

Medium bombers, immediately prior to attacks on Bardia, Tobruk and Derna, were employed in a similar role to the heavy bombers both by day and night and at other times attacked enemy aerodromes. No. 113 Squadron, and later No. 55 Squadron, continued to provide strategical reconnaissance.

The activities of our fighters were varied. They provided reconnaissance, made low flying attacks on mechanical transport on the enemy's lines of communication, in addition to providing air protection to our own troops against enemy air action.

Army Co-operation aircraft were employed mainly on tactical reconnaissance with Hurricanes or Gladiators. Lysanders were used to a limited extent for spotting artillery bombardments.

Early in January the Italian Air Force was still very active despite the heavy losses already inflicted on it.

5. As a prelude to the Army's assault, Bardia was subjected to a heavy Naval and Air bombardment. Thus, during the night 1st/2nd January, following many previous attacks, Wellingtons and Bombays, together with Fleet Air Arm Swordfish, dropped over 20,000 lbs. of bombs on enemy defences and troop positions. Blenheims continued to attack during the day on 2nd January making 44 bombing sorties, followed during the night of 2nd/3rd January by further efforts of Wellingtons and Bombays which dropped another 30,000 lbs. of bombs. The total load of bombs dropped during this series of attacks amounted to over 40 tons.

At the same time Blenheims bombed enemy aerodromes concentrating on Gazala, Derna and Tmimi. Hurricanes of Nos. 33, 73 and 274 Squadrons maintained offensive patrols over Bardia during the attack.

6. The Army attacked Bardia at dawn on 3rd January, the assault being made by armoured forces in co-operation with Australian infantry. During the battle, Blenheims effectively bombed troop concentrations while aircraft of No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron co-operated with artillery. Gladiators of No. 3 R.A.A.F. (Australian) Squadron maintained low flying offensive patrols to cover our troops as they advanced.

As soon as the attack had been launched a large proportion of our bombing effort was turned on to aerodromes in Cyrenaica, with the intention of pinning down and destroying the enemy air force.

Fighting at Bardia continued until 1330 hours on 5th January, when the enemy ceased to offer any further resistance.

7. By the 6th January our Armoured Forces, advancing under cover of offensive fighting patrols, had reached the outer perimeter defences of Tobruk. They also occupied El Adem aerodrome on that date, capturing 40 unserviceable aircraft which had been abandoned by the Italians on the landing ground there. A further 35 burnt out aircraft were found by armoured patrols at Gazala a few days later.

8. On 10th January, Headquarters No. 202 Group, together with the Western Desert Squadrons, started to move forward. By the middle of January, Headquarters, No. 202 Group was established at Sollum, and bomber and fighter squadrons had moved forward to

landing grounds in the Sollum-Bardia area, with No. 208 Squadron and No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron further forward at Gambut.

9. Operations now passed through a stage of preparation and consolidation before the attack on Tobruk. During this period heavy bombing attacks were continued against Tobruk to wear down the enemy and destroy his defences. Enemy aerodromes were consistently and effectively bombed, particular targets at this time being Berka and Benina, near Benghazi, to which the enemy had been compelled to withdraw his bomber forces as a result of our continued attacks on his more forward aerodromes. Port facilities and shipping at Benghazi and military objectives at Derna were also attacked. It now became evident that the aircraft losses inflicted on the enemy, both on the ground and in the air, were resulting in reduced activity of his air force, and from that time onwards our own aircraft operated with comparative immunity.

10. As in the case of Bardia, the assault on Tobruk was preceded by a Naval bombardment and heavy bombing attacks from the air. On the night of 19th/20th and 20th/21st January, Wellingtons and Blenheims dropped 20 tons of bombs, inflicting heavy damage on the defences and other military objectives at Tobruk, including the A.A. guardship, "San Giorgio". The assault on Tobruk was launched at dawn on 21st January and, simultaneously, Blenheims of Nos. 45, 55 and 113 Squadrons, operating in direct support of our troops, attacked enemy positions within the Tobruk defences, maintaining their attacks throughout the day, and making a total of 87 sorties. The Gladiators of No. 3 R.A.A.F. Squadron, and Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons maintained offensive patrols Westwards of Tobruk to cover ground operations, but very few enemy aircraft appeared and only one engagement took place.

Operations continued on 22nd January. Aircraft of No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron provided close support for our troops. Early in the morning the Australians entered the town, while the Free French companies penetrated the perimeter near the sea to the West. All organised resistance was at an end by the evening.

Between the fall of Tobruk and 1st February the following moves were made. Headquarters, No. 202 Group moved forward to Sidi Mahmoud; Nos. 73 (F) and 274 (F) Squadrons to Gazala and No. 3 R.A.A.F. (A.C.) Squadron and No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron to El Tmimi.

11. The main body of our forces now pushed on Northwards to Derna and our armoured formations Westwards to Mechili. Enemy air activity was on a small scale, but as the advance approached Italian base aerodromes a certain number of fighters continued to attack our forward troops. They were, however, successfully dealt with by our own fighter patrols which prevented the enemy from inflicting any serious casualties or from materially influencing the rapid progress of the advance. The intensity of our own air operations at this stage was also somewhat reduced, due partly to unserviceability through long flying hours under desert conditions, but also through our inability to establish forward landing grounds sufficiently rapidly to keep pace with the advance. The over ponderous standard squadron organisation did not lend itself to such conditions, and,