

moreover, very few transport aircraft were available. However, the Blenheims and Wellingtons, not being so dependent on advanced landing grounds, were able to continue bombing enemy aerodromes.

12. Our armoured forces entered Mechili on 27th January, and on 30th January Derna fell to the forces which had advanced to the North. Like Bardia and Tobruk, Derna had already been regularly and heavily bombed for a considerable period and was not, therefore, subjected to concentrated bombing attacks immediately prior to the assault. Fighter patrols, however, provided constant cover for the troops and continued to harass the enemy on his lines of communication throughout the operations.

The advance continued and Cyrene was occupied on 3rd February. A rapid withdrawal of enemy forces now took place; M.T. and troop convoys retreating Westwards from Barce were repeatedly attacked by Blenheims and harassed by fighters.

13. The Australians now advanced on Benghazi from the North, while on 4th February our armoured forces started their remarkable dash across the desert from Mechili to the coastal road South of Benghazi. The interception, which completely surprised the enemy, took place at Beda Fomm, approximately 30 miles South of Solluch on 5th February. The enemy, supported by strong armoured car formations, tried to break through, but were repulsed with heavy losses and the greater part of their forces were captured or destroyed.

Meanwhile, as the Australians advanced on Benghazi, our medium and heavy bombers maintained their attacks on Berka and Benina aerodromes and on the railway at Barce which was being used by the enemy for the withdrawal of his forces from that area.

14. Our troops occupied Benghazi on 6th February, meeting little resistance in the final stages. The R.A.F. occupied Benina aerodrome on 10th February and found 87 unserviceable and damaged enemy aircraft there, which, together with those found at other aerodromes, notably El Adem and Gazala, were an indication of the effectiveness of the numerous bombing attacks made on enemy air force objectives and accounted very largely for the virtual collapse of the Italian Air Force during the latter stage of the advance.

15. Following the British occupation of Benghazi, the remnants of the enemy forces retreated Westwards into Tripolitania, while the Italian Air Force had been so depleted as to be incapable of offering any serious threat for the time being. Thus it appeared improbable at that time that the enemy would be able to stage an early counter-offensive in Libya. Meanwhile, the increasing gravity of the situation in Greece called for the early despatch of further air reinforcements to that theatre and the consequent reduction of the Royal Air Force in Cyrenaica.

16. The next phase, therefore, consisted of the reorganisation and redistribution of forces. H.Q. No. 202 Group, Nos. 45 and 113 (B) Squadrons, and No. 274 (F) Squadron were withdrawn to the Delta area in the middle of February. No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron was withdrawn at the end of February, but was replaced by No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron of which two

flights were at that time already in Cyrenaica, the remainder of the Squadron being transferred to Aqir (Palestine).

H.Q., R.A.F., Cyrenaica was formed at Barce on 25th February, 1941, under the command of Group Captain L. O. Brown, D.S.C., A.F.C.

The Squadrons remaining in Cyrenaica in March, 1941, were disposed as follows:—

No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F., which by that time was completely re-armed with Hurricanes, was located at Benina to provide the air defence of Benghazi.

No. 73 (F) Squadron, at first located at Gazala, was moved to Bu Amed on 14th March to defend the Tobruk area.

The Headquarters and one flight of No. 6 (A.C.) Squadron (Hurricanes and Lysanders) was at Barce, with a flight at Agedabia and sections at other landing grounds in Western Cyrenaica.

No. 55 (B) Squadron was at Bu Amed until 10th March, when it moved to Maraua.

17. Enemy air activity increased shortly after our occupation of Benghazi. It was at this time that German aircraft, operating from landing grounds near Tripoli began to attack our forces in Cyrenaica, at first using J.U.87's and Ju.88's. German fighters started to operate at a slightly later date from advanced landing grounds, Me.110's making their first appearance, followed shortly afterwards by Me.109's. Before the end of February the Germans had assumed a leading role in the enemy air effort.

The enemy's main bombing objective at first was Benghazi, which was attacked regularly and with some intensity between 14th and 20th February. Subsequent attacks, however, covered a wider range of objectives including Tobruk, our aerodromes in Cyrenaica and troops in the forward area at Agheila and Agedabia. It was in fact due to this somewhat unexpected increase of enemy air activity, coupled with the presence of German fighters, that No. 73 (F) Squadron was retained in Cyrenaica when it had previously been intended to withdraw it from that front to provide further reinforcement for Greece.

18. Reconnaissance of Tripoli harbour from the middle of February onwards revealed considerable quantities of shipping using the port, and it soon became evident that the enemy was being rapidly reinforced. In addition to sea borne reinforcements, the enemy carried considerable numbers of troops to Tripoli by air in Ju.52's. German troops were included in the reinforcements and early in March it was estimated that the greater part of a German division had already arrived in Tripolitania.

It was essential therefore to maintain attacks on shipping and harbour facilities at Tripoli to impede the flow of enemy reinforcements and supplies to Libya. Wellingtons of Nos. 38 and 70 (B) Squadrons, operating from landing grounds in Cyrenaica, accordingly bombed these objectives, making a total of forty sorties against Tripoli during February and March. Further attacks on Tripoli were made by F.A.A. Swordfish as well as Wellingtons operating from Malta. Considerable damage was inflicted during these operations but the total effort which could be made available was insufficient to cause any serious obstruction to the arrival of enemy reinforcements. Other