisting of posts with sub-posts radiating from each and linked to air defence centres by telephone, operated with a certain degree of success, and various interceptions of Italian aircraft had been made over the Larissa area.

A fighter operations room was established at Larissa and was run by the squadron stationed there. Depending on alternative duties, aircraft were standing by throughout the hours of daylight. It was, however, inevitable to leave the L. of C. and base area unprotected when the fighters were required for escort duty or protective duties over the forward troops.

The system worked well, although there was little enemy air activity during the first few days of the campaign. When, however, the withdrawal of our troops began, the personnel manning the posts of the observer system had to withdraw and consequently the system broke down.

Liaison with Force H.Q.

38. The wing commander visited the force commander in his office each morning as a routine, and daily discussions were held in the force commander's mess both with him and his B.G.S. The force commander was fully informed of the air situation and made no excessive demands upon our resources. Without exception, the utmost was done to meet the requirements of the army and every request for reconnaissance made by the force commander or the B.G.S. was followed by a faithful endeavour to carry out that task. At the outset, however, weather was a serious hindrance, and in spite of the most frequent and determined attempts, many failures had to be reported.

The choice of targets for the bombers, the ways and means of providing fighter patrols over our forward troops, the question of leaving the base area unprotected whilst fighters escorted bombers or patrolled over the line, ground straffing of M.T., reconnaissance, and

every other aspect of the air situation were discussed, and complete agreement was expressed with the direction and operations of the squadrons supporting the army. Neither the force commander nor the B.G.S. permitted themselves to indicate more than a general plan, in view of the rapidly changing situation, and they always expressed their agreement in the suggested methods of meeting any particular circumstances.

In addition to the personal liaison between the force and wing commanders, an A.L.O. kept in constant touch with the G. Staff, watching and reporting every development in the situation. It is difficult to know how air forces could be operated in closer co-operation with the military forces than was in fact the case during the opening days of the Balkan campaign. Whatever shortcomings there may have been in the support given by the air forces, they certainly cannot be attributed to lack of co-operation or to lack of the most faithful endeavours of our pilots. At every available opportunity, aircraft of this wing were doing their utmost to carry out the multifarious tasks which were required of them.

6th-9th April—The German Advance.

39. On the morning of the 6th April, the German forces were on the march. The bulk of the enemy moved west from the Struma valley, filtering by all available roads into each valley and gorge, inundating every plain with their swiftly moving forces. The first air reports indicated that an attack was being made upon Mt. Beles and the Rupel Pass. Simultaneously, our reconnaissance aircraft reported movement of M.T., on the road west from Petrich.

It was certain that this movement would be covered by fighter patrols, and the fighters were sent off to carry out a sweep over the road and over the Greeks on Mt. Beles and in the Rupel Pass. Twelve Hurricanes met twenty Me.109s. and our fighters shot down five without loss to themselves. This disposed of any anxiety or over cautiousness which the squadron commander of the fighters had felt about the change over from Italians to Germans. Whereas, at the outset, the squadron commander expressed the view that his aircraft could not operate in formations of less than twelve, he now agreed that formations of six would be able to escort Blenheim formations across the line. This meant that the base area only had to be left completely unprotected when the Hurricanes went off in strength to patrol over our forward troops. In the circumstances, the wing commander considered it a reasonable division of fighter strength.

Meanwhile, reconnaissances of the Struma valley were being carried out. During the course of that night Sofia, Gorna Djumaya, Simitli and Petrich were bombed by Wellington and Blenheim aircraft both from Athens and from the Larissa plain. These raids were most successful, and pilots on their return reported good results. The weather was bad on the following day and no reconnaissance was possible, but it was anticipated that considerable concentrations of enemy M.T. would be found at Strumitsa. Late in the afternoon, in spite of severe weather, some of our aircraft got through and bombed the rich target presented by the heavy congestion of German M.T. confined to the road in this area by marshes and