



1971- 2021: Puma reaches 50 years of RAF service

LOYALTY

The 33 Squadron RAF Association Newsletter

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Inside this issue...Part One

- Page 3 From the Editor
- Page 4-5 From the Chairman
- Page 6 From the Hart - OC 33 Squadron
- Page 7-42 *Memoirs of a Canadian in the RAF 1935-1944* Wing Commander A L Bocking DFC & Bar RCAF, who served with 33 Squadron & 30 Squadron
- Page 43-50 *Air Operations In the Middle East: 1 January 1941-3 May 1941.* Part of the Despatch submitted to the Secretary of State for Air on November 24th, 1941, by Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, G.C.B., D.S.O., Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Royal Air Force, Middle East.
- Page 51-62 *Air Operations In Greece 1940-1941* Report by Air Vice Marshal JH d'Albiac DSO, Air Commander Greece

PART TWO

- Page 3-17 *'Ace of Aces' : Marmaduke StJ Pattle* Extracts from E C R Baker's book of the same name
- Page 17-20 The Men in the Larissa Photographs Short profile of the men in those well-known images.
- Page 21-40 Woody Woodward - The Quiet Canadian Extracts from Hugh A Halliday's book *'Woody – A Fighter Pilot's Album'*
- Page 41-53 *A Greek Tragedy* Corporal, later Squadron Leader, W F J 'Tug' Wilson, recalls the dark days of Greece and Crete in 1941
- Page 54-58 *30 Years On - The Maleme Memorial* 33 Squadron aircraft and personnel at Maleme for the first time since Apr 1941 for the consecration ceremony in May 1991.

Cover Pictures:

Top: The 30 Squadron/33 Squadron Memorial at Maleme in Crete.

Bottom: A wrecked German glider lying next to the Tavronitis Bridge, close to the airfield at Maleme.

From the Editor..

For this, my penultimate edition of 'Loyalty', and because neither we nor 33 could attend any of the 80th Anniversary events at Maleme this year, I have focussed on the battles of Greece and Crete 1940-41, which had a major effect on 33 Squadron at the beginning of World War 2. Having converted from bombers to fighters in 1938, and been involved in Palestine during the Arab Revolt before the war broke out in 1939, 33 had to wait until 1940 before Italy declared war on Great Britain to establish itself as a top-class fighter squadron against the *Regia Aeronautica* over Libya.

In recognition of the bond that was established in Egypt, Greece and Crete with 30 Squadron during this period, I start with articles written by a man who flew with 33 and 30 at that time - Alfred Llewellyn Bocking. In 1955 he wrote eleven articles for the RCAF's 'Roundel' magazine which are considered to be some of the most popular that were ever published in 'Roundel'. For archival purposes, the details and stories he provides about life on, and during operations with, 33 in Palestine are fascinating, and he was the captain of one of the first 30 Squadron Blenheims to land in Athens in November 1940.

Once the Italian Air Force was defeated and Cyrenaica stabilised, in February 1941 33's Hurricanes became a vital part of the fighter reinforcement package sent to support the Greek campaign, where again the squadron performed remarkably, this time under intense and relentless air attack once the *Luftwaffe* arrived in Greece. As we all know, 33 paid a high price during the battles of Greece and Crete. Mustering once again on 1 June 1941 at Amriya in Egypt, 33 had no aircraft, just seven pilots and its groundcrew were scattered across the theatre. It had lost two COs, one killed and one

thought to be dead, several very experienced pilots, a host of ground personnel and sixteen Hurricanes. At Amriya, 33's Flight, led by 'Woody' Woodward, was attached to 30 Squadron, and then 274 Squadron, which had absorbed 33's 'C' Flight in August 1940.

The Crete campaign was covered in broad detail in the Summer 2016 '75th Anniversary' issue. For archival reasons I have included two detailed reports, written after the events, by the AOC-in-C RAF Middle East and the RAF Commander in Greece, which provides us an accurate and clear picture of the conditions and problems faced by the RAF operational and tactical commanders at the time.

Having read through a rather broad picture of the period through Albert Bocking's eyes, I thought it fitting to follow the story of two of 33's exceptional pilots, 'Ace of Aces' Pat Pattle and Woody Woodward, with Corporal 'Tug' Wilson's recollections of both battles from the groundcrew perspective. It would appear that Woodward and Wilson were both taken off Crete in the same destroyer, HMAS *Nizam*, albeit at different times and locations. I end with a small piece about the Maleme Memorial, consecrated 30 years ago this month.

Concentrating heavily on Greece and Crete for this issue left no room for any of the pre-'50 Years of Puma' articles that I was hoping to publish, but having received absolutely nothing from any of you to help me create the intended four-edition specials this year, I hope that some of you might manage to put pen to paper and jot a few of your memories of life on the Puma Force before it's too late. It looks



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TBD

SQUADRON GROUNDCREW REP

Sean Docherty (WO Eng 33 Sqn)

like there will be a Cenotaph Parade this year, and there is a good chance of holding a Puma Reunion in town this year too, so my aim is to publish my last edition of 'Loyalty' in the last week of November. Will it be entitled '50 and out'? After that, the editorial duties will pass on to one of you reading this issue ... any willing volunteers out there?

Proud to be 33

Dave Stewart

From the Chairman - Dick Brewster

Who would have thought that within our lifetime we would be able to go into a bank and ask for money with a mask on!!! Well this year certainly has been one of challenges, to say the least; however, there does now appear to be a light at the end of the tunnel and hopefully we will all start to getting back to some form of normality. The Association continues to monitor and react accordingly to forthcoming events such as this forthcoming Thursday's 'Crete Day' memorial service and again my thanks must go to Dave Stewart and the committee as they have 'Boots On the Ground' in terms of being able to remain in contact with 33 Squadron on a daily basis whereas I myself lie over two hours away and I work full time.

Having active Committee members proved invaluable last month, as they were able to organise a memorial service on Friday 9 April with 33 Squadron and the wonderful Padre Cannon to remember Andy Crous and Mark Maguire, who lost their lives in Kosovo twenty years ago. I know all of us who remember that time are still deeply saddened by their loss to this day. The memorial service also proved to be a springboard to the 80th Crete memorial service this forthcoming Thursday and again, through the excellent links that Dave Stewart and the committee have established, we have been able to link in with the Squadron to ensure, even under the current Government guidelines of having no more than thirty personnel present, that we will mark this special anniversary. Many of you know that our intention was to have a good Association presence at Maleme this year, and plans were going well until the imposition of the COVID 19 travel restrictions. Even the Squadrons plans had to be shelved, so I am pleased to say that we will have ten Association members joining with twenty serving officers and airmen, remembering that period of 33's history with a scaled down service and reading from serving personnel, followed by the laying of wreaths.

All of you that have an understanding of the 'Battle of Crete' in May 1941 and the involvement of 33 Squadron, not only in the lead up to that battle but during the battle and the aftermath, will know what a dark time it was for the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, not only for the loss of life during that campaign but what was also going on in the war at that time. Things were not going well, to say the least; however, later that year we were able to turn a corner with the battle of Alamein and 'the beginning of the end', and 33 Squadron were able to play their part in that campaign in the Western Desert.

As I have previously alluded to, the Association prior to Covid had undertaken a very busy period and when we



**Top: The Memorial plinth in front of 33 Squadron.
Centre: Squadron Leader Jez Allinson, 2IC, and MALM (Retd) Richie Knowles, who survived the crash in Kosovo.
Bottom: The 2IC, Padre Rebekah Cannon and Richie, having laid the 33 Squadron and 33 Squadron Association wreaths.**

are finally clear of the restrictions we plan to bring Association members together again through attendance at the Cenotaph, the undertaking of another Battlefield Tour, visits, lunches and so forth. If you have any suggestions of things you would like to do, please let me and the Committee know.

All of this would not be possible without your Committee and my thanks and appreciation must go out to them for their tireless and continuous work, on your behalf, promoting the Association. Jez Read has remained in close contact with the RBL for our annual attendance at the Cenotaph and has ensured that our finances are in good order. Paul Davies, Membership Secretary, has done some remarkable work in recording the history of the Puma fleet, on the Roll of Honour, and several other initiatives to ensure that the Puma 50th is remembered in some way this year, while Dave Stewart and Neil Scott ensure that I am kept fully informed in regard to both 33 Squadron and Station events.

Additionally, I hope that I see more old friends at Association events as we come out of lockdown. And talking of old friends, at this particular time my thoughts must turn to all those who we have served with us in the past and have died during Covid, none more so than Stan Smith, who passed away recently. Stan was a 33 Squadron pilot in the early Puma years, a stalwart and a true character from my early days on 33 Squadron in the seventies. We will be sending the Association's condolences to Stan's wife and family at this sad time.

In regard to options for this year's AGM we will keep you fully informed, we hope to hold one at the earliest opportunity once the current Government restrictions have been removed.

Finally, as we look forward towards the remainder of this year, on behalf of myself and the 33 Squadron Committee, I hope you and all your families remain safe and in good health and we look forward to seeing you all in the not too distant future. In regard to contributions to the 'Loyalty' magazine, suggestions, and feedback in regard to the Association, please do not hesitate to contact me or any one of the Committee.

Thank you.

Dick Brewster

Loyalty



Top: COVID restrictions meant a very limited attendance was allowed. From left to right, Dave Stewart, Dick Brewster, Jez Reid and Neil Scott. Unfortunately, Paul Davies was called away at the last minute and was unable to attend.
Centre: All of the attendees.
Bottom: After the service, the 2IC wrapped the wreaths in protective covers and tie wrapped them to the plinth to avoid any FOD issues.

From the Hart - OC 33 Squadron



33 Squadron have had a blistering Spring, being deployed to both Afghanistan and South-Western USA. 'A' Flight are still shaking the dust off their boots having had a tremendously successful operational tour of Op TORAL which saw several of their number win commendations for excellence on operations. During their deployment the United States announced its withdrawal from the Afghan Theatre by September and so alongside routine tasking The 'A' Team were deeply involved in draw down planning and operations.

'B' Flight detached to El Centro where they undertook demanding desert environmental training as part of Exercise IMPERIAL ZEPHYR. The Exercise was a great success, qualifying a number of crews in desert operations and preparing them for future operations. The Flight also stretched its legs, conducting littoral training at North Island Naval Air Station, San Diego and urban training in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, where they trained alongside Pavehawks of the 66th Rescue Squadron.

Both operational and exercise flying was underwritten by outstanding performances from the engineering and operations teams which continued to deliver unprecedented levels of aircraft availability and support. Meanwhile at home, with the Squadron deployed, the Second-In-Command has kept the ship steady as she goes, preparing a superb array of activities to mark the Aircraft's fifty years of service.

In the background there has been significant strategic turbulence and uncertainty. The Integrated Review confirmed that Puma would be retired from Service early but did not set a date. The Review also announced plans to field a New Medium Helicopter, but helicopter type and timelines remain to be confirmed. What is clear is that there will likely be a capability gap and much work is ongoing to chart a path through for the officers and airmen of 33 Squadron.

If the horizon is clouded we clearly see the next hurdle: Kenya. Running from mid-August until December, planning for Kenya is at a mature stage. Ambition in Kenya lies beyond environmental training; the detachment will support UK government strategic ambition in the region, engage with Kenyan Armed forces and set the conditions for a long term JHC presence in East Africa.

Sam Fletcher

Wing Commander S P Fletcher MVO MA RAF
Officer Commanding No. 33 Squadron

Memoirs of a Canadian in the RAF 1935-1944

Alfred Bocking - ex-33 Squadron & 30 Squadron



**Left: Alfred Bocking (right) with his friend John Kent, circa 1932. In 1935 they joined the RAF together, and John retired as a Group Captain, DFC & Bar, AFC, RAF. In 1952 he was Station Commander at Odiham.
Right: Squadron Leader Alfred Llewellyn Bocking DFC & Bar RAF, later Group Captain RCAF.**

As many of you are aware from previous articles about 33's long and proud history, we have had men from the Dominions – Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa - serving in our ranks ever since we formed in January 1916. During the First World War men transferred from their Army units to become pilots and observers in the Royal Flying Corps, several of whom would serve with 33 (HD) Squadron RFC and gave their lives while defending the North of England against Zeppelin attack. With the formation of the RAF in April 1918, and the establishment of the RAF Cadet College at Cranwell in 1920, where a former OC 33 Squadron, Major Cyril Gordon Burge, became the first Adjutant as a Squadron Leader, the way was opened for a new generation of aspiring Dominion personnel looking for a career in the RAF. Consequently, our history records the achievements of many of those men who served with 33 during the inter-wars period and during the Second World War, men like MacGregor, Woodward, Starrett, Holman, Kierath, Tribble, Argument, Roney and, perhaps the most well-known of all, Marmaduke Pattle. Following another period of research, and the invaluable assistance of another former OC 33, Wing Commander John Webb, and his contacts at the Canadian Forces College Information Resource Centre, Librarian Jeanine Eakins and Library Technician Angela Minchopoulos, we can add the name of another man who served with No. 33 Squadron in Palestine and Egypt, and with No. 30 Squadron in Greece - Alfred Llewellyn Bocking, Irish by birth but a naturalized Canadian.

A FLYING CAREER IN THE R.A.F.

In Canada, the constitution of the College at Cranwell had been communicated to the Canadian government via the Governor General, on 1 September 1920, together with an expressed hope that Canada would recommend candidates for the College. It was suggested that each self-governing Dominion would recommend two candidates per year; more limited numbers would be entertained for protectorates and colonies with less autonomy. Potential cadets were to be between 17 and 19 years of age, physically fit, unmarried and "of unmixed European descent."

The number of candidates allowable from the Empire was subsequently enlarged; as of 1932 it stood at 33 annually, with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the Irish Free State, Northern Ireland, Newfoundland and Southern Rhodesia each being allowed four candidates per annum (two per entry) while 'other territories' were allowed one yearly Cranwell candidate. It is evident, however, that Air Ministry would have considered it a nightmare had all the Dominions and colonies simultaneously filled their quotas. In 1932, the number of reserved places for colonial cadetships was cut in half.

Over the years barely a dozen Canadians were nominated as Cranwell cadets. The vast majority took a different route. Commencing in 1933, the RAF gradually expanded to meet the Nazi threat, which included training more Short Service commission pilots

who did not go through Cranwell. Recruits from the Dominions were welcomed, although initially they were expected to have a private pilot's licence and pay their own way to Britain. Travel expenses were reimbursed if the men were recruited, but there was no guarantee they would be accepted upon their arrival.

The RCAF had been cut by one-fifth in 1932, and it was not until 1937 that the Permanent Force experienced any significant growth. The Auxiliary Force took up some of the slack from 1934 onwards, but its units offered little of the glamour and excitement of a professional force. Young Canadians seeking an air-force career looked increasingly towards Britain, and slowly, they began to appear in RAF schools. Alfred, born in Belfast on 10 October 1915, immigrated with his parents to Canada and was educated in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He went solo in a Cirrus Moth at the Winnipeg Flying Club in 1931 and in an eleven-part series that he wrote for the RCAF Magazine 'The Roundel' in 1955, he described his journey to become an RAF pilot:

"It was 1933, and I was proud holder of a brand-new 'Commercial Air Pilot's Certificate – Flying Machines' duly signed by [Squadron Leader] A. T. Cowley for the Controller of Civil Aviation. I was all set to fly anything, anywhere, at any time for 'hire or reward' or just for the hell of it.

Disillusionment came fast. I was 18 years old and no one appeared especially interested in hiring a teenager to fly anything, anywhere, at any time."

FROM CANADA TO CAIRO

Having paid his way to England in October 1934, Alfred Bocking was brought before a selection board consisting of a group captain and four wing commanders. He found the experience terrifying:

"The interview itself has become a somewhat hazy memory, but I do recall that the first question was "A Canadian, eh? What cattle-boat did you come over on?" This was not as rude as it may sound, because at that time the cattle-boat appeared to be the accepted means of transportation to the U.K. for Canadian hockey-players and R.A.F. aspirants. I explained that I had arrived via the Canadian Pacific Railway's 'Duchess of Bedford'. I must have made this statement with a slightly supercilious air, for they found it necessary to put me smartly in my place by expressing the hope that I had a return ticket, so that I wouldn't become a charge on the public if I didn't satisfy their required high standard ... "

The Board agreed to accept Alfred, but five months elapsed between their decision and his being directed to the RAF Depot Uxbridge, during which time he led a very spartan existence. Arriving at the depot on 15

March 1935, and given the rank of 'Acting Pilot Officer on Probation under Suspicion' it was 26 March 1935, before the London Gazette announced that 68 young men had been 'granted short service commissions as provisional pilot officers on probation' with effect from that day. They included six Canadians, and Alfred Bocking's name was listed. Besides these men, nine other Canadians would secure short-service commissions that year. In 1936 the figure was 70; in 1937 it was 116, and 127 in 1938. (CAN/RAF: The Canadians in the Royal Air Force (RCAF Journal - SPRING 2015 - Volume 4, Issue 2))

Alfred was posted from Uxbridge to No.3 Flying Training School (FTS) at Grantham on 2 April 1935, where he was taught on the Avro Tutor in his junior term. He was then streamed onto the fighter flight for his senior term, where he learned to fly the Bristol Bulldog, at that time a front line fighter of the Air Defence of Great Britain (ADGB), but being replaced by new 'super' fighters – Gloster Gauntlets and Hawker Furies. Under normal circumstances Alfred's course of 30 pilots would have graduated in April 1936, but the threat from the military resurgence in Germany and Italy saw RAF should expand rapidly to meet the threats; consequently, the course was posted to squadrons straight away. Alfred was posted to No. 19 Squadron at Duxford, an ADGB squadron equipped with Gloster Gauntlets, until he heard the Group Captain say that because of the tense situation in Abyssinia, the RAF was reinforcing the Middle East squadrons with a fourth (or 'D') flight, and anyone volunteering for a spell in Egypt, Palestine or Sudan 'could do so with a reasonable hope of reporting to their squadrons after a half-year tour.' The opportunity of a first-class passage by Orient Line to Port Said, six months of pleasant duty in Egypt, and a 12-day cruise home clinched it - Acting Pilot Officer (APO) Bocking was going to the Middle East, but it turned out to be for rather longer than he originally intended.

Following his journey on the *Oransay* from Tilbury to Port Said, via Toulon, and an unexpected train ride to Cairo as OIC a draft of airmen going to join No. 216 Squadron, Alfred was persuaded to ignore his orders to take the 10:30 pm train from Bab-el-Luq station for the 20 mile journey south to Helwan-les-Bains to join his new squadron, and instead go and see the sights of Cairo with APOs 'Moose' Fulton and Pelley-Fry, who had arrived in Egypt a short time before.

The following day, after what Alfred describes as a 'bang on' night, he arrived at Helwan-les-Bains, a name derived from the odoriferous sulphur baths there, to join No. 45 Squadron, flying the Vickers Vincent, a large square biplane with an open cockpit, powered by a Bristol Pegasus engine and capable of 1 000 mile range with its long-range tank. As for the RAF station, Alfred



Vickers Vincent



Hawker Hart of 33 Squadron

described it as an excellent example of a small one-squadron station left over from the First World War which hadn't weathered the depression years well. The hangars were ancient Bessineau hangars, canvas tents with sand floors and canvas flap doors ripped by desert winds, surrounded by wooden revetments filled with sand. The officers' quarters were in long one-storey stone buildings and consisted of one room, one bed, one mosquito net, one wash-pail, and one dilapidated wardrobe. In the morning the bearer brought a small can of warm water for shaving purposes, drinking water was in a 'chatti' (earthenware jar) outside the door, and the ablutions were in the end room, over a large sand pit. The officers' mess consisted of an ante-room, a dining room and a kitchen.

ALFRED JOINS 33 SQUADRON

In January 1937 I was temporarily attached to No.33 (light bomber) Squadron, at Ismailia, on the Suez Canal. I hadn't been there long before I felt that I had found my niche. The C.O., Sqn. Ldr. 'Hot Lips' MacReynolds (of whom more anon) was the very best type of officer – an outstanding pilot, a first-rate engineer, and a gentleman. The other officers were all of fine calibre, too and – above all – the squadron was equipped with Hawker Harts. Though admittedly not a fighter, the Hart was an infinitely sweeter aircraft to fly than the larger and more cumbersome Vincent. Happy though I had been with No. 45 Squadron, I applied for – and was granted – a transfer to No. 33.

First, a word or so about the Hawker Hart. It was a beautiful aircraft, a small biplane with a sharp and gleaming silver nose enclosing a Rolls Royce Kestrel engine of 480 b.h.p. at sea level. A two-seater, it carried a pilot and an air gunner, and its armament consisted of a Vickers air-cooled .303 machine gun mounted along the port side and fired through the propellor arc by a Constantinesco (or 'C.C.') gear. This arrangement, which derived its name from its inventor during the First World War, was in continuous use from the Sopwith Spad of 1915 to the Gloster Gladiator that fought as late as 1942 in Greece.

Another contraption that was a very similar sight around the squadron flight line was the 'Huck starter', which consisted of the bare chassis and seat of a model-T Ford, with a steel pyramid supporting a long metal shaft that stuck out over the driver's head and the hood of the car. This shaft had an end that fitted into the hub of the aircraft propellor. The old model-T would clutch its engine to the shaft, and, with incredible bangs and stench, the whole affair would disappear in a haze of blue smoke from which emerged the curses of the driver as the propellor spun around until the engine finally caught. If someone had remembered to put chocks in front of the aircraft and

the Huck hadn't been chopped up, it would then back out of the smoke and repeat the operation with the next aircraft.

The Middle East Air Force had its share of characters, and not the least colourful of these was our C.O., Sqn. Ldr. 'Hot Lips' MacReynolds. Now, this nickname was not bestowed on him, as one might think, because of any amatory leanings or because of his ability with the trumpet. The reason for it was purely technical in nature. It appeared that, while a cadet at Cranwell, he had owned an ancient but very fast motorcycle (which he probably made himself). One day, as he was proceeding around a cinder track at a very high speed, the front forks of the motor-bike broke, and he covered the last hundred yards or so on his face. Plastic surgeons, working from the chin up, were fairly successful in pushing all the necessary parts back into their proper places, and they would probably stayed there had Hot-Lips not decided to buy a Bentley car soon after his release from hospital. Forgetting to let go of its crank-handle when it backfired, he left most of his newly repaired face on the radiator cap. Subsequent repairs were, to the browned-off medicos, in the nature of an anti-climax – hence the nickname 'Hot Lips'. That, anyway, is the way the story goes, and if the Air Commodore ever reads this I'm open to correction.

Our Station Commander at Ismailia was a very senior Wing Commander of considerable First World War fame. Year after year he had consistently arranged a large promotion party in the mess, beginning at midnight on December 31st and gathering strength until the promotion list arrived by signal in the early hours of January 1st. Just as consistently, year after year he was passed over for promotion – with the result that the party eventually became known as the 'Feast of the Passover' and went on with undiminished enthusiasm.

FROM LIGHT BOMBER TO FIGHTER

The first few months of 1938 found No. 33 (Light Bomber) Squadron still in Ismailia, and still flying the Hawker Hart. Life in the Suez Canal Zone was severe, placid, and just a little boring. In February, however, the grapevine hinted that we were going to be re-equipped with Gloster Gladiators and thus become a fighter squadron. On March 1st the rumour was substantiated: our name was to be changed shortly to No. 33 (Fighter) Squadron – the first fighter squadron to be formed in the Middle East since the end of the First World War.

The Gladiator was the last and most famous of a long line of biplane fighters and was to enjoy a period of operational fame equalled only by its successor the Hurricane. Indeed, the 'Glad' had the unique distinction of being the only fighter that faced the Luftwaffe and the Italian Air Force after having already received its



Feast of the Passover, New Year's Morning 1938. OC 33 Squadron, Squadron Leader 'Hotlips' MacReynolds holds on to the '33' sign as Alfred reads the Promotion results!



Flt Lt Hale Winter Bolingbroke, awarded the D.F.C. in April 1939 for distinguished service in Palestine. After the outbreak of war he remained in the Middle East and was killed in a flying accident in Egypt in June 1940.

baptism of fire while attending to his Majesty's business on the outposts of Empire. The changeover from Harts to Gladiators was made with little difficulty, and, now that we were 'fighter pilots', our unique prestige among the members of less fortunate squadrons rocketed to a new high. Our new status as a fighter squadron of course necessitated the display of our prowess in the air on every possible occasion, and a brief period of rather reckless flying ensued.

It was brought to an abrupt halt by two near disastrous incidents which led to a firm clamping down by the C.O. There were normally three flights to a squadron: 'A' Flight, 'B' Flight and 'C' Flight, each having its own colours of yellow, red and blue, respectively. I was by this time the flight commander of 'B' Flight, having reached the exalted rank of Flying Officer some time previously by virtue of time in rank and having passed the promotion 'A' examination.

The first incident concerned the Officer Commanding 'A' Flight, who had found an excellent audience aboard a packed troop ship in the Suez Canal. After several low passes over the cheering soldiers, he ended up with the usual grand flourish – a half roll followed by an inverted climb. Unfortunately, near the end of this manoeuvre, the Gladiator (which had been subjected to stresses never bargained for by its designers) came apart at the seams. The centre section collapsed first, at which point the pilot and the Glad parted company. After further disintegration of the aircraft, sundry wings and control surfaces found their way to the ground not many yards away from the pilot, who was sitting on the desert sands, shaken but unhurt, under his collapsed parachute.

The second incident occurred on the evening of the same day. Though less spectacular, it was more nerve-racking and lasted over a long period of time. I was doing a low-level beat up of Port Said at night when a landing wire broke (landing wires were the heavy gauge wires that ran from the top of the centre section down to the outer struts of the bottom wings.). It whipped back and and smashed the cockpit hood, causing me some minor facial cuts and a bad nose bleed. The slipstream, whipping through the broken canopy, soon made the cockpit look like an abattoir. Of more immediate concern was the fact that the wire had snapped back and penetrated the bottom wing, jamming the aileron controls so that the aircraft was in a slight turn to the left, which I couldn't correct except by excessive skidding and hard right rudder.

I briefly considered using my 'chute, but I felt that the loss of two aircraft in one day would take a bit of laughing off by the squadron; so, by some unorthodox flying and judicious use of throttle and rudder, I managed to get back over the flare-path. The resultant landing was only briefly visible to the O.C. night flying

and the small crowd assembled at No.1 flare. This was lucky, for immediately after touchdown I disappeared promptly into the black Egyptian night to end my landing run, without further hurt or damage, under the mooring tower (for dirigibles) in the far north-west corner of the landing area.

Summer found Sqn. Ldr. 'Hotlips' McReynolds still C.O. of No. 33, and my fellow flight commanders were Flying Officers 'Ace' Hawkins (a Canadian) and Bolingbroke. Ace was later killed in a Boston over Europe, and Boly, after winning a D.F.C. in the Arab Rebellion, was killed in the Western Desert while flying a Gladiator.

Old days are apt to be loosely referred to as 'good'. Over the years, it is easy to forget the sticky nights, sandflies, fleas, and malaria. It is not, however, easy to forget the cool clean mornings when one was awakened by a gentle raising and lowering of one's leg by a cheerful but careful bearer who had a firm hold of a big toe. (he held it at arm's length, because he had learned from experience not to come within reach until he had ascertained the effendi's morning mood.) It was good to be alive and to breathe the crisp cool desert air into one's lungs. It was good indeed to be young and a fighter pilot.

The days started at 0600 hours, inevitably by a cup of steaming hot tea, incredibly sweet, served in a thick battle-scarred mug. A typical early morning flight might be a three-aircraft formation practice along the Suez Canal, north to Port Said, or over the green oasis of Ismailia and south down the silver ribbon of the canal, above the twin columns of the Anzac Memorial and on past the Great Bitter Lake to Suez itself, with its towering hills of bleak and bare stones dropping precipitously down to the blue-green waters of the Gulf. Those were halcyon days.

WEDDING LEAVE IN CANADA

In August I applied for and was granted four months' leave, and with a high heart and post-dated cheques I bought a one way ticket to New York via an Egyptian boat (third class) to Genoa, by rail (third class) to Paris, and by the Hamburg-Amerika liner Hansa (you guessed it – third class) to New York. There, my family were to meet me with their car.

The trials of this trip were many. In a Paris pub I met some American fighter pilots who had been fighting in the Spanish civil war. I forget which side they had flown for, but it must have been the losing one, because I changed some Spanish money for them into good Egyptian pounds and I had that Spanish money for years. I never could get rid of it, even in a crap game. As a result, when I arrived in New York I had a short, sharp session with a gum-chewing official who, on discovering that my total wealth in legal tender was seventeen



**'B' Flight, No. 33 (Bomber) Squadron
Flying Officer Bocking seated front row, second from left.**



Gloster Gladiator of No. 33 Squadron flying over Lake Timsah, Ismailia. The yacht below belonged to King Farouk.

cents, snapped his braces and mentioned something about Ellis Island. I managed to convince him that, notwithstanding the fact that I had been born in Belfast and had just arrived from Egypt in a German boat, I was a Canadian. Eventually convinced, both by my statements and by the providential arrival of my father, he reluctantly conceded that maybe my Canadian passport, with its necessary U.S. visa issued by the American consulate in Cairo, was in order; and I was allowed to proceed on to Canada.

My stay in Winnipeg was short. I visited old friends at Stevenson Field and made some new ones. I met my first R.C.A.F. officer and had lunch together at Fort Osborne Barracks, where I'd had my original interview after applying to join the R.A.F. Most important of all, I achieved my aim and married my schooldays sweetheart. All this activity was brought to an abrupt end by the Munich crisis and a preemptory Air Ministry signal ordering me to report to my unit 'forthwith'. Since I had been banking on my accumulated pay over the four month leave period to buy our tickets back to Egypt, the order came as a bit of a financial shock to a newly-married Flying Officer. My wife's suggestion that I send a telegram back to the Air Ministry saying 'forth with what?' was tempting, but I deemed it unwise. But, like most problems, this one was finally solved, and we left Winnipeg for Montreal, England and Egypt, on October 4th of 1938 – four years to the day after my original departure.

I arrived back in Egypt at the end of October and found that No. 33 Squadron was in the process of moving to Ramleh, in Palestine, to help deal with the rising tension between the Jewish settlers and the Arabs. There had been some changes in the squadron during my absence, the most important one being that a new C.O. had taken over – Sqn. Ldr. H.D. McGregor. His charming wife Jean and his children were going to remain in married quarters at Ismailia during the squadron's absence in Palestine, and the C.O. very kindly suggested that my wife should stay with them.

I will make no attempt to assess the rights or wrongs of the conflict that was taking place in Palestine. The facts that concerned No. 33 Squadron were, in those winter months of 1938, that the Jews were attempting to carry out collective farming on the vast fertile plain that runs from Mount Carmel to the Sinai desert and lies between the Mediterranean and the Judean hills. The Arab, rightly or wrongly, felt that his rights were being violated, and he had resorted to terrorist tactics against the outlying Jewish villages. Whoever was at fault, Palestine was a British Protectorate, and it was the duty of His Majesty's Government, as represented by the Royal Air Force, to bring peace to the Holy Land – even, as the Irishman said, "if I have to kill you to do it."

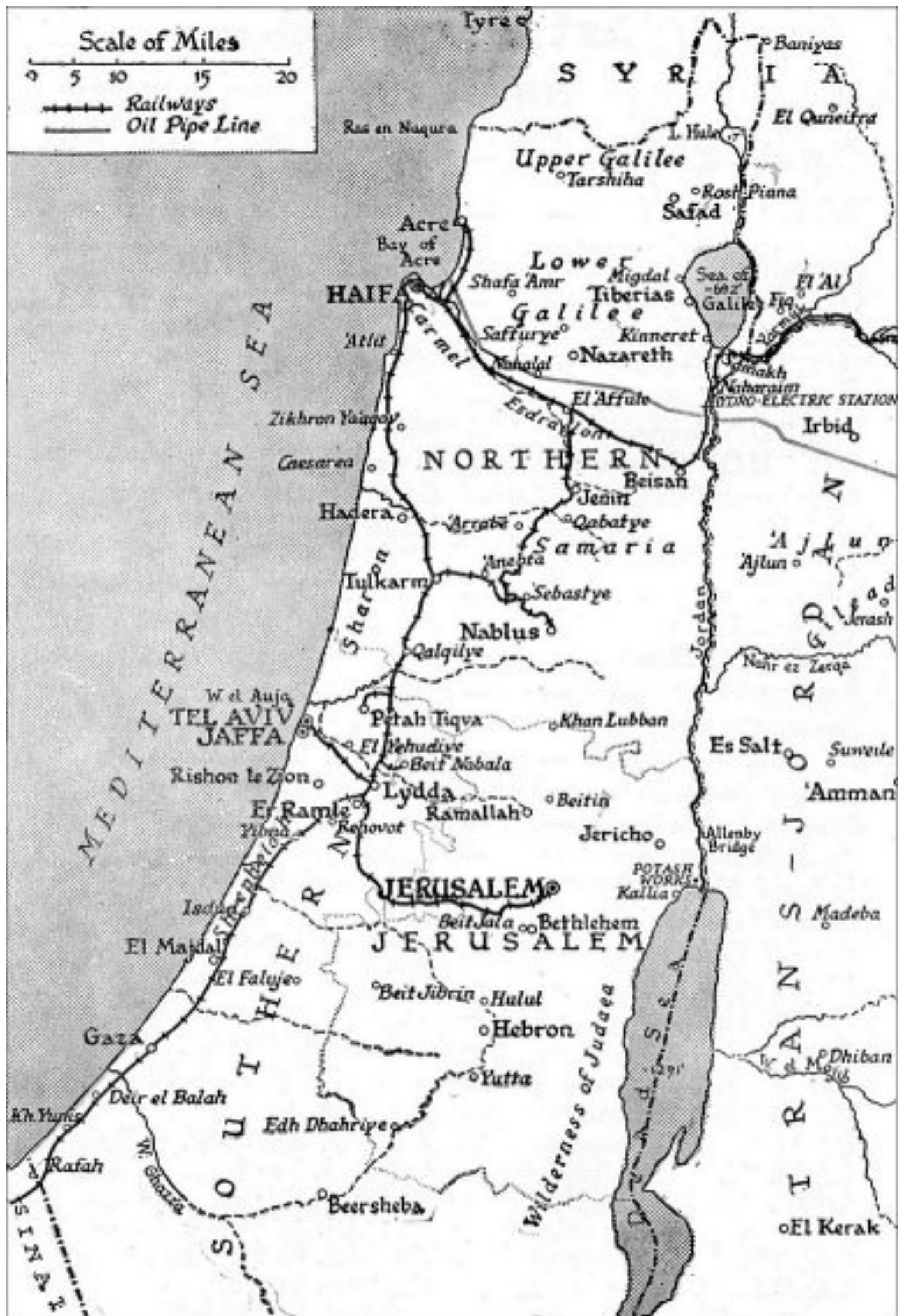
RAMLEH

Ramleh was a rolling mud-field. As the tides of the First World War had swept across that ancient and embattled land, it had served as an airfield for the Turks, the Germans, and the British, in succession. I had, by virtue of being flight commander, become an acting Flight Lieutenant, and senior flight commander. Under some C.O.s, this position of second-in-command can be a precarious one, and it has not been unknown for its incumbent to find himself being allotted all the more dangerous and less glamorous operations, thus leaving the plums for the C.O. In my case, it was just the opposite. 'Mac' was a flying demon. He provided operational leadership by flying on every possible occasion, and the fact that he chose, not the easy flights, but the more difficult and dangerous ones, was eventually reflected in his being awarded one of the very few D.S.O.s ever awarded in time of 'peace'.

Our adversaries, the Arab Rebel Army, reputedly led by one Abdul Razeq, were well armed, well trained, and highly skilled in guerilla warfare and terrorist tactics. They used the Mauser 9mm. automatic rifle and the Italian Parabellum. With these weapons they were exceedingly adept in the field of anti-aircraft fire. This was a direct heritage from the days of Lawrence of Arabia, who had taught the Arabs the art of 'leading' their targets. The rebel Army would make night attacks on Jewish villages, blow up trains, and ambush vehicles on the road. No quarter was asked or given. As in all guerilla actions, its success was largely the result of its ability to fade back into the bleak rocky hills where roads were practically non-existent, and where local villages, either out of fear or sympathy with the cause, provided food and shelter. Britain, as always, was reluctant to expose those villages – even the known guilty ones – to the agony of air bombing. With the arrival of No. 33 Squadron, however, the thinking began to grow more stern. No. 6 (Light Bomber) Squadron (Hawker Hardys) stepped up its bombing activity and many notorious rebel villages were heavily bombed – but only, of course, after leaflets had been dropped to warn the population that the bombing was to take place. This procedure allowed them to take grandstand seats on the surrounding hills and watch this display of His Majesty's wrath – the villagers with helpless anguish, the rebels with smouldering anger.

INTO ACTION AGAINST THE ARABS

It was during one of these bombing sorties that No. 33 Squadron drew first blood. An aircraft of No. 6 Squadron had been shot down and had crashed back in the hills near Kolundia. A pitched battle was taking place between an Army column and the Palestine Police, on one side, and a strong force of Arab rebels, on the other. The pilot and the bomb aimer were the prize. Back at Ramleh, the rain was beating down out of



low-hanging winter clouds, and we had just asked the Operations Officer in Jerusalem for permission to 'stand down' when word of the crash and a call for assistance came in through Army wireless channels.

Ace Hawkins and I were airborne in a matter of minutes. I was leading and Ace was tucked in tight on my right wing. There were no radio aids or forward visibility, but we knew the road to Jerusalem; so, at 200 m.p.h., with our wheels scant feet from the road, we headed for the city. On arrival there, we swung around the tall tower of the Y.M.C.A. building and followed the road to Kolundia, not forgetting the nearby presence of the tall transmitting towers of the Palestine radio, unseen and deadly somewhere in the murk ahead. Fortune favoured us in every respect, or maybe we just lived right; for we saw the frantically bobbing red and white umbrellas of the Army column on our first pass over our destination. We had no difficulty in locating the crashed aircraft but could see no signs of the crew. (They were, in fact, with the Army by this time.) The ball-and-arrow code laid out on the ground spelled the message: 'Enemy firing from the direction of the arrow.' Without further ado, Ace and I swung over for a look-see.

We immediately came under fire, and two holes appeared miraculously in my left wing, a fraction of a second before the sound of two sharp slaps, as of clapped hands. This quick, accurate, and hostile action on the part of the unseen sharpshooters on the ground came as a bit of a shock. In visualizations of one's first actions, it is always the villain who gets shot up (or maybe down) and never in any circumstances oneself – at least, not before large numbers of the enemy have been accounted for. If one did get shot (which could, by a stretch of the imagination, eventually happen), it would of course be a slightly romantic type of wound that didn't hurt too much. Now, however, as I looked at the ragged holes in my bottom mainplane, it became apparent that I could have become very dead indeed – and in a very messy and very unromantic manner – if those bullets had been aimed a few inches in another direction. Thus rudely awakened to reality, I called Ace on the radio: "Red leader to Red one. You take the area east of the road and I'll look after the west side." Ace swung out of sight, and, as I broke left, I saw my enemy for the first time.

Two figures in khaki tunics and Arab head-dress were just climbing over a stone wall. As I dropped the nose of the aircraft in their direction, the whole picture seemed to freeze into immobility. The two figures were clearly outlined in my electric reflector gunsight, etched in red lines on the windshield, arms over their heads, holding their guns high preparatory to making a leap to the ground below. My mind raced, Gun sight was on, cockpit guns cocked, hydraulic reservoir handle in the

'up' position, firing button turned from 'safe' to 'fire'. All these things were done, and in the fraction of a second before I pushed the button I realised that these two men were going to die and things would never be quite the same again. The four Brownings chattered and the figures on the wall disappeared in a cloud of disintegrated stone and dust. Hauling back frantically on the control column, I pulled out of my dive with a force that jammed me down in my seat. I swung around in a tight circle and saw the bodies of my two rebels lying at the foot of the wall.

With this incident the Gladiator was launched on an operational career that was to cover an area from the Western Desert, through Greece and Crete to the Norwegian fjords, and which would culminate in the epic defence of Malta, by those three most famous of all Gladiators: 'Faith', 'Hope' and 'Charity'.

AIR TO GROUND COMMS—UMBRELLAS

In case the mention of white and red umbrellas, a few paragraphs back, has left my readers with the impression that the Army entered such operations as this in a gala mood, let me explain that the gaily coloured umbrellas played an important role in ground-to-air signals. Soldiers advancing on a village – say, through orange groves – would be difficult to distinguish from the rebels lurking in the area. A pilot who obtained only a fleeting glimpse of furtive movement might very understandably 'shoot up' the wrong people., particularly as the Army very seldom approached from the agreed direction – a fact which was due, I understand, to the tortuous and rocky nature of the terrain rather than any ineptitude at map reading. To prevent such a tragedy, the column commander carried a large brilliant red umbrella, and the company or platoon commanders smaller white ones. Pilots were known to make the odd dive at the white umbrellas just to see them bobbing frantically. It was not considered cricket to dive at the red umbrellas under which the top Brass clustered in distrust.

This distrust was not unjustified, as the standard of air-ground co-operation was low – thanks mainly, to a lack of understanding or appreciation of each other's job on the part of the soldier and the airman. The education of both was greatly enhanced by detailing pilots in turn to accompany a ground attack on at least one operation. This was an extremely uncomfortable and hazardous business, and one trip was usually sufficient to give the pilots a healthy respect for their comrades on the ground and to allow them to explain something about air operations. As the months went by, this army-air co-operation improved until we eventually became an efficient joint operational team.

As the winter rains continued, the mud at Ramleh made it necessary for No. 33 Squadron to move to Lydda, 14

miles to the north. The move of the ground party was made without incident, under the protection of No. 2 Armoured Car Company, R.A.F. This company was equipped with Rolls Royce armoured cars of ancient vintage. The officers and men were as swashbuckling a crew as could be imagined, and not the least swashbuckling of them was Flt. Lt. 'Cas' Casano. With a naturally swarthy complexion, hawk-like features, and a devil-may-care air, he could have been a throw-back to the crusaders that roamed these same hills so long ago. Cas was eventually to command this small R.A.F. Armoured Car Company against Rommel in the bigger war just around the corner.

The stories of the activities of the R.A.F. armoured cars are legendary. but the one that caused most amusement, from Alexandria to Damascus, concerned Cas's liver-and-white hound dog, 'Butch'. It seemed that Cas and his merry men were as usual ranging far behind the German lines, deep in the desert south of Benghazi. They had formed a laager for the night with their armoured cars and dug the necessary slit trenches. Early the next morning they were dive-bombed by Stukas of the Luftwaffe, dropping 1,000 lb. bombs; and everyone headed for cover in the slit trenches. When the last German aircraft had departed, a ring of faces peered gloomily over the lips of the trenches at a monstrous and deadly-looking 1,000-pounder that lay unexploded in the very centre of the laager.

Did it have a short delay-action fuse? That was the question. As the sun grew hotter, the situation became uncomfortable. No one wanted to make the first move. Suddenly out of Cas's trench came 'Butch', watched by a circle of eyes peering red-rimmed through small slits between the desert floor and steel helmets. He sauntered over to the half-buried bomb, and sniffed it disdainfully. Then, apparently deciding that, in a land where trees were so scarce, this was indeed manna from heaven, he proceeded to put it to the obvious doggy use. A roar of laughter arose, and the tension was broken. Treading very gently and driving off in a careful fashion, No. 2 Armoured Car Company proceeded on to the war, leaving the Nazi's bomb to shatter the still of the desert in its own good time.

LYDDA

To return to Palestine, in the winter of 1938, the airfield at Lydda and the terminal building in which we were to live were both still under construction; but to pilots who had never seen a runway, the joy of flying off those fine hard-surfaced strips was adequate compensation for the most primitive accommodation. And primitive it was – just the shell of a building, built, like most airport terminals, in the shape of a three-tiered wedding cake, with the glass-enclosed control tower perched on top like the model of the happy

couple. Construction had reached the stage where door-knobs were to be put on the doors and glass in the windows, but there it had stopped. There was no furniture, no heat, and the plumbing worked only spasmodically. R.A.F. H.Q. located in some comfort in Jerusalem, gave us bed-boards and palliasses, a gallon jug of rum, and their deepest sympathy. For the uninitiated, a bed-board consisted of three six-foot planks resting on small blocks of wood about six inches high, on top of which went the palliasse, like an elongated pillow-case stuffed with straw. The rum was provided in accordance with Kings Regulations and Air Council Instructions, and the sympathy was thrown in for free.

The airfield itself was surrounded by a strong wire fence, with stone blockhouses placed at strategic locations around the perimeter. These blockhouses were veritable fortresses, with small slits for windows, complete with steel shutters that could be battened down at the slightest sign of danger. They gave adequate protection to the Jewish constabulary that was providing the ground defence. They did not, however, give much protection to the airfield, and life inside the wire could be precarious.

We had been in the habit, in Egypt, of using a strong portable floodlight, called a 'Chance light', to provide illumination for night flying. At Lydda we tried this for a pre-dawn take-off – but we only tried it once. As soon as the light came on, several heavy slugs ripped out of the orange groves outside the wire, and, with a crash of shattering glass, everything was plunged into a darkness which covered a frantic scramble for cover by everyone but the pilot. He, poor wretch, was left sitting in his cockpit wondering what had happened and where everyone had gone so suddenly. For a while after this, our night take-offs were made without benefit of any illumination save that provided by the stars or moon.

A rather clever trick of the rebels, which could have led to disaster for us, was rendered innocuous by their underestimation of the take-off run required by the Gladiator, particularly when the pilot was trying to pull it into the air off the dark runway as quickly as possible. After one pre-dawn take-off, the morning light revealed a string of large boulders stretched across the runway at the intersection. The Gladiator's wheels could not have missed them by more than few feet. He was a wily heathen, this Arab rebel, and we had to learn fast to keep ahead of him.

THE PALESTINIAN REBELLION

The R.A.F. had much experience in desert warfare. Air power as an aid to land forces had long been employed on many Empire frontiers. India, Aden, and Iraq had become accustomed to the roar of Air Force engines

over remote and rebellious tribal camps. Desert nomads no longer cowered in fear as a Vickers Valencia, like a fat and stately Boanerges, flew overhead and with a voice of thunder exhorted them to lay down their arms and return to their tents and flocks. The Arabs had long since discovered that the voice was that of the political officer, many times magnified and directed through loud-speakers in the belly of the aircraft; and many a verbal battle took place between the imperturbable voice from the sky and the fierce desert rebels screaming threats and invective from the backs of their wheeling steeds.

The Palestine rebellion of 1938-39 was not this type of war. Any use of air power in the traditional role of punitive bombing or flag-waving was doomed to failure. This rebel was not the traditional desert warrior who fought only for the greater glory of Allah, with no discipline or aim, and without modern weapons or sound leadership. On the contrary, he had a very definite aim – to eject the usurper from land he considered his own by virtue of centuries of occupancy. He had modern weapons, good leadership, and technical skill. The last attribute was convincingly demonstrated by his ability to lay road mines, blow up trains, and destroy bridges.

In such circumstances, the R.A.F. was fortunate that its operations were to be directed by an A.O.C. whose breadth of vision and genius for leadership were later to win him world fame as leader of Britain's Bomber Command. Now, in 1938, he was Air Commodore Harris, A.O.C. Palestine and Transjordan. Of this period he was later to write: "In the summer of 1939 I was on my way home from Palestine where I had been A.O.C. Palestine and Transjordan during one of the worst of the periodic rebellions resulting from the Anglo-Jewish-Arab controversy. I had been there a busy year, teaching the British Army the advantages and the rebels the effectiveness of Air Power."

Our aim was to destroy the rebel army. Whenever information was received through Special Service officers or other intelligence sources that the rebels were meeting in a particular village, word was flashed to the appropriate army field command to prepare a column for action. At the same time the R.A.F. was warned of the impending action, and the number of fighters required was put on 'stand-by'. The operation was usually timed so that the army could make its preliminary movements under cover of darkness. The Air Force would dispatch its fighters before dawn with instructions to arrive over the suspected village at 'first shooting-light'. This presented a very nice problem in navigation, for attempting to pin-point a small village, while flying at night over mountainous and desolate country, was no easy task. It was necessary not to come too close to your village before the dawn was

sufficiently advanced for shooting, otherwise you would flush the rebels and they would disappear into the hills – much to the chagrin of the army column when it arrived some hours later.

AIRPINS

If the timing was right, the Gladiators would sweep low over the suspect village just at dawn, and handfuls of leaflets would be held out into the slip-stream to be torn away and flutter gently down on to the village. This operation was known as an 'airpin'.

The leaflets were, of course, written in the local tongue. They warned the natives to remain in their village, and explained that if they did so they would come to no harm. The other important piece of Arab literature that the pilots carried was a 'blood-chit' that promised to pay the bearer a large sum of money, or 'baksheesh', if a shot-down pilot was returned, unharmed, or at least un mutilated, to the nearest military or Palestine Police post – and no questions asked. As the Arab in most cases couldn't read either leaflets or chits, we considered it only fair to emphasise the former with our machine guns and try to forget the implications of the latter.

The setting of 'airpins' over Arab villages constituted the bulk of No. 33 Squadron's operations during the closing days of 1938. This type of flying was always a gamble with the weather, engine failure, and enemy fire – and there was always the fear of falling into the Arabs' hands. His treatment of prisoners was notorious, and he had no love for the pilots of No. 33 Squadron.

The dawn arrival over an Arab village was full of suspense and excitement. If the intelligence was bad, or the village had somehow received warning of the attack, then all was quiet. If, on the other hand, the intelligence was good, the shattering roar of 900 h.p. and the gentle rain of yellow leaflets was the signal for intense activity. Half-dressed sleepy rebels, clutching their weapons, would make a break for the hills. Sometimes there would be only one or two, sometimes many. If there were too many for the Gladiators to handle, one of the aircraft would climb above the surrounding hills and call base for more assistance. It was war in its simplest form. The rebel fired at the aircraft and the aircraft fired back. Sometimes the rebel died, and on occasions the aircraft would continue its dive to terminate in a fiery pyre on the side of some remote and rocky hill. The pilot had four machine guns, but the Arab had a hundred eyes and half as many weapons.

But it was not always that simple. The rebels soon learned that an ill-planned rush to escape could end in disaster, and many were the wiles they used to ensure the escape of the leaders and – more important – the safe removal of their weapons before the arrival of the

army column. Many a pilot was faced with a situation for which his military training and background had not prepared him. After he had dropped his leaflets on a village, what was he to do when a small group of Arab women swathed in black, openly left the village, or an elderly patriarch pulled his small cart down the road to the hills? There were basic moral issues involved here, and each pilot had to solve them according to the dictates of his own conscience. His duty was clear, but each pilot acted independently and far from the eyes of authority or the possibility of criticism, had the power of life or death under his right thumb. Different men reacted in different ways, but generally the pilot's sense of duty triumphed, and it was not long before word went around the Arab villages that a stern hand was being used to stamp out terrorism in the Holy Land.

1938 ended in a blaze of action. A large band of rebels was operating in the Nablus area. Intelligence reports indicated that Abdul Razek had called a meeting of various tribal leaders. The village in which the meeting was to take place had been identified. The activity in this area was watched closely by the R.A.F. Special Service officers, Army Intelligence, and the Palestine Police. When all signs pointed to the gathering's being complete, a carefully prepared joint operation was begun. A reinforced Army column, supported directly by light bombers (Hawker Hardys) of No. 6 Squadron from Ramleh, headed for the suspect village. An 'airpin' was clamped down directly on the village by three Gladiators from No. 33 Squadron flown by the C.O. and myself from Lydda, and Sergeant Pilot Tebbs from the detached flight at Haifa, respectively.

Almost immediately it became clear that this was to be no ordinary operation. I was following the C.O. in a low fast dive over the village, and his leaflets were still in the air, when we came under heavy fire from the ground and the whole village seemed to erupt with armed and very hostile rebels. The action was hot and fast for the first few minutes. Both Mac and I took several hits, fortunately none in a vital spot. That the rebel casualties were fairly high was evident from the number of khaki-tunic'd Arabs, unmistakably dead, who were sprawled among the rocks. Occasionally the staccato sound of rapid-fire weapons would speak with more authority than the more familiar flat crack of the rifle, and it was apparent that the Army was going to have a major skirmish on its hands when it arrived.

GLADIATOR DOWN

All too soon we were out of ammunition and short of fuel. As Tebbs had come the shorter distance from Haifa, we were forced to leave him there and return to base for fuel and ammunition and to check for damage. We had just set course for home, flying in tight formation, when we passed our relief aircraft on the

way to the scene of the action. Mac quickly briefed them on the situation by radio, and three or four minutes later, when we were already far away, we heard the radio-talk of the pilots and gathered that the Army column had arrived and that the ground situation was confused. (I gathered that there was much bobbing of red and white umbrellas). It was clear that a fairly large ground action was under way and that heavy fire was being exchanged. We were very nearly at the limit of our radio reception when we heard faintly a conversation that indicated that one of our Gladiators had been shot down.

Our landing at Lydda caused some excitement. Rumours of the magnitude of the action had spread, and everyone was full of curiosity. To add to the confusion, an Imperial Airways 'Hannibal' airliner, en route from England to the Far East, had landed just before us, and a milling group of tea-planters, civil servants, and teachers on their sabbatical year, surrounded our aircraft, fingering the bullet holes and gashed fabric with many 'Ohs!' and 'Ahs!' We had great difficulty in keeping them from standing in front of the still hot guns. Of course, I enjoyed every minute of it while pretending a nonchalant annoyance.

Inspection showed that my aircraft had a split main spar and sundry other minor damage. The C.O. decided that, in view of the activity, he would remain to direct operations while I would get another aircraft and return to the scene of action. I was very pleased with this order, as I was worried about that crashed aircraft. Two of the three relieving Gladiators had come from Lydda and were flown by Canadians – Flt. Lt. 'Ace' Hawkins and Pilot Officer Johnny Mahoney, the latter of whom had recently joined my flight. It was, in fact, Sgt. Tebbs' aircraft that had crashed. He had been shot down almost immediately after Mac and I had set course for Lydda and just a few moments before the other aircraft had arrived, so no one had seen the actual crash. I lost no time in transferring my parachute to a serviceable Gladiator and in taking off immediately, with Flying Officer George Rumsey, the adjutant, flying as my wingman. George, incidentally, had his big toe shot off in this action. He became reconciled to the loss of the toe, but the destruction of his shoe was another matter, and, with the true administrative fervour of a born adjutant, he entered into a bitter paper-war with Middle East H.Q. in Cairo until they capitulated and bought him a new pair.

On arrival at the scene of hostilities, we quickly located the rebels' positions on the side of a hill, the Army column at the foot of the hill, and the crashed aircraft on a fairly level plateau about half-way between the opposing forces. The Army ground-to-air signals told us that they were being fired on from the general direction of the crashed aircraft. Just as we arrived, a

brilliant red flare arched into the sky from the crashed aircraft. The aircraft we were relieving advised us that this was the first sign of life that had come from the wreckage. A close look at the crash showed that the fuselage was fairly intact and that the sliding hood was either jammed three-quarters closed or the pilot was too badly hurt to open it further.

As I circled low above him, Sgt. Tebbs again fired a red signal in the same direction as the first one. This was the recognized ground-to-air Verey-light signal meaning "I am being fired on from the direction indicated". The only sign of life in that direction was a large flock of sheep and several shepherds, all gazing down at the crashed aircraft with dull apathy. I routed the sheep out of there with a low fast dive and a short burst of machine gun fire, and, as the sheep scattered in panic, several rebels who had been hiding among them ran for more adequate cover. The combined fire of eight machine guns from our two Gladiators soon dealt with them – and, since one flying figure could not be discerned from another, with the shepherds as well. (Anyway, they were keeping bad company).

Knowledge that the pilot was still alive inspired a rescue mission by the Army that was in keeping with the finest traditions of gallantry. A small party of about twelve men (one white umbrella), including medical orderlies, set out to scale the heights to the wrecked aircraft. I remained, giving close cover to Sgt. Tebbs, but the other aircraft, reinforced just at that crucial moment by two more from Flt. Lt. Bolingbroke's flight at Haifa, buzzed around like angry bees desperately trying to keep the Arabs heads-down and to provide measure of relief to the rescue party. The rebels were numerous, however, and the rock-strewn slopes of the surrounding high ground gave excellent cover to sharp-eyed snipers. It was not long before the enemy fire began to take effect, and first one and then another of the soldiers fell.

The rescue party finally reached the wreckage and began the difficult job of manoeuvring a stretcher, containing a six-foot, two-hundred-pound pilot, down the precipitous slope under furious fire from the enemy. A stretcher-bearer fell, mortally hit, and Sgt. Tebbs pleaded with them to leave him and take cover. This they refused to do, and they finally won through to safety. Those of us who were watching from the comparative safety of the air offered up some heartfelt prayers of thanks to these gallant men. Our respect for the courage of our comrades on the ground, and some realization of the dangers and difficulties under which they operated with such steadfast purpose, was brought sharply home to us by the example we had before our eyes. It was a lesson from which we derived great benefit in the dark days ahead. It was too bad that more airmen and soldiers were not exposed to it

at this early date. A sad footnote to this rescue was added some days later when Sergeant-Pilot Tebbs died of his injuries in a Haifa hospital.

It is interesting to note that while the R.A.F. in Palestine was operating under the future 'Bomber' Harris, the army in the Haifa area was operating under a Divisional Commander who was to achieve equal lustre and to win his Field-Marshal's baton as Montgomery of El Alamein. We were fortunate indeed to serve our apprenticeship in war under two such distinguished commanders.

VILPATS

In addition to the 'airpin', our other regular operation was the village patrol, or 'vilpat'. This originated in a rather peculiar way. On 2 December 1938, in formation with Sgt. Slater, I was returning to base from a rather dull 'airpin' on a northern village. Ours were the last aircraft over the area and the army had the situation well in hand. It was a boring flight home, and I was looking idly around the cockpit when I noticed that I still had a handful of leaflets stuffed down the side of my flying boot. We were just at that moment passing a rather large village called Talluza. On an impulse I called Sgt. Slater on the radio and told him to remain at cruising height and wait for me. I peeled off into a quick dive toward the centre of the village and let go a handful of leaflets just to see what reaction I would get. I figured that, if there were any rebels there, they would believe this to be an 'airpin' and make a break for the hills. There were, and they did! Before the leaflets reached the ground, a very large band of rebels was scattering in every direction. Sgt. Slater quickly joined me, and for a few hectic moments we couldn't shoot fast enough. When the first flurry of excitement died away, the rebels had lost thirteen dead (the bodies were later picked up by the Army) and I had taken an equal number of hits (by subsequent actual count) through the fuselage – four of them, I noted reflexively, through the cockpit. This, of course, was before the days of self-sealing fuel tanks or armour plating, so it was fortunate that none had been made in that most vital spot where I was sitting. Sgt. Slater had also escaped serious damage.

A quick look at the map showed that Tulkarm, where there was an Army detachment, lay just a few miles to the west, so I sent Sgt. Slater to drop a message (by message bag) informing them of the action. They had, as it transpired, heard the firing; so a motorized patrol was already on the way, and it wasn't long before it bounced into view. After recovering the weapons from the bodies of the rebels that Slater and I had shot (and for whom, I understand, they received a bounty) the soldiers got about the serious business of routing out the rest of the Arabs from the surrounding hills. We left them to their dangerous task and returned

to base.

The Army claimed later that they had been watching this villageful of rebels located practically on their own doorsteps, and that my dropping of the leaflets was premature. R.A.F. operations in Jerusalem, while agreeing generally that it was a "good show, old boy", were a little disgruntled that they hadn't thought of I first. In any case, a 'vilpat' shortly afterwards became a standard operation, the idea being that the Arab, not knowing whether our aircraft were on a 'vilpat' or an 'airpin', would have to make the first move.

As a curious sequel to this operation, the following summer I was stationed at Abu Sueir in Egypt, the Palestine rebellion was over and largely forgotten by all except the few who had been directly concerned. One morning while on station parade for a review by the Commander-in-Chief I was called in front of the Air Marshal, who said a few kind words about the Palestine operations, gave me a firm handshake, handed me a scroll neatly and appropriately done up in red tape, and turned away. Later, reading the scroll to my admiring and envious friends, I was pleased, but mystified. It read: 'Flying Officer A.L. Bocking, R.A.F. Your name has been brought to my notice for distinguished conduct in action at Talluza on Dec. 2, 1938. I congratulate you on your devotion to duty and thank you for the example you gave. I have directed that a note of your conduct should be made on your record of Service – (signed) R.H. HAINING, Lieut./General Commanding British Forces in Palestine and Transjordan.' It was extremely gratifying to receive this belated pat on the back from the Army – even though nothing, as far as I know, was ever noted on my record of service, and indeed I have not been able to find out to this day just what the award represents.

A much more tangible recognition of No. 33 Squadron's operations during the rebellion was the award by his Majesty the King of the D.S.O. to Sqn. Ldr. MacGregor, and of the D.F.C. to Flt. Lt. Bolingbroke, Flying Officer Rumsey, and myself. This was a singular honour for a squadron in peacetime, and we were very proud. When we added our Palestine campaign ribbon to the distinctive stripes of the D.F.C., we were indeed early versions of what were later known in Fighter Command as 'glamour boys'. The squadron airmen were just as pleased as we were with this honour, which they shared, but they reserved the right to sing with more than usual gusto the old Air Force song that starts off:

"Oh, the flight commander he flies away,
He'll get the D.F.C. some day,
But there's damn all gongs for the troops who stay
And push around the kites in the morning."

Life inside the wire at Lydda was pretty grim and austere. It was not possible to leave the confines of the

camp except in convoy or by armoured car. In December the winter rains had set in earnest, and the building became cold and clammy. After you had fallen asleep with some difficulty on the damp straw palliasses, it was disconcerting to be awakened by a heavy thud on the wall over your head and the sound of falling plaster, followed immediately by the characteristic 'whish-whish' of the bullet as it tore across the airfield over the runways in quick pursuit. You could get used to this, and the Arab had enough sense to go to bed about 2 a.m. Not so the Duty N.C.O., however. Along about 3.30 a.m., a rough hand would shake you out of a restless dream and the hearty voice of one who had been awake for hours would say in a hoarse whisper. "Jerusalem on the 'phone, Sir. Three Glads required for first shooting light. Bags of tea in the Ops Room."

You would then struggle out into the cold and patter down the corridors in wet slippers to make sure the Flight Sergeant was routing out the poor miserable groundcrew who had to face the sudden morning without benefit of tea in order to run up the engines and get things ready to go. After a hot cup of tea we thought of other less fortunate squadrons who had no war of their own to go to this morning, and we were thankful that, if the job had to be done, we were in the right spot at the right time to do it. After all, other pilots were getting up on cold wet mornings with nothing exciting to look forward to but station parades and routine training. So we counted our blessings.

The Arab made life very uncomfortable for us. He would sneak into the orange groves around the perimeter during the day and pick his window for the night's activities. Cutting two forked sticks to support his rifle, he would line up the sticks and rifle sights on the window of his choice, and then lash the whole thing down. After dark he'd come back: and as soon as there were signs of movement in the lighted window of his choice, 'bang!' would go his gun. As many Arabs as wanted to could play this game, and it made walking in front of windows at night very unpopular. This got to be fairly dangerous, so the Army was asked to provide some form of airfield protection, and we learned shortly that a Lieutenant was reporting to Lydda to live with us. Our problem, we thought, was solved. The Lieutenant and his merry men could sally forth at night and keep the Arabs from spoiling our plaster.

When, one evening, he finally arrived, he was taken to our mess and given an overwhelming welcome. After several of Jim Marley's special mixtures (known as 'Between the Sheets', because that was where you ended after drinking them), our young Army hero told us that we would be all right now that he was there with his mortar. We sent him to the bar for more beer, and, as he crossed the line of the window, our friend

the Arab, right on schedule as usual, let go with what we believed to be an elephant gun. He only fired it every other day. We figured he used the remainder of the time to accumulate the scrap iron he must shove down the barrel. Our erstwhile warrior stood unhurt, but white and trembling, in the middle of the room, and we led him gently away and tucked him between the sheets.

Our Army support, consisting of one mortar, intrigued us. None of us had ever seen a mortar before, and this elongated pipe, mounted on a large flat base, looked like a very unlikely weapon for providing protection against snipers in orange groves. Nevertheless, we were prepared to reserve our judgement. We tried to talk the 'General' into firing the contraption so that we could see how it worked. But his ORDERS were clear: it was only to be fired against the enemy. Our Arab was apparently having trouble finding scrap-iron for his elephant gun, and for two nights all was quiet.

On the third night we sat on the flat roof around the sandbagged mortar (the sandbags had no practical purpose on the roof, but they illustrated how the thing looked when it was ready for operations). We were drinking ale and trying to talk the General, with the usual lack of success, into firing the Monster. He did concede, however, that if we were fired on he wouldn't question too closely the origin of fire. So we tossed a coin, and Jim Marley and Poynton, our New Zealander, were picked to go out to the wire and fire a few rounds from their pistols toward the building. They disappeared down the stairs, and presently we heard them giggling like a couple of schoolgirls as they crossed the runway.

All was silent for a minute; then there came a lone shot from the darkness, followed by a loud yell of indignation in Poynton's unmistakable accent: "Now look what you've done, you damn fool! You've ruined my tunic!" Silence had just descended again when a mighty crash went off from right behind us. The mortar had fired! We could hear the missile tearing upward into the dark sky, the noise fading slowly and then disappearing altogether. We stood there on the flat roof, and the whole world seemed to be holding its breath. Suddenly, with an angry crack and a flash of fire the shell landed about twenty yards from one of our concrete pillboxes. There was a great cheer from the roof, the General was carried around in triumph, and the Jewish Constabulary in all the pillboxes opened fire on each other in the light of Verey cartridges and starshells. It was the most spectacular battle of the whole campaign. No one got killed and everybody was on the winning side.

CHRISTMAS, 1938

To many people, the last Xmas before darkness

descended and the madness of a world at war prevailed. In the Holy Land there was little cause for merriment or rejoicing. The pilots of No. 33 squadron faced a bleak festive season. The Arab rebel had increased his terrorist activities, and to add to our misery, the winter rains beat down and low wet clouds shrouded the Judean hills. The card game in Lydda operations room dragged interminably and the gramophone ground out for the ten thousandth time the plaintive assertions of some early Liberace that he'd 'Marry the Belle of Barcelona'. The squadron was suffering from that oldest of complaints among fighting men, the boredom that intervenes between the short sharp periods of intense operational activity.

The C.O. was quick to realise that something drastic was required to shake us from our lethargy. His opportunity came just before New Year's Eve, with the arrival at dusk of a battered and shot-up Army convoy. The young captain in charge told his story. His convoy of Army trucks, escorted by two armoured cars, had been passing through the village of Lydda, a few miles down the road, en route from Sarafand to Haifa. The first hint of trouble occurred when a road mine exploded under the leading armoured car and the whole convoy came under small-arms fire from an orange grove on the west side of the highway. By a miracle, both vehicles and personnel escaped serious harm and were able to proceed to Lydda airfield, where they sought safety inside the ground defence system.

Now that his main charges, the unarmoured trucks, were safe, the captain was anxious to return to the scene of the action and take issue with these impertinent fellows who had fired on him. His moustache fairly bristled at the outrage to his dignity. What he needed were some 'stout chaps' to help him teach these rebels a lesson. The C.O. decided that we were just the stout chaps to do it. Quickly, rifles were handed out to volunteer groundcrew and the pilots checked their '45 Colt pistols.

It was a light-hearted crowd that left the airfield in canvas-covered lorries led by an armoured car of ancient vintage. But, as the safety of the perimeter defences receded, the humour became more forced. Darkness gathered about us and the thinness of the flapping canvas gave a new menace to the orange groves that lined the road. There was no turning back, however, and the blacked-out vehicles crept slowly forwards towards Lydda. The first flurry of firing came as a relief to taut nerves. With almost professional competence, the Air Force party hit the shallow ditch on the west side of the road, while the vehicles pulled off behind a clump of trees to the rear.

I don't think any of us had realised just what we were getting into until we found ourselves lying in a wet ditch facing an unknown number of rebels – and by



**Above: Military convoy with Armoured Car support.
Below: Military Roadblock on the Ramleh-Lyddá road, April 1939.**





XX Calls: (Above) Standby pilot at his desk in the Operations Room at Ramleh Aerodrome, answering an XX call, and then dashing off to his aircraft, in this case a Hawker Hardy of No. 6 Squadron. Having been in Iraq since 1919, the squadron relocated to Palestine in 1938. The Squadron motto, *Oculi Exercitus*, is Latin for 'The eyes of the army'.

(Below) The groundcrew respond to the 'XX Call' scramble, and the aircraft taxis out to fly off and support provide air support to the ground forces.

These photographs, along with a number other photographs from the 1930s in Palestine used throughout this article, are part of the Matson (Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection held in the Library of Congress Online Catalog (1.164.959)



into the night. To the left and right of me our little party was now in action and criss-crossing the orange grove with rifle and pistol fire. Watching one spot in the darkness ahead, I thought I could discern a vague moving shadow and occasionally a stab of fire. I carefully raised my pistol, put it close up to my right eye in order to line up the barrel on my target, squeezed the trigger gently – and promptly retired from the battle! I had, in my excitement, forgotten the brilliant flash and the man-size kick of a Colt .45. I was unharmed but temporarily blinded, and the cry of pain from the orange grove was little compensation for a rapidly blackening right eye. By the time I could see again, the rebels had faded away into the night, taking their wounded with them. Fortunately for the C.O., we had no casualties, and we returned to Lydda in high spirits to celebrate our ‘victory’ in the appropriate manner. Word of the sortie soon reached R.A.F. H.Q. in Jerusalem, where it aroused mixed feelings. The net result was an order forbidding any such activity in the future – and quite rightly too, in my opinion! But, however much HQ may have looked askance at that night’s action, it did achieve the results desired by our C.O. It gave a boost to the squadron’s morale and provided a subject of conversation for many a day.

XX CALLS

Spring of 1939 found the emphasis of our fighter operations being diverted from ‘airpins’ and ‘vilpats’. The Arab had always taken a keen delight in derailing the trains of the Palestine Railway, particularly on the line that crawled across the plain from Lydda to wander precariously around the barren hills, through rocky gorges, and past villages unchanged since biblical days, until (if it was lucky) it arrived panting triumphantly at Jerusalem. Now, however, the blowing up of trains and the wanton slaughter of crew and passengers was reaching serious proportions. To meet the threat, the Army now rode the trains, so that, if trouble developed, the survivors were not defenceless and it was possible to radio for air assistance.

This cry for help was known as an ‘XX’ call. Its receipt in No. 33 Squadron’s operations room set in motion a machinery that was as simple as it was effective. When a call came, giving the location of the trouble by a simple code, the wireless operator passed the information to the operations officer, at the same time flicking a switch that set off a raucous siren. While the Ops. Officer quickly marked two maps, the ground crew started the two stand-by Gladiators, and the pilots, scattering cards to the floor (or perhaps carefully pocketing a winning hand), scrambled off to grab their maps and climb into the cockpits. Within minutes the aircraft would be away, flying fast but erratically as the pilots struggled to tighten their shoulder straps. Then, pulling into close formation, they settled down at

maximum speed in an endeavour to reach the scene of action before the rebels faded into the fastness of the hills. At first, the speed of the Gladiator fooled the Arab, who was used to the much slower reaction and speed of the Hawker Hardy, the Fairey III-F, or the Gordon, and many a surprised rebel was caught at the scene of his crime. The exact location of the wrecked train could usually be determined from miles away by the steam that rose into the air in a tall column of disaster.

Viewed from the air, the wreckage of a train looked ludicrously like something on the floor of a careless child’s playroom. The engine lay ponderously on its side, with several wooden coaches telescoped and splintered behind it. Only the sprawled bodies and the puffs of rifle-smoke from the surviving defenders and from the rebels on the rocky hillsides gave any reality to the grim drama being played out below. The arrival of the Gladiators was the signal for the fighting withdrawal of the attackers. The courage of the rebel was often evidenced on such occasions. Caught in the open, he would stand straight up and trade shots on even terms with the diving aircraft until the fire from four machine guns cut him down.

The net result of the Gladiators’ quick reaction to ‘XX’ calls was merely to drive rebel activity further away from our only operational airfields at Lydda and Haifa. The Arab now took to operating in the more areas. Trains continued to be wrecked in the Sinai Desert south of Gaza, motor convoys were attacked on the Beersheba road, and the oil pipeline that crawled over the desert from Iraq to Palestine’s Mediterranean ports, all received rebel attention. No matter how fast No. 33 Squadron arrived at the scene of activity, it achieved no more than retribution – never prevention. A solution to the problem of prevention was urgently required.

The first attempt consisted of providing ‘suicide cars’ (small flat four-wheeled vehicles driven by gasoline motors). These cars, manned by heavily armed soldiers, proceeded along the tracks ahead of the train. The purpose was twofold. First, if mines had been planted, the ‘suicide car’ would explode them and thus save the train. (This was a little hard on the soldiers). Secondly, if the soldiers were only a little bit blown up, they could provide defence for the train and crew until the line could be fixed. The Arab, of course, delights in this kind of battle of wits; and it was not long before he began to plant pressure mines which could not be set off by the weight of the ‘suicide car’ but which would blow up under the greater weight of the engine. This, then, was the impasse which had been reached when the whole situation was drastically altered, and in a manner which raised the prestige of the British to a new high in rebel eyes.



Examples of the British Army's 'Suicide Car'.



SEND IN THE NAVY....

The job of manning the 'suicide cars' was, for some reason unknown to me, given to the Royal Navy. It didn't take the sailors long to decide that the most effective means of stopping the blowing up of the 'suicide cars' or the trains was to stop at the first large village en route and load up the car and the train with vigorously protesting Arabs – including the headman (or muktah) himself. Great were their protestations of innocence and loud the denials of any knowledge of mines that might be planted on the railway line ahead. But, before the 'suicide car' and the train (its cow-catcher festooned with wailing Arabs) had crept very far out of the village, there would arise cries of anguish as the innocent began to berate the guilty. It was not long before the location of the mines were made known, and they were safely removed amidst scenes of great jubilation as each was reached. This was the kind of action the Arab understood and appreciated, and the Palestine Railway soon returned to a near-normal operation. The rebel turned his hand to the easier and safer attacks on remote road convoys, and the sailor went back to sea.

...AND THEN THE CAVALRY

With the pressure off the railway, No. 33 Squadron went back to 'vilpats', the village patrols that pinned down the rebels until an Army column arrived and took over. It was during one of these patrols that I witnessed my first – and only – cavalry charge. I was north of a village, idly watching the red and white umbrellas of the approaching Army column, when I heard an excited call on my radio: "Red two to Red Leader. Gor-blimey, come on down here and take a look at this! What a wizard show!" A statement like this from the usually phlegmatic Sergeant-Pilot Goodchild was sufficient inducement for me to change course immediately for the area, about two miles south of the village, above which I could see his Gladiator circling.

It was a wizard show indeed. A long grey line of horses wound along a rocky trail to join others already grouped behind a hill that shut out the whole scene from the Arab village. They paid no attention to the aircraft circling overhead – and we kept a sensible distance away. While these preparations were going on in the south, the column from the north had entered the village and the usual last-minute exodus of rebels and other bad types was beginning to ease out down the trail directly towards the unsuspected cavalry. Behind the hill, horses were mounted, swords were drawn, and, like the Assyrians of old, the cavalry prepared to descend on the village.

As we watched, the cavalry commander stood up in his stirrups, raised his arm over his head, and, after making a circular motion in the air, pointed his sword like an

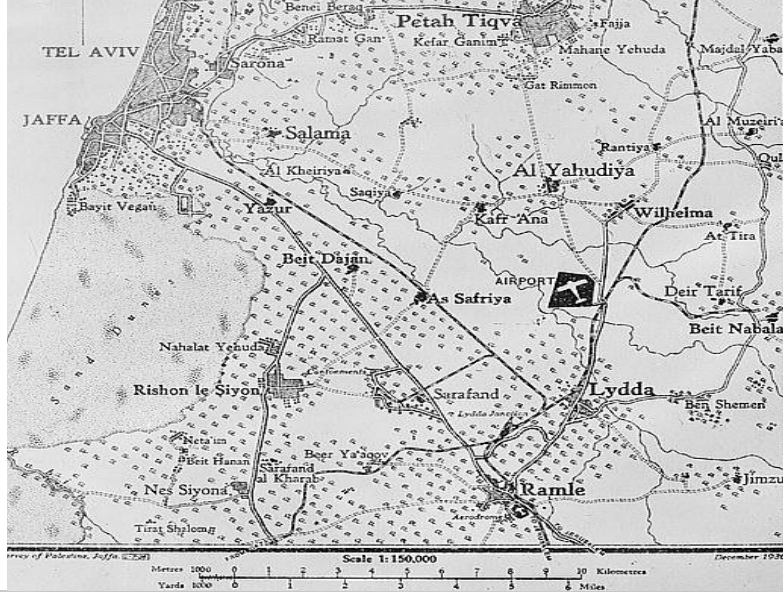
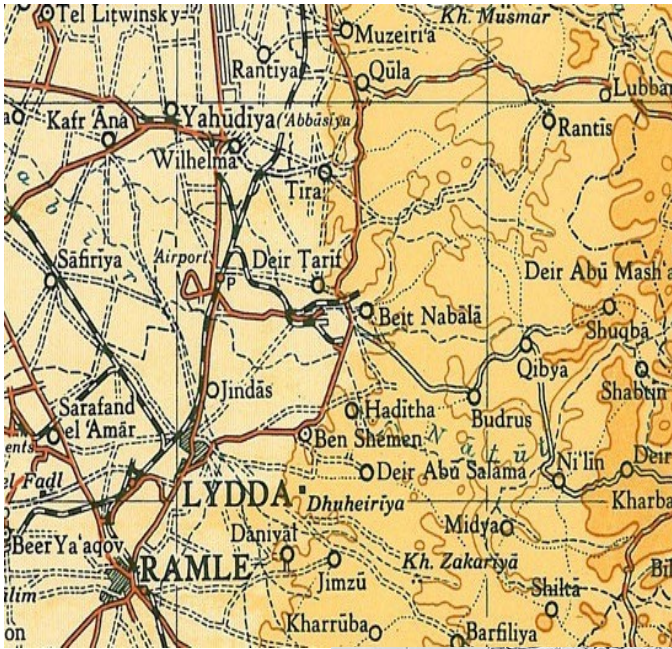
avenging finger down the trail. Immediately the whole troop took off in line-astern. As they swept around the hill, I had a feeling that the only things missing were the Indians and a little galloping-music from a piano. But if it looked like a terrifying sight from our vantage point, it must have been doubly terrifying to the rebels retreating along the route directly in the path of this thundering mass of horse-flesh and naked steel. There was little argument left in them as they called on Allah to witness the guile of these mad Englishmen. Even the Arabs hiding among the rocks came down with their hands held over their heads in surrender. I will not say that this was history's last cavalry charge, but, since it took place in the spring of 1939, it must certainly have been the last one before the outbreak of the Second World War.

MARRIED QUARTERS

It was just after the New Year that Mac (the C.O.) and I decided to make an effort to get our wives up to Palestine. We entered into negotiations with the burgomaster of Wilhelma, a German settlement about two miles from the aerodrome at Lydda, regarding accommodation. Wilhelma was an extremely pleasant little town, run with Teutonic efficiency and cleanliness, and we eventually settled on the house of one Frau Frank as being most suitable. We told the burgomaster that No. 33 Squadron would hold him and his village personally responsible for the safety of our families. The fact that we had no authority to enforce any such threat never, of course, crossed the good German burgomaster's mind. Under the Hitler regime one didn't question a military order. We figured that this bluff, together with the suspected German collaboration with the rebel Arab, would ensure the safety of our wives. British Intelligence was already giving the settlement a jaundiced look, so the latter was naturally not anxious to stir up trouble. After all these arrangements were made, a signal was sent to H.Q. Middle East, in Cairo, requesting authority to have our wives flown up by the R.A.F. mail run. Much to our surprise, our request was granted, and our wives arrived at Lydda in Valencia K1313, on Friday 13th of January 1939.

They lived for just a short time in the settlement. Then one day they watched through a gap in the curtains as a finely dressed Arab (possibly the Arab chief Abdul Razek himself), accompanied by his followers, rode into town on a white horse and entered the burgomaster's house. That same evening we received an urgent call from H.Q. Jerusalem: we must move our wives and Mac's two children inside the Lydda airfield defences immediately. We lost no time in doing so, and their departure from Wilhelma was no doubt a great relief to the burgomaster.

My wife and I set up house in the terminal building at Lydda by the simple expedient of adding three more



Top: Map showing location of Wilhelma, north of Lydda, and Ramle (Ramleh) to the south. The picture to the right of the map shows some of the younger German Templers outside their community centre. In the inter-war years the colony produced dairy goods and wine. During WW2 it became an internment camp. It is now the site of the Israeli locality of Bnei Atarot.

Centre and Bottom: Lydda Airport, built in 1934, was renamed RAF Station Lydda in 1943. It is now Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport. Imperial Airways first scheduled route to Palestine started in January 1927, then stopping at Gaza, en route to Cairo, Iraq, Baghdad and Basra.

planks and another straw-filled palliasse to my bed boards and blankets on the floor of the bare room in the corner farthest from the tarpaulin-draped window. For a new bride the accommodation was, to say the least, primitive: and, although she tried to be a good sport about it, I discovered later that she was really quite upset until she discovered that the rest of the R.A.F. didn't live under similar conditions.

I should say that my bearer, Ismail, never quite understood that I had got married and, as the wives had moved in after he had left the night before, he was a very puzzled Sudanese when he appeared with my tea the next morning and found that the bed had miraculously grown much wider and was occupied in part by a mass of brown hair of which, even in those days, I was unable to boast. He stood there with his mouth open and gold teeth gleaming. I burst out laughing, and to my wife's sleepy question as to the cause of my mirth I could only reply that she was too young a bride to understand. I had, of course, been inevitably reminded of the old joke in which the native servant comes up with the classic remark: "Wake up, Missy. Time you go home now."

As the spring of 1939 gave way to summer, it became obvious that war with Germany was inevitable. We were anxious to wind up this Palestinian campaign in order to prepare ourselves for the sterner task ahead. It was with relief that we received our orders, in May 1939, to move the squadron to Egypt. The successful conclusion of the campaign was marred, as far as No. 33 Squadron was concerned, by the death of our popular New Zealand pilot, Pilot Officer Poynton, who was shot down during one of the final actions of the rebellion. Just before leaving Palestine, the C.O. and myself were invited to lunch with Air Commodore Harris, the A.O.C. Palestine and Transjordan, who was himself to leave shortly to take over his greater tasks against a more ruthless enemy. We had learned much from the Palestine campaign, not the least of which was the fact the Arab is a gentleman of some courage.

The advancing summer of 1939 brought a new sense of urgency to the Royal Air Force squadrons of the Middle East. The change in tempo was accepted somewhat reluctantly by the older officers who had spent many years in the unhurried atmosphere of this ancient land of Egypt. Gone were the leisurely afternoon's beside the swimming pool of the Gezira Sporting Club, the 'gimlets' at the Turf Club, and the long evenings of good conversation at Tommy's Bar. No. 33 Squadron's activities epitomized the preparations being made all over the world against inevitably approaching war.

Our Gladiators appeared in new war-paint. One bottom main-plane was painted white and the other black, in order to distinguish them from the Italian CR-42s, which were very similar in appearance. (The Germans

did not seem to concern us greatly at this period. We had spent too long glaring over the backyard fence at Italian Cyrenaica). For the first time, numbers were issued to officers: mine was RAF 37079. Identification discs, or 'dog tags', were issued – two of them. ("One's left on your bleedin' body, Sir, one goes to the 'igher-ups!"). The preparation of last wills and testaments became compulsory.

This latter business caused some amusement among the pilots. On pooling their assets, they found they could raise eight pounds seven shillings and fourpence, three packages of Players, two half-empty tins of Woodbines, and a 'Dear John' letter from a girl in Blackpool saying she was going to marry a sailor.

INSTRUCTOR DUTIES

The backbone of the Middle East Air Force was still the old-time squadrons – No. 47 with its Vincents at Khartoum, No.33 with its Gladiators and No. 45 with its Wellesleys at Helwan, No. 14 (Wellesley) at Amman, No.216 (Bombay transports) and No. 208 (Army co-op. Lysanders) at Heliopolis, and Nos. 55, 30 and 84 (all Mk.1 Blenheims) in Iraq. No. 80 Squadron and its Gladiators, more recent arrivals, were at Ismailia. We were not heavy on fighters, a situation that was not to be remedied for many long months and was to be particular hard on Blenheim crews.

The month of June brought a move that I had been fearing for some time. I was posted to the instructional staff of No. 4 Flying Training School at Abu Suweir, at that time the only F.T.S. outside England. Abu Suweir was situated in the desert about 10 miles west of Ismailia. It was a station with no redeeming features – hot, pest-ridden, and with the highest incidence of malaria in the Middle East. Even the Egyptian Railway sprayed its coaches and passengers as their train pulled out of the malodorous sun-baked station and travelled along the putrid stretch of water which bore the unbelievable name of 'Sweetwater Canal'.

About to leave Helwan, I was feeling low about going just when it looked as if things might get really interesting. I was standing around the bar, bemoaning my fate, when 'Boly' (Flt. Lt. Bolingbroke, D.F.C.) came in, full of news. His flight had just been detached to the Western Desert for frontier patrol duty out of Mersa Matruh. If the balloon went up, he'd be sitting there right over the wire waiting for it. Feeling even more sorry for myself, I didn't pay much attention when I heard someone ask Boly what he'd done with his 'car'. That Boly had managed to get rid of it was obvious, however; and despite the prodding from others, I could see he was reluctant to say what sucker he had foisted it on. Then I caught a couple of side-glances in my direction. With a dawning realisation, I challenged him point-blank: "Boly, you didn't - ?" "Well, old boy," he

ABU SUWEIR TO HABBANIYA

answered in a hurt tone, "I just mentioned it casually to your wife that I was going to drive it out into the desert and leave it, and she thought that it was a frightful thing to do to the faithful old jalopy, so I just gave it to her." With that he made a quick escape.

Jerry Harrison, a Canadian pilot officer who had recently joined my flight, came home with me that evening and there in the driveway was the car. Jerry walked slowly and carefully around it, and then said in a slightly awed tone, "What a hunk of tin!" So 'Hunka Tin' it was christened and 'Hunka Tin' it remained until it fell apart many months later. On the day my wife and I left Helwan for Ismailia, all our worldly goods had been piled in the back seat of Hunka Tin. One hour and twenty miles later we stopped for a drink in Cairo. We didn't dare stop Hunka Tin, and all the time we were in the Long Bar of Shepherd's Hotel it remained banging and shaking outside. All through the afternoon we headed east, along the thin strip of vegetation that follows the Sweetwater Canal from the Nile across the eastern desert to the Suez Canal. About 4 o'clock we pulled into a native village and stopped at the ubiquitous Shell gasoline pump, and eventually arrived in Ismailia and moved into a furnished apartment which we had rented by mail. As we carried our cases upstairs, we heard a loud bang. Hunka Tin's left rear tire had blown out. A few moments later, a despairing hiss told us that the right rear had followed suit. Poor old Hunka Tin was determined not to go further that day.

My tour of duty as O.C. the front-gun and tow-target flight at No. 4 F.T.S. was notable for little outside the routine of hard work. Flying commenced at 5.30 a.m., which meant that I had to leave home not later than half past four. This posed the problem of rounding up enough sleepy-eyed Arabs, on their way to work, to push Hunka Tin. It became even harder as the word got around and the natives began to shun our area at that time of the morning.

The end of August finally brought the certainty of war. I was miserable as I envisioned things starting while I was languishing at an F.T.S. I was pulling every string possible to get back an operational squadron, but life was getting pretty hectic in H.Q. and the problems of one Flight Lieutenant didn't receive much attention.

On September 1st, a move that had been long discussed got under way. No. 4 F.T.S. was to move – lock, stock, and half-trained pupils – to Habbaniya in Iraq, several hundred miles across some of the worst flying country in the world. This move was necessary in order to place F.T.S. beyond the range of the Italian S-79 three-engined bombers, based on the Dodecanese Islands in the Mediterranean. That it was a wise move was evident later, when Abu Suweir did in fact get heavily bombed.

The first air movement of the training school was to be made by a large gaggle of pupils from the junior term, none of whom had been outside the airfield circuit, and very few of whom had even an elementary knowledge of formation flying. They were to fly the school's Hart trainers and Audaxes and I was to lead the formation in a Fairey Gordon. We had a carefully worked-out plan of how to get these fledgelings into the air and all heading in the same direction. The plan was of necessity rigid: there was no room for operational flexibility. Any change in the carefully briefed procedure could cause chaos among this group of embryonic airmen. Such was the situation when I took off ahead of the widely spaced group of fifteen training aircraft that thundered off the desert in my wake. Every eye was fixed on my Gordon as we set course for Amman in Transjordan, our first refuelling stop. There could be no turning back. Soon all my charges were safely in the air and the small armada was crossing the Suez Canal and heading across the Sinai Desert towards Palestine, the valley of the Dead Sea, and Amman.

As we approached the Transjordanian hills, the hot thermal currents caught our slow biplanes and slammed them 500 feet up, then dropped a sickening thousand. My loose formation was becoming even more widespread. Then what I feared most happened. An Audax, far out on the left, peeled off and started down for the rugged hills. Its propeller windmilled slowly for a moment, then stopped. Notwithstanding the strict orders to the contrary, a Hart trainer, flown by a pupil with large bumps of curiosity and idiocy, or with aspirations to be a hero, followed the stricken aircraft down towards the peaks. We didn't see the climax of this incident. We pressed on to Amman, where No. 14 Squadron took up the search for the missing aircraft. Our landing at Amman took toll of another Audax, which ground-looped and became a write-off.

We took off from Amman, now thirteen strong, in the blazing heat of the early afternoon. We followed the oil pipeline, over the big pumping stations of H4, H3, H2, across the desert to Rutba Wells. The landing area beside the fort at Rutba was rolling desert, and the sand blown up by the landing and taxiing aircraft hung thick in the air, making each landing progressively more difficult. Twelve aircraft were safely on the ground when disaster struck again. The pilot of the thirteenth aircraft, an Audax, possibly confused by the thick pall of sand and the unfamiliar airfield, and tired after a long and arduous flight, came in too slowly on the final approach, spun in, and burst into flames. Both he and his fellow-pupil passenger were killed.

It was now but a short flight to our final destination, and the route was clearly defined by a broad camel and caravan trade route that led to Baghdad, passing

Habbaniya en route. I put the senior pupil in charge of the remaining eleven aircraft, and my two airmen and myself remained at Rutba Wells to make the necessary arrangements for the removal and proper care of the victims.

ALFRED MOVES TO 30 SQUADRON

It was the morning of September 3rd, 1939, when I landed at Habbaniya. There, in the Iraq Levies' mess, I heard the Prime Minister announce over the BBC that we were now at war with Germany.

The heartache and desolation of the war that descended on the world in September of 1939 left the Middle East relatively unaffected. While great struggles were taking place over the English Channel and history was being made on the beaches of Dunkirk, the armed forces in the desert countries pursued the even tenor of their ways.

I won my first personal victory of the war by getting out of my instructional job and nicely ensconced as flight commander in an operational squadron. It took me just one month to wangle my way out of No. 4 F.T.S. in Iraq, where I was O.C. the gunnery flight, and into No. 30 (Bomber) Squadron back in Ismailia, Egypt. I was very happy about this move. No. 30 Squadron looked like a good bet to get into any fight that might start up. As events transpired, I could have made a fortune on that bet, had it ever been laid.

No. 30 Squadron flew the Mk.1 Blenheim. Although she lacked armour plate and self-sealing tanks, and although only one Lewis gun of First World War vintage protected her tail, the 'Short-Nose' Blenheim could step high and fast in terms of 1939, and her Bristol engines were the finest ever built.

Month after month, No. 30 trained. Night after night we made long lonely trips over the Stygian darkness of the Sinai Desert, to arrive at dawn over the live-bombing range and there drop our four 250-pound bombs or perhaps a load of incendiaries. By day we bombed from high and low level, and in between we carried out long patrols down the Gulf of Suez to ensure that no one was trespassing on our sea. Sqn. Ldr. Shannon, our hard driving C.O., was justifiably confident that he had the best-trained operationally-ready bomber squadron in the Middle East Air Force. On 10 June 1940, Mussolini joined Hitler by declaring war on England, and, on June 11th, Middle East H.Q. , in their infinite wisdom and by a simple signal, turned No. 30 Squadron into an untrained fighter squadron.

This was done very simply by an order that removed our bomb-racks and substituted a pack of four Browning guns under the belly of the aircraft. Our disappointment at this change, and at the thought of our months of wasted training, was somewhat

tempered by the fact that in those early days we were still naïve enough to believe that this was all part of a broader plan.

ITALY DECLARES WAR

I was enjoying a rare evening at home in Ismailia on that June 10th in 1940. The radio was tuned to the B.B.C. ; the unhurried and dulcet voice of the announcer gave no emphasis to what he was saying. It wasn't until my wife came into the room and remarked, "What was that he said about Italy?" that I paid any attention to the announcement that our war in Egypt had started. I packed a bag, gave my wife my cheque-book, my .38 revolver, and a good-bye kiss. When the staff car came to take me to the station (as I knew it would), I was waiting, complete with respirator and 'tin hat (to be placed under the Blenheim's seat.) It was to be many long months before I returned home again.

The squadron left early the next day for our first war station. Ikingi Mariut, in the desert outside Alexandria. Our first job was to carry out fighter patrols over the vital harbour areas. In addition to this duty we had another – dreamed up by H.Q. Cairo. It was quite unbelievable then, and has remained so (to me, anyway) ever since.

It was called 'shadow patrol'. The idea was that the pilot would take off and pick up the enemy bomber after it had bombed Alexandria and ascertain what type it was! Apart from the fact that he could have done this with field-glasses from the door of his tent, at that time the Italians had only one type, the 3-engined S-79. This wasn't the end of it, however. Our hero would then proceed to follow the enemy bomber to its home base, "taking the greatest precautions against being shot down", and thus find out where it came from. Meanwhile, of course, on the S-79, all the way back to its desert lair, a very puzzled Italian wireless operator would be busy pounding out the strange news that a Blenheim, for some inexplicable reason, seemed to be coming home with him. This ensured our hero a hearty welcome from the Italian CR-42 fighters, and usually the last view he had of the S-79 was as it disappeared into the west while he himself turned in the direction of a friendly fighter airfield in the hope of inducing a Gladiator or two to come up and delouse him. This whole thing was a very silly game, and it didn't last very long.

CONVOY ESCORT

It was during these late summer months of 1940, while the Mediterranean convoys were taking such a beating from the enemy air on their Malta-Alexandria run, that No. 30 Squadron, with its relatively long-range Blenheim fighters, was given the additional task of convoy escort. This was the most satisfying duty of all. We shot down several S-79s that were flying out from

the Dodecanese Islands secure in the belief that they were safely out of range of our land-based fighters. We quickly disillusioned them, but not without cost. Dick Lee, making a stern attack, was caught by the rear-firing belly guns of a 79 and bailed out just as the aircraft blossomed into flames. His gunner, either dead or caught in the flaming wreckage, rode it down to the water. Dick's parachute opened without trouble, and soon he was in the warm water of the Mediterranean, safe in his 'Mae West' and directly ahead of a convoy. But, so great was the submarine menace, and so high the stakes, that the convoy sailed steadily by, and we, Dickie's friends, helpless in our land-planes, learned that there were strange ways in which a pilot could be called upon to die.

There is little to be said about the aerial war over the desert that has not already been said more adequately elsewhere. I do believe, however, that history has not yet recorded the fact that No. 30 Squadron was the only desert squadron that had a piggery. The pigs (two ladies, as I recall) were the property of our disciplinarian Flight Sergeant. He had purchased (or, more probably, won) these pigs in Alexandria one memorable evening, when they were just piglets. The Flight Sergeant, who was a staunch teetotaler, a strict disciplinarian, and weighed over 250 lbs., was usually pressed into service as vehicle driver and general looker-after of everyone on those not too frequent occasions when the squadron repaired to the beauty-spots of Alex for an evening of relaxation with the beauties. The Flight Sergeant, whose services would not be required for the first hour or two, would disappear on solitary excursions into the darkness of the blacked-out city.

It was after one of these sorties that he reappeared just in time to save two of our chaps from the wrath of some kilted soldiers who were objecting to the airmen's natural curiosity as to whether they did or not. The Flight Sergeant, in action, was a sight to behold at any time, but on this occasion the eerie squeals and grunts that he seemed to be emitting during the fracas attracted the biggest crowd seen in Alexandria since Farouk had left for Cairo to escape the Italian bombs. When the tumult and the shouting died away, and the casualties were loaded into the car, he triumphantly produced two small and very frightened porkers. Where or how he had acquired them we never did find out, but he loved every bristle on their miserable hides. He was eventually killed, leading a bayonet charge against German paratroopers on Crete, without ever having revealed where those mysterious pigs had come from.

Since I was a Canadian, he felt that I was probably more sympathetic to farm animals than the other pilots, and so my flight dispersal area was honoured with the

piggery. Made out of old packing cases, its only real purpose was to keep the pigs out of the props; most of the time they followed the Flight Sergeant around like pet dogs. In order to protect them from becoming P.O.W.s of envious squadrons in the vicinity, we established their status as civilians. With a brush and black paint, we gave those now-much-larger porkers civilian aircraft registration markings. One became G-PORK, and the other (in my honour) CF-PIG. It is sad to relate that both RK and IG became casualties before the squadron's next move. They attended a diner in their honour in all three mess tents – and mighty good eating they were, even though we had had to remove the bristles with a blow-torch. As was usual in such compassionate cases, we gave the Flight Sergeant a special three-day pass, and it was unreliably reported that, abstainer though he was, he downed a small mild-and-bitter to assuage his grief.

All this talk of pigs, by the way, reminds me that H.Q. Staff Officers, both Army and Air Force, had at that time a penchant for having their uniforms tailor-made from the finest gabardine. Thus, quite naturally, they became known by the desert officers as the 'gabardine swine'.

PALESTINE

In September 1940, I was ordered to take my flight to Haifa in Palestine. There I was to set up a standing fighter-patrol at 20,000 feet over the harbour to protect it from sporadic raids by the S-79s from the Dodecanese Islands. This was not too difficult except for the fact that, without oxygen, staying alert and awake at that altitude presented a problem. It was an uneventful period, and one which would not be worth mentioning at all except for two minor happenings. First, a beach in Cyprus was front-gunned by the Italians, and some children were killed. This caused a bit of a flurry, and I took three Blenheims over to that very beautiful island for a four-day stay – which, unfortunately, was uneventful as far as air action was concerned. And second, a group of Free French pilots, flying Morane fighters and Potez 63 light bombers, came under my command. As a result, a few years later in London, my wife and I received an invitation to meet that most unusual man, General de Gaulle.

Our pleasant task at Haifa came to an abrupt end on 5 November 1940. A pre-emptory signal from R.A.F. Headquarters in Jerusalem ordered us back to Egypt forthwith. Within a few hours we were packed, airborne, and en route to Ikingi Mariut.

We climbed westward over Mount Carmel and set course over the lush green citrus groves that stretched along the fertile coastal plain. The brilliant blue of the Mediterranean off our right wings contrasted sharply with the golden glare from the beach and the brilliant white of the piled cumulus clouds. It was a peaceful

picture, and I was not surprised when my air-gunner said over the intercom, in an unusually soft voice, "Gor' blimey, skipper, it's a beautiful country!" I didn't answer, but my mind went back over the last few years and conjured up memories of some of my former friends – 'Jock' Waddell, D.S.O., D.F.C., a jovial little pilot, with the burr of Scotland in his voice; tall taciturn Sergeant-Pilot Tebbs; Poynton, from New Zealand; Williams, a red-headed Welshman; and many others who, not so long ago, had found out the hard way that looks were often deceptive in this part of the world. They lay together now in the small cemetery beside the old crusaders' tower on a gentle hill overlooking the ancient village of Ramleh, above which at that very moment our small formation of Blenheims was flying.

BACK IN EGYPT

These were unwontedly morbid thoughts; and, as we passed Gaza and headed into Egypt, I left them behind in Palestine, where they belonged, and began to wonder about our immediate future. We refuelled at Ismailia, then pressed on in the gathering dusk towards Alexandria and our personal piece of desert at Ikingi.

We landed without the aid of flares, just at last light. As each of us came to a rolling stop, we waited until the ground crew arrived with special sand filters to place over the engines' air intakes before we taxied to our dispersal area. Then we climbed stiffly out of our aircraft and slid down the wings to the ground. The sand, of about the consistency of face powder, rose in puffs and hung almost motionless in the still desert evening, just about head high. We breathed it in slowly. "We're home!" said my navigator.

It was strangely quiet in the mess tent; only the Intelligence Officer was there to greet us. He had two important pieces of news. First, at dawn the next morning we were to take off for Mersa Matruh, where we would open sealed orders as to our eventual destination. Second, the local A.O.C. was giving a farewell party at the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria, and we were all invited. For my personal information, my wife, who was living in Alexandria, was already at the party and expecting me.

We lost no time in heading for the big town, twenty odd miles to the north-east. We'd covered about ten miles of the trip, when the searchlights came on and pointed probing fingers into the darkness over the west harbour that sheltered the British Mediterranean Fleet. We couldn't hear the wailing of the distant sirens, but, as we doused our headlights and pressed on with undiminished speed, we did hear the Egyptian frontier guards yell at us from the roadside that the 'spaghetti bombers' were coming. We did not stop. It was going to take more than 'spaghetti bombers' to keep us from the party ahead. Tomorrow we were going back to war.

We hit the outskirts of Alexandria just as the bombs began to explode along the waterfront. The questing searchlights, the parachute flares, the ineffectual tracer fire that petered out thousands of feet below the high-flying bombers, all combined to give the scene a gala air. The noise inside the double black-out doors of the Cecil Hotel successfully blocked out the crashing of high explosives outside. The party was obviously a success.

The Air Commodore met us at the bar and gave us a hearty welcome. His jovial "What ho, chaps! Have a drink. I hear you're off to Greece in the morning", could be heard all over the bar. I thought of the sealed orders, carefully labelled 'Most Secret', that awaited us at Mersa Matruh, and I looked around to see how much interest this statement had aroused. My wife, noting my look of concern, told me to stop worrying; everyone had known for several days that No. 30 Squadron was moving to Greece. Well, we in 'B' flight jolly well hadn't known, and I was somewhat concerned. Bob Davidson and I retired to a relatively quiet corner behind the 'galli-galli' man, and, while we idly watched him pulling numerous baby chicks out of his far-from-clean robes, we pondered this business of moving from the Egyptian desert to a Balkan winter.

THE GREEK CAMPAIGN

Our aircraft had desert sand-filters installed; we had no maps of Greece; our blind-flying instruments, never used in the sunny Egyptian skies but of vital concern over the cloud-topped mountains of Greece, were long since past the repairable stage. There were other problems to face, too. We had no winter flying clothing, we shared oxygen masks, and the airmen hadn't been paid (for that matter, who had?). All the normal administrative and operational problems of a bomber flight were magnified by the move out of Africa into an unknown situation in Europe. We called for another ale and consoled ourselves with the thought that all these things must have been taken care of by Headquarters. Which showed, of course, how young we still were.

We went to Greece with high hearts and higher hopes, firm in our beliefs, and standing solidly on tradition. We were destined to leave Greece and Crete (those of us who did) with the feeling that, somehow, the script wasn't being followed. We had not been conditioned to lose; there was nothing in Kipling to cover an abject retreat. We left Egypt rich in our beliefs, we returned as veterans with nothing but experience. The bitterness we felt, however, was tempered with the firm resolve that some day we would go back. We did, too; but it wasn't soon, and it wasn't easy.

Faced with a dawn take-off, I rounded up my 'B' flight pilots (not without difficulty) and, before I had even said 'hello' properly to my wife, said another 'goodbye'



CLOSING PRICES EVENING STANDARD, October 28, 1940 FINAL NIGHT EXTRA

Evening Standard

London, Monday, October 28, 1940 ONE PENNY

THAT RUB WITH VICK ENDED BABY'S COUGH NOW WE CAN GO BACK TO SLEEP

TOMORROW NIGHT LETS STOP IT BEFORE IT STARTS BY RUBBING ON VICK AT BEDTIME

ITALY INVADES GREECE LAND AND SEA FIGHTING BRITAIN ASKED FOR AID

Metaxas says "No" to 3-Hour Ultimatum MUSSOLINI DEMANDED USE OF BASES

ITALY AND GREECE ARE AT WAR. A FEW HOURS AFTER GREECE HAD REJECTED AN ULTIMATUM FROM MUSSOLINI DEMANDING THE OCCUPATION OF "STRATEGIC POINTS" FIGHTING BEGAN ON THE ALBANIAN-GREEK FRONTIER.

Greece has appealed to Britain for aid, and has ordered general mobilisation.

A COMMUNIQUE BY THE GREEK CHIEF OF STAFF ANNOUNCED: "ITALIAN MILITARY FORCES BEGAN TO ATTACK AT 5.30 THIS MORNING ELEMENTS COVERING THE GRECO-ALBANIAN FRONTIER. OUR TROOPS ARE DEFENDING THE TERRITORY OF THEIR COUNTRY."

It is understood that the appeal made by Greece is now under consideration by the War Cabinet, and it is expected a reply will be given without delay.

3 a.m. Ultimatum

There is reason to believe that details of the assistance to be given to Greece in the event of her being attacked have already been worked out between the two Governments.

The Greek Minister in London had an interview with the Foreign Minister, Lord Halifax, to-day.

The Italian ultimatum was presented to the Greek Government at 3 a.m. to-day by the Italian Minister in Athens, Signor Grazi. It expired at 6 a.m.

It demanded, according to an authoritative statement in Athens, quoted by Reuters, the military occupation of (Continued on Back Page, Col. One)

Greek Minister



70-day's picture in London of King George II of Greece.

BRITAIN WILL FULFIL PLEDGE TO THE GREEKS

Our Diplomatic Correspondent

I understand that the British Government will fulfil their guarantee to Greece to the full.

That guarantee, described by Mr. Chamberlain in April 1939, was to the effect that if any action was taken which clearly threatened the independence of Greece and to which the Greek Government considered made resistance with her national forces necessary, the British Government would at once give to Greece all the support in their power.

Information in London suggests that Turkey will take up a firm attitude.

There is some obscurity about Turkey's diplomatic commitments to Greece, but her interests in the present development are clear.

The position of Yugoslavia is less clear. She is strongly pro-British, but geographically is in a difficult position. It is believed that if she is attacked she will defend herself.

HITLER, DUCE AND KEITEL IN TALKS AT FLORENCE

HITLER AND MUSSOLINI MET AT FLORENCE TO-DAY—THEIR SECOND MEETING THIS MONTH—WITH HITLER WAS RIBBENTROP, WHO HAD JOINED HIM AT BOLOGNA. Mussolini, accompanied by Ciano, was waiting at the station at Florence, and, says the German News Agency, "accorded the Fuhrer a cordial welcome."

Three Raiders Down To-day THEY WERE HEADING FOR LONDON

Evening Standard Reporter

Three waves of German raiders crossed the south-east coast to-day and made for London, dropping bombs as they went.

One bomber was shot down by anti-aircraft guns, two by fighters.

In the first wave there were more than 50 bombers and fighters. Bombs were dropped on inland towns and some people were killed.

In the second wave a smaller formation attacked a south-east coast town and one raider crashed after receiving a direct hit from an A.A. shot.

In the third attack the raiders were met by fighters and a big battle was fought over the Channel. Dog-fights could be heard over our coast day a Nazi spokesman described them as "madness and chaos."

On the way, Hitler's plane, arrived at Bologna at 8.30, where he, Ribbentrop's special train was in half an hour before.

At Hitler's flight, the Duke of Bergamo, 1st of the Duke of Bergamo, the military commander of the district, on the 28th, was on a visit to the region.

Ten minutes later the train, with both Hitler and Ribbentrop aboard, left for Florence.

Empress of Britain Blows Up on Way to Port

A joint communique issued by the Admiralty and the War Office this afternoon announced with regret that the 42,000-ton liner Empress of Britain had been lost through enemy action.

The communique added: "The Empress of Britain was attacked by enemy aircraft and set on fire, and it became necessary to abandon ship. Salvage operations were begun immediately, but while in tow the Empress of Britain was up and sunk."

Some 200 survivors out of the total complement of 1,100 were rescued by British warships. Included in the list were military families and a small number of military personnel.

"The rescue and efficient handling of the Empress of Britain anti-aircraft defences contributed largely to the high proportion of the total complement being saved."

Only three lights on each deck are now permitted during an air raid that the King and Queen returned from their North American tour last year.



Il Duce - Benito Mussolini



Prime Minister Metaxas



The Italian Julia Alpini Division march into Greece, October 1940.

and left her once again – very far from home, very young, and, although she tried not to show it, very frightened. The R.A.F. wives in the Middle East, in those early war years of retreat, defeat, and frustration, deserved more praise than they ever got, God bless them!

We landed at Mersa Matruh in time for lunch the next day. There, with the greatest secrecy, the local 'spy' (Intelligence Officer) handed me the 'most secret' letter. After signing a receipt in quadruplicate, I bet him a lunch at the Turf Club in Cairo (the next time our visits coincided) that I could tell him what was in the mysterious document before opening it. This smacked of blasphemy, and he grabbed the bet. So I told him that I had heard from the Cecil Hotel's barman's sister that the 'most secret' letter waiting for me at Mersa contained an order to move to Greece immediately. Unfortunately, I never collected that bet. The 'spy' was shot down over 'Hellfire Pass' one day when his pilot, en route to Tobruk, wandered slightly off course and tangled with some German flak.

We didn't see Crete on the way to our destination outside Athens. Cloud covered the whole of the area – low-lying stratus, almost a surface fog – out of which rose the tops of many small islands that increased in number as we neared the Greek coast. They looked for all the world like boats sailing on a strange milky-white sea.

We had no alternate and little fuel when we reached Athens by straight D.R. navigation. 'D.R.' stands for 'Deduced Reckoning', and I found myself hoping that in our case it really meant what it stood for, because the biggest snow-covered mountains that I'd seen for many years lay straight ahead in a vast crescent shape. As 'Bud' Richardson, our hotshot pilot from Toronto, aggrievedly put it: "The gravy's getting mighty low!" But Dame Fortune was in a good mood that day, and she saved the lumps for later. We crossed the Corinth Canal, and there before us we saw the airfield at Eleusis (pronounced 'Elefsis').

And so, on 6 November 1940, No. 30 Squadron, in fulfilment of Prime Minister Churchill's promise to the Greek people, became the sole representative in Greece of the might of the British Empire that was going to help throw the invader back into the sea. The 'Wolves of Tuscany' were going to be driven back across the Adriatic into Italy whence they'd come – And, by God, the Greeks were already doing it! The Evzones, shorn of their fancy many-pleated skirts and turned-up slippers, and with their feet now wrapped in rags for warmth against the bitter mountain cold, were driving the pride of Mussolini's army in headlong flight towards temporary sanctuary in the Albanian hills. It was an honour to fight besides those intense little Greek soldiers, with their fierce pride and their love of

the country.

ATHENS

The gentle Etesian winds of the Greek summer had given way to the cold snow-laden Kashava gales that roared out of Yugoslavia. Our accommodation was primitive. We were billeted in an unfinished terminal building on the airfield. Though I'd had a little experience of this kind of living before, there was a difference here. The rain was colder than the Palestinian rain, and sometimes, rather disconcertingly, it turned into sleet. Athens, however, with its light and warmth, was close at hand – Athens, at that time a city drunk on victories, living in a fool's paradise, while the Germans, with whom Greece was not yet at war, sat in the restaurants and bars, fingering their swastika pins, keeping their ears open, and watching the celebrations with cynical eyes.

This German business was confusing to us. Here we were, sitting in Zonar's bar side by side with the Herrenvolk. Across the street, at the German Embassy, the Nazi flag was snapping defiantly in the breeze. But war makes strange bedfellows; and as long as we were here to help the Greeks fight the Italians, we had to put up with the Germans, who were still their 'friends'. To add to our confusion, we had an American Army officer, Major Craw, attached to us as an official observer for a still-neutral United States. He, of course, had (ostensibly) to be friendly with everyone.

Major Craw was one of the finest officers and gentlemen it has ever been my privilege to meet. His one ambition was to get in the fight. He hated the Germans for the heartaches and bloodshed they had caused, he despised the Italians for the jackals they were, and he was firmly convinced that his country would eventually join us in our fight for freedom. We had great difficulty in keeping him out of our combat aircraft in raids over enemy territory, where, as a neutral observer, he was not supposed to be. No harm can be done now by admitting that, on one or two occasions, we did not keep him on the ground, and that Major Craw, of the United States Army, flew with us to watch the bombs crashing down on those who were, in reality, our common foe.

Events moved rapidly in Greece during that fateful winter of 1940. At three o'clock on the morning of October 28th, President Metaxas of Greece had been handed an Italian ultimatum. It expired at six a.m. Metaxas forcibly, and with no equivocation, made known his decision. Greece would resist to the last. Just before dawn, Count Ciano's so-called 'Wolves of Tuscany' crossed the frontier, swarmed into Greece, and were on the road to Athens.

Ciano's promise that this would be an easy victory was quietly given the lie by the hastily mobilised but



Eleusis, Greece, November 1940. Left to right: Unidentified, Major D. Craw, Flying Officer Richardson, Flying Officer Davidson, Flight Lieutenant Bocking.



Blenheim Mark IF, L6670 UQ-R, of No. 211 Squadron RAF, landing at Menidi/Tatoi, Greece, after a raid on Italian positions in Albania. (Both IWM)

incomparably gallant Greek soldiers. Spearheaded by the famous Evzones of the King's bodyguard, the Greek Army stood firm, and the fighting was as bitter as the winds that tripped across the snow-clad Pindus mountains.

BRITISH ASSISTANCE

On the political side, the President was quick to call on the British minister in Athens, Sir Michael Palairret, and ask for British assistance. Britain, despite the desperate need in the Western Desert, immediately diverted R.A.F. squadrons in fulfilment of her mutual assistance pledge.

No. 30, as I have already said, was the first of these squadrons to arrive in Greece. We were ill-equipped to cope with the Balkan winter. Having flown for many years in the sunny skies of Iraq and Egypt, the instrument-flying capabilities of the pilots were in almost as bad shape as the blind-flying instruments themselves. However, the presence of enemy fighters on a Blenheim's tail was a wonderful incentive to hurry into cloud and on to needle and ball. Improvisation was the order of the day. Artificial horizons (of the early type that couldn't be locked) had long since become unserviceable: but now that blind flying had become an important factor in life, pilots were quick to level their wings before entering cloud and then to draw a line with a grease pencil across the glass at whatever unusual angle the artificial horizon assumed. This line then represented 'straight and level' when the aircraft plunged into the dark snow-laden clouds.

Maps were issued (in Greek, and of questionable reliability), with the heights marked in metres instead of feet. Bombs were provided by the Greeks. They were of local manufacture, square and yellow and reputedly filled with T.N.T. and they weighed approximately 250 lbs. Their trail angle was unknown, but as it turned out, this didn't really matter, as any use of the bomb sight was purely cursory during those first few weeks. In the face of the weather and the heavy fighter opposition, we were lucky to get over the target and drop the bombs at all. The weather was, if anything, worse than the fighters. No meteorological facilities were available, and every flight was a gamble.

On one of the early raids on the Albanian port of Valona, Bob Davidson, myself and Sergeant-Pilot Gallagher tried to get through the mountain passes. The weather was stickier than usual, and, since we were at 7,000 feet with mountains 9,000 feet high around us, we had to go up through cloud. We tried to get above it, but at 16,000 feet ice was forming on the wings and the controls began to get very heavy. The cockpit was full of snow, and it was difficult to see. Then glaze ice – the most dangerous sort – began to form. Just as we were wondering if it would be

necessary to jump, we found a hole in the cloud, through which Bob and I came down and steered a course for home.

The third aircraft was not so fortunate. Gallagher had reached 20,000 feet and was flying in the clear, just on top of a level cloud-layer. But at that altitude the machine was wallowing; now and then it sank back into the cloud, whereupon ice immediately formed. Suddenly, probably on account of carburettor icing, one engine failed. The Blenheim immediately went into a spin. Gallagher ordered the crew to jump, and then it was discovered that the observer's parachute pack had been thrown down the fuselage and out of reach. The pilot and air gunner stayed with the observer. Still spinning, the aircraft came down through cloud into clear air at 7,000 feet, and they found themselves in a narrow valley with mountains rising sheer on either side of them. Gallagher brought the aircraft out of the spin, only to find that both engines had stopped. His luck held, however. A small field, the only one for miles around, appeared dead ahead; and, with a small prayer of thanks, Gallagher slid the Blenheim in on its belly.

This makes an exciting story only because the crew returned alive. The circumstances were not unusual, but in most cases the aircraft slammed into some remote peak and was simply marked off as 'failed to return'.

30 SQUADRON'S FIRST CASUALTY

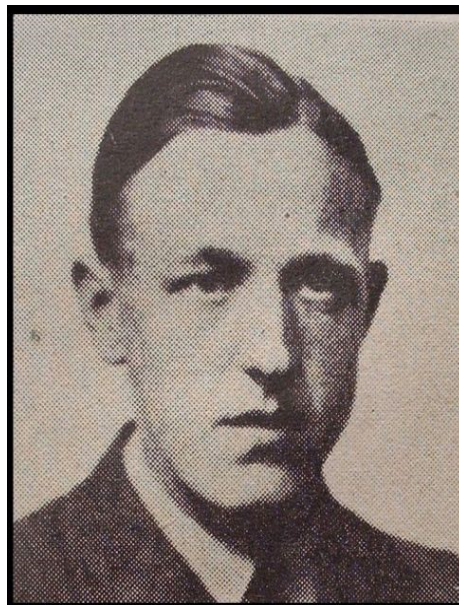
No.30 Squadron's first casualty came on the first raid, when the C.O.'s air gunner (Sgt John Merifield (20)) was killed – ironically enough by the only bullet to hit the aircraft. It was also the first casualty of the B.A.F.G. (British Air Force in Greece). The young airman was buried in Athens, his funeral being attended by a representative of the King and by the President in person. One of the Greek newspapers wrote: "The coffin was covered with two crossed flags – the flags of Britain and Greece. The dead, a young English airman, the first to be killed on Greek soil, came down out of the blue sky, wounded while chasing the assassin of Greek women and children. He was the first British eagle, his wings broken, to fall on the sacred soil of Attica – the first hero of the new generation of philhellenes of 1940'. He was not to be the last.

ITALIAN RETREAT

By mid-November, the 'Wolves of Tuscany', their tails tucked between their legs, were in retreat on all fronts. On the 15th of that month, No. 30 Squadron was briefed to carry out a special bombing assignment. The Greek Army had cut off an impressive number of Italian units and had them surrounded and isolated on a mountain peak in Northern Greece near the town of Konitsa. There was to be a set-piece charge by the Greek army. They were to attack from all sides at once



The funeral cortege of Sergeant John Merifield passing down a street in Athens to the English Church, where he was interred. Merifield, an air gunner serving with No. 30 Squadron RAF, was the first RAF casualty of the campaign in Greece. He was killed during the RAF's first offensive action on 6 November 1940, when Bristol Blenheims of the Squadron were attacked by Italian fighters while bombing Valona airfield in Albania.



Sergeant John Merifield (751514)
slide 33 (photo: Brian Curragh)

and overwhelm the defenders. The signal for the advance was to be the exploding of 3,000 lbs of bombs dropped on the summit (and, it was hoped, on the Italians' heads) by three Blenheims. The importance attached to this operation was enhanced by the presence with the Greek army of King George and Prince Paul of Greece. I was to lead the flight with Bob Davidson on my right and Sergeant-Pilot Childs on my left. The necessity that the bombing should occur on time, and the distance to the target (about 250 miles), and the reported intense activity of enemy fighters (CR-42s, Macchi 200s, and G-50s), all combined to make it imperative that we have some kind of fighter protection if we were to live long enough to reach the target. Fighter escort was therefore provided – seven high wing monoplanes (PZL-24s) flown by Greek pilots.

As we approached the target (or what we fondly hoped was the target), we came under heavy attack by CR-42s. All seven of the escorting Greek fighters were shot down before we released our bombs, and Sgt. Childs' Blenheim burst into flames and exploded just as we got the bombs away. Bob and I, in tight formation, headed for the deep valleys and set course for home. We stopped only momentarily at the airfield in order to get rid of the aircraft before we continued our headlong flight towards Zonar's Bar, where we talked over this frightening business in a peaceful hush broken only by the subdued tinkle of ice cubes. After several drinks we decided that flying was strictly for the birds and that we would ask for a transfer to the H.Q. staff, where we could operate more comfortably in the Grande Bretagne Hotel, just a few steps away from this our favourite bar. Nothing, of course, came of the project, laudable though it was. The next morning found us heading for Valona with enough square yellow bombs to give the Italians as sore heads as those we were nursing.

There were many Canadians in Greece in that winter of 1940. Besides Bob Davidson, Harry Card, Bud Richardson and myself in No. 30 Squadron, there were Jerry Harrison and Vern Woodward in No. 33 Squadron, L.G. Schwab and Len Bartley in No.112, and many others. With the exception of Harry Card, who was killed over Valona, all the above-mentioned survived the war – some of them, after incredible adventures.

Tales of heroism and self-sacrifice were commonplace in the desperate fighting during the retreat from Greece to Crete and the subsequent subjugation of that island by the Nazi paratroopers. Perhaps the outstanding trait of the Commonwealth fighting man evidenced during that grim period was his determination to avoid capture at all costs, while at the same time despatching as many as possible of the Nazi supermen to whatever Valhalla rewards gallant but misguided warriors. If he failed to avoid capture, of

course, his aim immediately became escape. The most unusual story of capture and escape of which I have first-hand knowledge is that of Flt.Lt. Len Bartley, who like myself, was a Canadian in the R.A.F. who had arrived at No. 4 F.T.S. at Abu Suweir as an Acting Pilot Officer in 1938. Over a glass of ale in front of his open fire in the living room of his house in Ottawa, Len recalled:

"It was in January when 112 Squadron left Egypt for Greece. We left Sidi Hanish in the Western Desert, with twelve Mk.II Gladiators. Our first job in Greece was the local fighter defence of Athens. After the Western Desert this was an assignment we could really enjoy. Athens was a wide-open city. A pound note bought 550 drachmas and champagne was 50 drachmas a bottle – and say, how about that Bella Smira and her 'Dance of Fire' at the Argentina nightclub! Yes sir, it was tough.

We left Athens in February and went to a forward airfield deep in the Pindus Mountains near the town of Yannina, fifty miles south of the Albanian border. Here we could operate against Musso's forward fighter-strips and also provide escort for the Blenheims.

GERMANY STEPS IN

We operated from Yannina until mid-April. The war had taken a turn for the worse with the arrival of the Germans. We were pretty badly shot up, and when it became obvious that we'd have to evacuate to Crete, we tossed coins to see who'd fly the five beat-up aircraft we still had left. I lost – along with several other pilots and some of the ground crew. I hitch-hiked my way to Athens – which, by now, incidentally, was a city of somewhat more sober mien than it had been – to see if by chance I could get out of Greece in a Blenheim. All that night we sat in the blacked-out mess at Eleusis, carefully disposing of the bar stock, and when dawn arrived, so did the Me.109s and 110s. After the first attack, six of us crawled aboard an aged Blenheim that had miraculously escaped serious damage. We were taxiing out at high speed when – wham! – we heard a heart-breaking crack. The tail had fallen into a hole in the grass field and the stern-post had broken. So there we were, a sitting duck right in the middle of the field.

I thought I'd had it that time for sure. But just then another Blenheim – the last one on the field – taxied out for take-off. When he left we'd be on our own. But I was determined to get out at any cost. I charged across the field, and, just as the pilot was opening up, I grabbed his port aileron and waggled it frantically. The engines closed down momentarily and a head poked out of the pilot's compartment. I recognized Bob Davidson's bushy moustache and beaming smile. He didn't hesitate for one moment. "Get your men aboard." He yelled. We needed no second invitation. As six more chaps – in addition to the seven already there



Bristol Blenheim Mark I 'UQ-D' of No. 211 Squadron RAF, on the ground at Paramythia, Greece.



Aircrew of 'A' Flight, No. 30 Squadron RAF, collect their equipment and board Bristol Blenheim Mark I, K7095 'VT-G', at Eleusis, Greece, for a raid on Italian targets in Albania. K7095 was shot down in flames, on 11 April 1941, when an explosive bullet hit the port tank. (Both IWM)

before us – climbed in an aircraft built for a crew of three, Bob looked a little worried for a moment. Then he said, “What the hell, let’s go! Either we’ll all make it or we all won’t!” I don’t lie to dwell on that take-off. Suffice to say that at last we brushed through the olive groves at the end of the airfield and were on our way to Crete. Today twelve people owe their lives to Bob’s superb flying. Our overloaded aircraft broke its back as it landed on the short runway at Crete, but we were down. I left 30 Squadron’s airfield and, together with my boys, rejoined 112 Squadron at Heraklion.

ESCAPE FROM CRETE

We operated from Heraklion for about three weeks. Then disaster struck in the shape of the German *Fallschirmjäger* tumbling from the sky in unbelievable numbers out of the 3-engined Ju.52s which came roaring in at 300 feet, with Me.109s and 110s swarming around them in an angry protective screen. We had no aircraft left, so we grabbed rifles and bayonets and joined the army. Many men died that day, but somehow I survived and found myself in sole command of several airmen. We determined to break through the enemy forces, if possible, and make our way to the southern beaches, where – rumour had it – British and Commonwealth forces were still holding out and some evacuation was taking place. Very much on our own, we went into the hills. After many miles of climbing and hiding we reached the southern beaches. We were a sorry looking crew, I can tell you. And we were really beat.

We came upon a small group of soldiers, led by a Captain Fitzharding, trying to raise a motor landing craft that had been sunk in shallow water. Our added assistance was welcomed, and we managed to raise the craft sufficiently to start bailing. Our little party included some Australian engineers and, by sheer good luck, a South African Air Force officer who had worked in the factory that had produced the engines with which the craft was equipped. After much tinkering, he declared that at least one of the two engines should be ready to go. With a battery salvaged from somewhere along the shore, he turned the motor over, while we loaded three drums of aviation petrol and several hundred gallons of water.

On June 2nd, 1941, at eight o’clock in the evening, the Padre came down to the boat and held a service. Our small bay was completely surrounded by the enemy and North Africa was 250 miles away as we pushed off into the darkness across a hard swell – one engine and sixty men, some wounded, some seasick, and all were frightened. But we were determined, if it was humanly possible, to avoid capture and to return eventually to our units.

Hour after hour we made steady progress, then,

suddenly, the lookout perched on the bow drop-ramp, shouted there was a whale dead ahead. Our scepticism brought forth a profane invitation to come and have a look. It was about 2.00 a.m., and the moon was bright enough for us to make out the outlines – not of the whale, but of the Italian submarine that had surfaced dead ahead and was riding the swells in unison with our own craft.

A voice called out: “Are you English?” With immense relief, we answered that we ‘bloody well were, old boy! Alas, our relief was short lived. A heavy machine gun chattered and red streaks of incendiary and tracer arched across our bows to back up the peremptory order to ‘Heave to!’ We heaved to as requested and Captain Fitzharding went aboard to discuss the situation with its captain. Convinced by Fitzharding that most of the passengers were wounded troops, the Italian commander agreed to let them go if they would return to Crete and if the officers would come aboard his submarine as prisoners. He added that if any reluctance was shown, or if officers attempted to remain in the smaller boat, he would be forced to sink it. In the face of this ultimatum, we decided that for the good of the greater number we would comply.

The vessels had drifted about fifty feet apart, and the swells were running high; but, at the insistence of the crew, we jumped into the water one by one and swam across. Unfortunately, the South African Lieutenant who had fixed the engine on Crete was drowned on the way. I must, in all fairness, add that one of the Italian submariners jumped in and tried, unsuccessfully, to save him – being rescued himself, indeed, only after some difficulty. As for our own craft, it resumed its painful way to North Africa, where it arrived at last without further incident.

PRISONER OF WAR

The submarine was the ‘*Ardua*’ out of Taranto. The captain, a fastidious and dapper little individual smelling faintly of perfume, was very correct in his treatment of his unexpected prisoners. We arrived in Taranto some five days later and on arrival we experienced much kindness in the Italian Naval Hospital. But that was where the picnic ended. The next two and a half years were spent in a prison-camp near the town of Sulmona, in Central Italy. Although I watched every chance to escape, no opportunity presented itself until one day we heard that the Allies had landed and were fighting their way north. A note of urgency was added to the escape plans by rumours that the Germans were going to move P.O.W.s – particularly air force prisoners – to camps in the Fatherland. The opportunity for which I had waited suddenly occurred in the new upset routine of the camp, and one night I broke out alone and headed south.

For days I wandered through the hills, relying on friendly shepherds for food and avoiding the retreating Germans in a series of rather frightening escapes. I was passed from one underground group to another, until at last I reached the famous guerrilla leader 'Popski' and his 'private army'. I operated with them on a bridge job one night, and a particularly close call, when I was wounded in the leg, brought back to me sharply my duty to return to the R.A.F. as quickly as possible. 'Popski' was most co-operative and provided a guide to take me south.

When I reached the Allied lines, the first vehicle I saw was an R.A.F. lorry. I flagged the driver down and asked him where he was going. Quite unbelievably he replied; "112 Squadron, Hop in." And so, two and a half years later and many miles from my point of departure from it, I arrived back at my squadron mess. On the way to the mess tent I passed aircraft I had heard about but never seen – Spitfires, beautiful looking machines.

As I pushed open the flap of the tent I was greeted by yells of "Outside, you! No Eyeteys in here!" from young pink-cheeked lads with shiny wings and smart clean uniforms that made me actually conscious of my old civilian overcoat and beaten-up peaked cap. I had some difficulty establishing my identity. Not a single familiar face was left in the squadron. In desperation I kept repeating, "Look, fellows. I'm Flt. Lt. Len Bartley, honest!" Suddenly I spied a familiar volume lying on a mess table – the squadron 'Line Book', which every desert squadron kept to register for posterity the most boastful statements made by pilots in an unguarded moment. "Look," I said, "You'll find my name appended to the very first entry in that book. It reads: I'll never get in the line book, fellow. I never shoot a line! They checked the entry, and I was accepted. The night that followed was one to be nearly remembered!

And what were you doing all this time, may I ask?" said Len.

"Well", I said, "that reminds me. I was commanding No. 11 Squadron..." On 1 December 1940, I was suddenly promoted to the rank of Squadron Leader after only eleven months as a Flight Lieutenant. In Spring 1941 I was posted back as SASO to the AOC Palestine and Transjordan, and a Sunderland took me back from Suda Bay in Crete to Alexandria. I picked my wife up in Ismailia and then we went by train to Jerusalem to plant my feet under a solidly anchored desk in a splendid top floor office in the King David Hotel, overlooking the Mount of Olives. Within a month I was bored and started a determined campaign to get back on operations.

I took over command of No. 11 Squadron on 6 June 1941, at Aqir in Palestine. I did a 20-minute circuit and bump to become familiar with this type of aircraft and also to get to know my new crew, Sgts. Mason and

Winship. Two days later we led nine Blenheims on a bombing raid against the Vichy French aerodrome at Damascus. We eventually flew more than fifty raids together....."

No. 11 Squadron, equipped with Blenheim Mk IVs, had also been sent to Greece in early 1941 to fight in the Greek campaign. Its few surviving aircraft and crews had been evacuated to Crete and then on to Palestine. After reforming, the squadron served in the Syrian campaign, designed to protect Palestine and the Suez Canal from the Germans. At the beginning of August it moved to Habbaniya in Iraq for operations in Persia, which were complete by 28 August. The squadron then moved to LG 09 in Egypt, between Sidi Barrani and Buq-Buq, became part of No. 3 SAAF Wing and took part in Operation CRUSADER (18 November-30 December 1941). Alfred handed over command on 6 November, and for his work with No. 11 Squadron he was awarded a Bar to his DFC on 10 October 1941.

Early in 1942 he left No. 11 Squadron and the Western Desert, and in April Alfred and his wife boarded the troopship *Volendam* at Suez for a three-month journey back to England. His articles finish there, and I have been unable to trace his movements between his arrival back in Britain and his return to Canada in 1944, where he transferred to the RCAF on 26 June and was given the rank of wing commander.

Alfred was promoted to group captain on 15 June 1960 and in October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was the Canadian Deputy Commander of NORAD - the North American Aerospace Defence Command. Having first obtained his 'Pilot's Certificate of Flying Machines' in 1933, by the time he retired in 1965 Alfred was an accomplished pilot, qualified on 64 different types.

Alfred passed away peacefully in Kelowna on 24 January 2009, aged 93, predeceased by his wife, Mabel. He had had a younger brother in the RAF, 22 year old W.O. II Stanley Bocking, who was killed while flying a Hurricane of No. 87 Sqn on 30 July 1942. Stanley is buried in Colerne (St. John The Baptist) churchyard in Wiltshire and has a lake named after him in Manitoba—Bocking Lake.

AIR OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: 1 JANUARY 1941— 3 MAY 1941.



Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, standing in the gardens of Air Headquarters, Middle East Command, in Cairo. (IWM)

Despatch submitted to the Secretary of State for Air on November 24th, 1941, by Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, G.C.B., D.S.O., Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Royal Air Force, Middle East.

This Despatch covers the period from 1st January, 1941, to 3rd May, 1941. On this latter date I was recalled to England and did not return to resume command of the R.A.F., Middle East. The main features to be recorded during these four months can be summarised as follows:

(a) The complete defeat of the Italian Air Force in Libya; the successful and rapid advance to Benghazi (6th February) and the subsequent temporary stabilisation in Cyrenaica as far West as El Ageila.

(b) The reduction of British Forces in Cyrenaica, both Army and Air, in order to meet fresh Greek Commitments due to development of the threat to Greece from German Forces which had crossed from Roumania into Bulgaria. The decision being made on the 22nd February to send British Land Forces to Greece.

(c) The subsequent German-Italian offensive in North Africa leading to the withdrawal of British Forces in Cyrenaica to the Frontier and to the isolation of Tobruk.

(d) The German invasion of Yugo-Slavia and Greece on 5th April, resulting in the capitulation of the Armies of both countries and the evacuation of British Forces to Crete and Egypt.

(e) Intensified attacks on Malta and Naval communications in that area by German aircraft based in Sicily.

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:

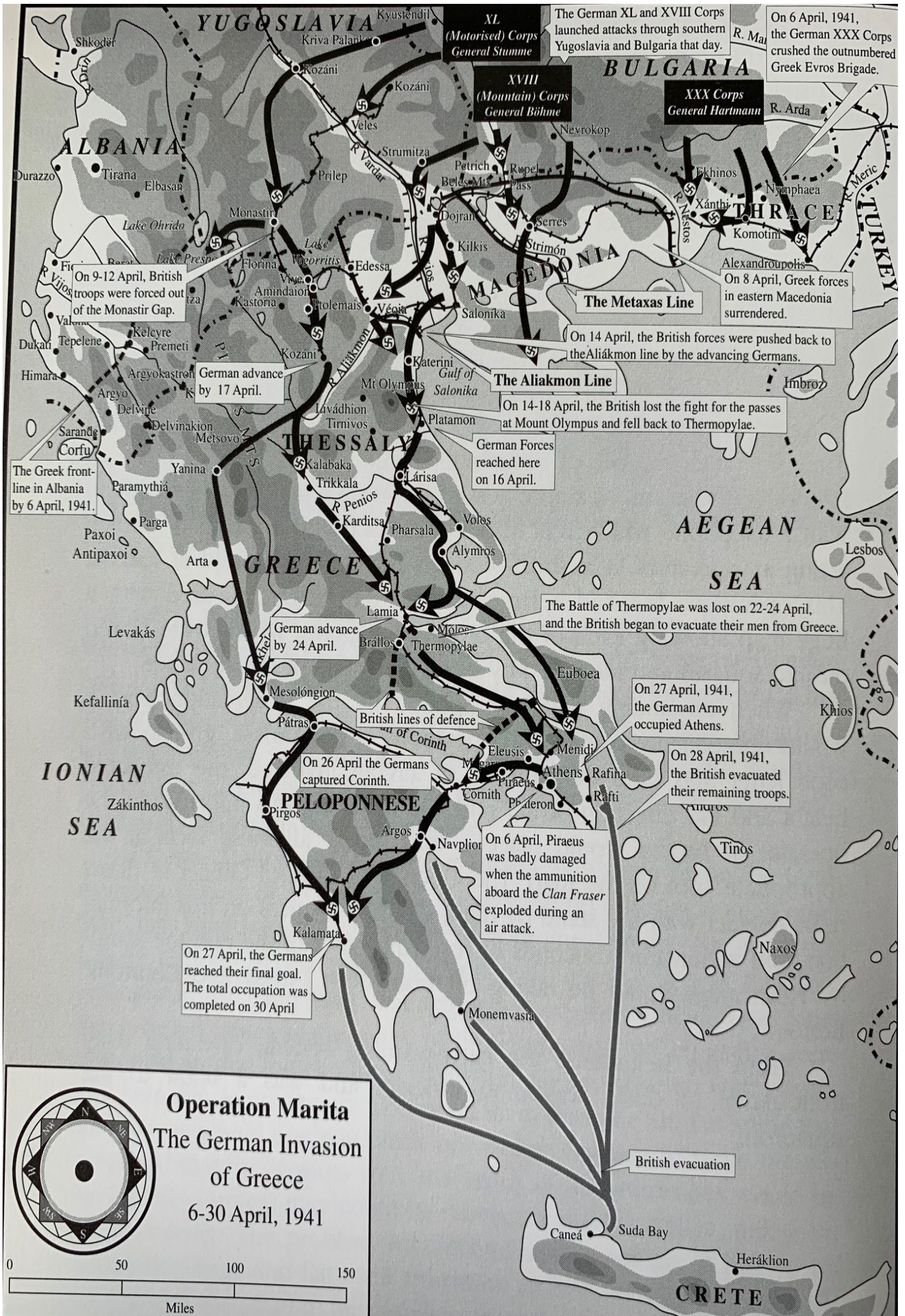
No. 30 (F) Squadron (Blenheim Fighters}.

No. 80 (F) Squadron (Gladiators).

No. 84 (B) Squadron (Blenheims)

No. 211 (B) Squadron (Blenheims).

In addition, detachments of Wellingtons of Nos. 37 and 70 (B) Squadrons based in Egypt operated during moon periods from aerodromes in Greece. The continued arrival of Italian reinforcements in Albania presaged an offensive, to counter which the Greeks would require the maximum air support that could be made available. Thus No. 112 (F) Squadron (Gladiators) was withdrawn from the Western Desert early in January, and No.11 (B) Squadron (Blenheims) and No. 33 (F) Squadron



On 6 April, 1941, the German XXX Corps crushed the outnumbered Greek Evros Brigade.

The German XL and XVIII Corps launched attacks through southern Yugoslavia and Bulgaria that day.

XVIII (Mountain) Corps
General Böhme

XXX Corps
General Hartmann

ALBANIA

BULGARIA

XL (Motorised) Corps
General Stumme

On 9-12 April, British troops were forced out of the Monastir Gap.

On 8 April, Greek forces in eastern Macedonia surrendered.

The Metaxas Line

On 14 April, the British forces were pushed back to the Aliakmon line by the advancing Germans.

The Aliakmon Line

On 14-18 April, the British lost the fight for the passes at Mount Olympus and fell back to Thermopylae.

German Forces reached here on 16 April.

The Greek front-line in Albania by 6 April, 1941.

German advance by 17 April.

AEGEAN SEA

The Battle of Thermopylae was lost on 22-24 April, and the British began to evacuate their men from Greece.

THESSALY

PELOPONNESE

German advance by 24 April.

On 27 April, 1941, the German Army occupied Athens.

On 28 April, 1941, the British evacuated their remaining troops.

IONIAN SEA

British lines of defence

On 26 April the Germans captured Corinth.

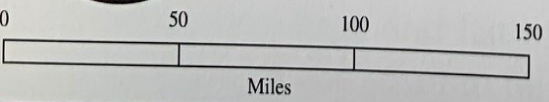
On 6 April, Piraeus was badly damaged when the ammunition aboard the *Clan Fraser* exploded during an air attack.

On 27 April, the Germans reached their final goal. The total occupation was completed on 30 April.

British evacuation



Operation Marita
The German Invasion of Greece
6-30 April, 1941



CRETE

(Hurricanes) were also withdrawn after the capture of Bardia and despatched to Greece, as follows:-

No. 11 (B) Squadron-24th January.

No. 112 (F) Squadron-10th February.

No. 33 (F) Squadron-19th February.

A situation calling for further reinforcements for Greece was created by the threatened German invasion through the Balkans. Accordingly, by the 31st March, No. 113 (B) Squadron (Blenheims) had also been despatched from Egypt to Greece and No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron (Hurricanes and Lysanders) was re-equipping and preparing to move at an early date.

(31). Although the Greek Air Force operated with success in the early days of the war its activities were much reduced latterly by the inability of the Greeks to make good their aircraft casualties. Thus, practically the whole of the air effort in this theatre devolved upon the R.A.F. which was consequently called upon to attack strategical objectives, to operate in direct support of the Greek Army, necessary in order to maintain their high morale, and to provide the fighter defence of the Athens area. To meet these requirements Squadrons were employed in the following roles:- Wellingtons operating by night attacked ports in Albania and to a less extent in S. Italy to interrupt the flow of enemy supplies and reinforcements to Albania. The primary role of the Blenheims was to provide direct support for the Greek Army by attacking:

- (a) enemy lines of communication and important centres behind the forward area to prevent the distribution of supplies and reinforcements, and
- (b) enemy positions in the forward area.

Blenheims also attacked ports in Albania by night and day and provided strategical reconnaissance of ports in Southern Italy and Albania'. Hurricanes and Gladiators were employed in escorting Blenheims during many of their daylight bombing attacks, in maintaining offensive patrols and in protecting the Greek troops against enemy air action. Blenheim fighters continued to provide the air defence of the Port and Air Bases in the Athens area. In addition to the commitments already referred to, Wellingtons and Blenheims operating from Greece were called upon to attack enemy aerodromes in the Dodecanese from which enemy aircraft were carrying out mine-laying operations in the Suez Canal, as well as air attacks on our convoys proceeding to Greece.

(32). For the first two months of the year extremely unfavourable weather conditions persisted, preventing our aircraft from operating with any degree of intensity. Although both sides were similarly

handicapped, it was more to our disadvantage in that, inter alia, it prevented our own aircraft from attacking ports in Albania and Southern Italy with sufficient intensity to do more than embarrass their use by the enemy. Thus, despite the damage inflicted and the nuisance value of our attacks, the Italians still continued to land reinforcements and supplies in Albania. The bad weather prevailing at the time of the Greeks' capture of Kelcyre on the 8th January prevented our aircraft from operating in close support of their troops during their advance; in fact, until the middle of February operations were of necessity of a sporadic nature, the weather and state of aerodromes on occasions preventing our aircraft from operating for several days at a time. Subsequently, on the 10th January, as the Greeks continued to make slow progress towards Tepelene, Blenheims attacked enemy troops retiring from Kelcyre towards Berat. Otherwise, support to the Greek forces at this time was confined to Blenheim attacks on the bases at Berat, West of the Central Sector and Elbasan, beyond the Northern Sector. Towards the end of January the fighting round Tepelene increased in intensity as reinforcements reached the Italians, enabling them to stiffen their resistance against the Greek thrusts. During this period and up to the middle of February periodical attacks continued against Elbasan in the North, and Berat, Bousar and Dukaj in the Tepelene area where military buildings and troop concentrations were bombed.

(33). By the middle of February there were indications that the threatened Italian counter offensive would not be long delayed. With the Greeks retaining the initiative the ground operations had developed into a series of attacks by the Greeks followed by fierce Italian counter attacks, this activity being concentrated in the Tepelene area. A brief spell of improved weather conditions at this time enabled our aircraft to operate with greater freedom, 108 sorties being made between 11th and 18th February in support of the Greek forces which were making a strong effort at that time to capture Tepelene. In these operations, stores, M.T. convoys and enemy troop and gun positions in the Tepelene area were persistently and effectively attacked by bomber and fighter Blenheims. Air activity reached a peak on 13th-14th February when, following a series of ineffective Italian counter-attacks, the Greeks launched a new offensive against enemy positions around Tepelene. Our aircraft made 50 sorties in direct and close support of the Greek troops as they advanced and captured important positions in the mountains to the North and South of Tepelene. Following this short favourable spell, weather conditions again deteriorated after the middle of February, but although this curtailed operations to some extent our aircraft continued to provide support

for the Greek Army which maintained its pressure on the enemy. Between 19th February and 4th March approximately 90 Blenheim sorties were made against enemy troop concentrations, gun emplacements and M.T. convoys in the Southern and Central Sectors in an endeavour to wear down the enemy resistance.

(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 Korysias (who had succeeded the late General Metaxas), Mr. Eden (Foreign Secretary), General Sir John Dill (C.I.G.S.), General Sir Archibald Wavell (C. in C. M.E.), Captain Dick, R.N. (representing C in C. Mediterranean) and myself, the decision was taken to despatch British Troops at the earliest opportunity to form on the Aliakmon line to the West of Salonika. It followed, of course, that an increased air commitment would be involved both in support of the British Army on this new front and also for air protection of the ships transporting men to Greece. Nevertheless, since the Greeks had decided to oppose a German invasion of Macedonia there was clearly no alternative to giving them the maximum assistance possible. Moreover, though German air and land forces had arrived in Tripoli these might well have been to prevent our further advance, and there was no reason on that particular date to suspect the imminent preparation of a counter-offensive in Libya. It is true, however, that such a threat developed almost immediately after the Greek commitment had been accepted.

(40). The landing of British Troops in the Athens area during March proceeded with little or no interference from the air; German infiltration into Bulgaria continued but their air activity was limited to occasional reconnaissances over Macedonia. By the 1st April it was evident that the German invasion of Greece through the Balkans was imminent. Consequently, with the prospect of fighting the war on two fronts, two air formations were created, viz. Eastern Wing and Western Wing. H.Q. Eastern Wing was at Tsaritsani, in close touch with G.H.Q. British Forces and controlled Nos. 11 and 113 (B) Squadrons (Blenheims), No. 33 (F) Squadron (Hurricanes) and No. 208 (A.C.) Squadron (Hurricanes and Lysanders). The role of this force was

to provide direct support for the British and Greek Armies against the prospective German attack from the North. H.Q. Western Wing was at Yannina and controlled No. 112 (F) Squadron (Gladiators) and No. 211 (B) Squadron (Blenheims), the role of this formation being to support the Greeks on the Albanian Front. The remainder of the squadrons in Greece, viz. No. 30 (F/B) Squadron (Blenheim Fighters), No. 80 (F) Squadron (Hurricanes and Gladiators) and No. 84 (B) Squadron (Blenheims), together with detachments of Nos. 37 and 38 (B) Squadrons (Wellingtons), were at aerodromes in the Athens area directly under the control of H.Q., B.A.F., Greece. No. 815 Squadron Fleet Air Arm was based on Paramythia and No. 805 Squadron Fleet Air Arm on Maleme (Crete).

(41). Germany declared war on Greece and Yugo-Slavia on the 5th April, 1941, and launched her attack at dawn the following day, crossing the Greek frontier into Macedonia by four routes, with the main thrust along the Struma Valley. Simultaneously they advanced Westwards into Yugo-Slavia along the Strumica Valley in the South, from Dragoman to Nis in the North, and by other intermediate routes. The Greeks resisted strongly at Rupel, temporarily checking the German advance through the Struma Valley, but despite this opposition the Germans succeeded in penetrating Thrace and Macedonia and occupied Salonika on the 8th April. Throughout the German advance the primary task of our Squadrons was to attack his A.F.V's., M.T. columns, troops and lines of communication on the Macedonian and Yugoslavian Frontiers. Practically the whole of our air effort was directed to this end, Wellingtons making night attacks, Blenheims operating both by night and day, with fighters constantly in support maintaining offensive patrols, making low flying machine-gun attacks on the enemy, and escorting our bombers by day. The first encounter with the German air force on this front took place on 6th April. A patrol of 12 of No. 33 Squadron Hurricanes engaged 30 Me.109s and shot down 5 of them without loss to themselves. During the night of 6th/7th April, 6 Wellingtons of No. 37 Squadron successfully bombed the railway station and marshalling yards at Sofia. From 7th to 8th April, as the Germans advanced in strength, Blenheims of Nos. 11, 84 and 113 Squadrons made heavy and effective attacks on large columns of their M.T., A.F.V's. and troops near Petrich in Bulgaria, on the Strumica-Lake Doiran Road in Yugo-Slavia and at Axiopolis and Polykastron in Macedonia.

(42). By this time the German armoured forces, supported by dive-bombers, advancing Westwards from Bitolj, had overwhelmed the Yugoslav Army and had succeeded in joining up with the Italians in Albania. They then advanced Southward from Bitolj to Fiorina, threatening to isolate the Greeks in Albania from our

own forces further East. The Greeks were thus compelled to withdraw from the Northern front of Albania, while our Armoured Brigade and an Australian Infantry Brigade were moved Westwards to close the Fiorina Gap, where they were joined by a Greek cavalry division from the Koritza area. On 10th April, as the enemy continued his Westward thrust into Yugo-Slavia, Blenheims attacked enemy M.T. columns and A.F.V's. on the Prilep- Bitolj road inflicting heavy damage on them. During the night of 11th/12th April, Wellingtons followed up this effort with further attacks on the enemy at Prilep and Kilkis. Meanwhile, our forces holding the Fiorina Gap had been hotly attacked by the Germans on 9th April and compelled, after a strong resistance, to withdraw on nth April. By the evening of 12th April, our front had been formed roughly on a line extending from the coast near Mount Olympus, along the Aliakmon River to Servia, thence N.W. towards the Albanian lakes. Continued bombing and machine-gun attacks by Blenheims and Hurricanes contributed to the delay of the enemy's advance during the critical periods in which our troops were falling back on new positions. These operations were inevitably accompanied by considerable losses and in one raid on the 13th April, for example, a complete formation of 6 Blenheims of No. 211 Squadron was destroyed by Me.109's. Wellingtons continued to attack more distant objectives. On the night of the 13th/14th April a force of 10 Wellingtons from Nos. 37 and 38 Squadrons made a further effective attack on the railway goods yard at Sofia, destroying a large number of trucks containing explosives. At the same time other Wellingtons bombed and machine-gunned M.T. convoys at Yannitsa and Gorna Djumaya. In operations on the following night Wellingtons destroyed the bridge over the Vardar River at Veles and Blenheims dropped bombs on enemy columns on the road from Ptolomais to Kozani. Our aircraft continued to attack similar objectives during the night of 15th-16th April and throughout the following day, to impede the enemy's advance on Katerini and Kozani.

(43). Meanwhile the Army had stubbornly held the Mount Olympus-Aliakmon Line until 14th April when it was turned by the Germans forcing the Kleisoura Pass. Our forces started to fall back on the Thermopylae Position on 15th April, completing the withdrawal by the 20th April. This new situation necessitated the withdrawal of all R.A.F. Squadrons to the Athens Area on 16th April and from that date onwards they were controlled directly by H.Q., B.A.F., Greece. Eastern and Western Wings were consequently disbanded.

Continuous enemy attacks on our aerodromes, coupled with losses from enemy fighter action, had by this time considerably reduced the effective striking power of our Squadrons. In a series of attacks on one day alone, the enemy destroyed 10 Blenheims on the ground at

Niamata and damaged several other aircraft which had to be subsequently destroyed and abandoned. Several such attacks were made, during which many aircraft were destroyed or rendered unserviceable, but owing to the loss in several instances of unit records during the ultimate evacuation, full details of enemy raids are not available. Towards the end the repeated enemy attacks on our aerodromes in the Athens Area caused further heavy losses, and as a final blow a force of Hurricanes retained at Argos to cover the evacuation was almost wiped out when 13 of them were destroyed on the ground during intensive enemy air attacks on 23rd April.

In turn our aircraft attacked the German occupied aerodromes on the Salonika and Larissa Plains in an endeavour to reduce the scale of the enemy's air effort. Thus between 15th and 22nd April Blenheims made effective night attacks on the aerodromes at Sedes, Katerina, Kozani and Larissa, starting several large fires. The effort could not, however, be maintained on a sufficiently heavy scale to cause any material reduction of the enemy's air effort, bearing in mind the comparatively large numbers of aircraft and reserves available to him. Nevertheless, our Squadrons continued to operate until, in the end, the use of aerodromes was virtually denied to them by constant enemy air attacks. In the concluding stages Blenheims attacked enemy columns advancing on the Larissa Plain, concentrating on road bridges between Kozani, Grevena and Kalabaka to impede the enemy's progress. One particularly successful attack was made when Blenheims bombed a large M.T. convoy concentrated in front of a broken bridge across the Aliakmon River a few miles from Kalabaka. Similarly our fighters continued to engage formidable enemy formations with success.

Throughout the campaign they had gained many victories against the numerically superior enemy, but at no time was their skill and high morale more in evidence than in the concluding stages. In a number of combats during the period of intensive enemy air activity on eighth and 20th April, Hurricanes of Nos. 33 and 80 Squadrons destroyed a total of 29 German aircraft and probably destroyed another 15. In addition, Fighter Blenheims of No. 30 Squadron probably destroyed 2 Italian bombers. These successes were achieved with a loss of 7 Hurricanes brought down and 2 damaged, a truly remarkable record in view of the increasing disparity of strength between the R.A.F. and the German Air Force.

(44). At the beginning of these operations the combined strength of the German and Italian Air Forces amounted to approximately 1,100 aircraft, of which over 40 per cent, were fighters, a little less than 40 per cent, bombers and dive-bombers, and the remainder

reconnaissance aircraft. The total strength of the R.A.F. in Greece with reserves was approximately 200 aircraft, of which about half were bombers. Although outnumbered, our Squadrons operated with success in the initial stages of the German advance. It is probable that unfavourable weather and the lack of forward all weather aerodromes at that stage prevented the enemy from making the best use of his superior numbers. As the enemy advanced, however, he was able to establish forward aerodromes, at first in the Salonika Area and subsequently on the Larissa Plain, from which he was able to exploit his numerical superiority to the fullest advantage. He was thus able to concentrate an overwhelming force which took an increasing toll of our aircraft both on the ground and in the air. These casualties could not be replaced at that time from the slender reserves available in the Middle East, particularly in view of the dangerous situation which had arisen in the Western Desert. The odds which our Squadrons had to face, therefore, increased disproportionately until the Germans had gained virtual air superiority. With that achieved they were able to concentrate the main weight of their attack against our troops, lines of communication, and ports.

By 20th April our much-depleted Squadrons were concentrated at the few remaining aerodromes in the Athens Area, where, as already described, they were exposed to continuous air attack. With the complete collapse of the Greek resistance it became evident that even the shortened Thermopylae front could not be held against the superior weight of the enemy and the decision was made to withdraw all British Forces to the coast and embark them for Crete or Egypt.

(45). The scheme for the evacuation of R.A.F. personnel aimed at the removal of air crews and certain key personnel by air in Squadron and transport aircraft and flying boats. The remainder were to be evacuated by sea with other British and Imperial Forces. Wellingtons of Nos. 37 and 38 Squadrons had already flown to Egypt on the 17th and 18th April, the personnel and equipment following by sea on 23rd April. In addition, 14 Blenheim Fighters of No. 30 Squadron flew to Crete on 18th April to provide convoy protection during the projected sea evacuation. The remaining aircraft of Nos. 11, 84, 113 and 211 (B) Squadrons and 208 (A.C.) Squadron, amounting to 24 Blenheims and 4 Lysanders, flew to Egypt on 22nd and 23rd April, the Blenheims having previously made several journeys between Greece and Crete evacuating air crews. The enemy air attack on Argos on 23rd April, already referred to, had reduced the remaining strength of Nos. 33 and 80 Squadron Hurricanes to 6. These and 14 Gladiators of Nos. 80 and 112 Squadrons were flown to Crete on 23rd April to defend Suda Bay against enemy air attack and to take part with No. 30 Squadron in providing cover for sea convoys engaged in the evacuation.

Sunderlands started to evacuate R.A.F. personnel on 19th April, when they flew a 30 Squadron party to Crete. The previous day they had also carried King Peter of Yugoslavia and other important political personages to Egypt, having taken them off from Kotor (Yugoslavia) on 17th April. Sunderlands continued the evacuation of essential personnel in stages from Greece to Crete, thence to Egypt. The King of Greece and members of the Greek Royal Family were included among other important passengers flown to Crete in Sunderlands on 22nd and 23rd April.

(46). On 23rd April the Sunderlands were reinforced by two B.O.A.C. Flying Boats which operated 'between Crete and Egypt and rendered valuable service. These efforts were further augmented on the same day by Bombays of No. 216 Squadron which took two parties from Eleusis to Bagush, and the following day by Lodestars of No. 267 Squadron which carried three parties from Argos to Bagush. Enemy air attacks rendered Eleusis and Menidi aerodromes unusable after 23rd April, and Argos was similarly out of action from 24th April. The Bombays and Lodestars thereafter continued to carry personnel from Crete to Egypt. The last Sunderland loads to leave Scaramanga were taken off on 24th April and included Lieutenant-General Sir T. Blarney, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., and Air Vice-Marshal J. H. D'Albiac, D.S.O., and their respective staffs. On 24th April 1,700 R.A.F. personnel were at Argos awaiting evacuation by sea but by the next day the majority of these had moved to Kalamata and Gytheon, three Sunderland loads having taken off from the former, and one from the latter and flown to Crete. Subsequently all personnel remaining there were evacuated by sea, many of them crossing in small boats to Kythera whence they were later taken off in destroyers. Further Sunderland evacuations from Greece, were made from Nauplia (Morea), transporting Prince Paul of Greece, the Greek Prime Minister and other important passengers including General Sir Maitland Wilson and Generals Mackay and Rankin. Meanwhile flying boats of Nos. 228 and 230 Squadrons and landplanes continued the evacuation from Crete to Egypt, the last flight being made by a Sunderland on 2nd May. The total number of personnel evacuated by air from Greece to Crete was over 600, and from Crete and Greece to Egypt 870. Two Sunderlands were lost in these operations, one of which crashed while alighting by night at Kalamata, and the other was destroyed by enemy air action at Scaramanga.

(47). The main evacuation from Greece of British and Imperial Forces was effected between 24th and 30th April in convoys of H.M. Ships and other vessels. All available aircraft operated in support to protect the convoys against the heavy enemy air attacks to which they were constantly subjected, and which were causing heavy losses. The forces available in Crete were

14 fighter Blenheims of No. 30 Squadron, 9 fighter Blenheims of No. 203 Squadron (recently sent to Crete from Egypt to take part in this operation) and the remaining 6 Hurricanes and 14 Gladiators of Nos. 33, 80 and 112 Squadrons. At this stage, however, only 6 of the 14 Gladiators were serviceable. Blenheims usually operating in patrols of six aircraft provided such cover for convoys as was possible in the vicinity of the mainland of Greece, while Hurricanes and Gladiators provided patrols over convoys approaching Crete and during their disembarkation at Suda Bay. At the same time, Sunderlands provided Ionian and Mediterranean reconnaissances to guard against possible raids on our convoys by units of the Italian Navy. During the six months' campaign in Greece our Squadrons contended throughout with numerically superior enemy air forces, emerging in the end with much credit although sadly depleted in strength. Our total aircraft losses amounted to 209, of which 82 had to be destroyed and abandoned by our own forces during the withdrawal and subsequent evacuation. Many of the latter had been damaged during enemy attacks on our aerodromes and in normal circumstances might have been repaired. Our total losses of aircraft, missing and in combat with the enemy were 72. As a comparison, the losses inflicted on the enemy totalled 259 aircraft destroyed and 99 probably destroyed, with several others damaged. Of these, 231 were destroyed and 94 probably destroyed in combat with our aircraft. Our personnel losses in Greece amounted to 148 killed and missing and 15 taken prisoner. Of the total, 130 were aircrews. Such losses cannot be considered unduly heavy, bearing in mind the difficulties of the campaign and the hazards of the subsequent evacuation.

(48). I cannot speak too highly of the work of Air Vice-Marshal J. H. D'Albiac, D.S.O., who commanded the British Air Force in Greece during the whole six months' campaign. His initiative, his personality and tact in dealings with the Greek High Command, enabled him, right up to the end, to obtain the maximum results in support of the Greeks from the small force at his disposal. Of those under his Command, the most outstanding for their valuable services were:

-Group Captain A. H. Willets, Senior Air Staff Officer during the whole period.

-Wing Commander P. B. Coote, who commanded the Western Wing (The Albanian Front) and himself took part in many of the fighter patrols and bombing raids of his Squadrons, from the last of which he is missing.

-Wing Commander J. R. Gordon-Finlayson, D.S.O., D.F.C., commanding No. 211 Squadron, and later the Eastern Wing. A fine leader and an inspiration to his Squadron, with which he had completed over one hundred raids.

-Squadron Leader E. G. Jones, D.F.C., commanding No. 80 (F) Squadron; his leadership maintained the high morale and efficiency of this Squadron whose six months' record in Greece, mostly in Gladiators, was quite remarkable.

-Wing Commander Lord Forbes, Intelligence Officer on the Staff, who carried out many special missions in his Q.6 aeroplane, some of which were of an unusual and hazardous nature.

ARTHUR M. LONGMORE,

Air Chief Marshal.

1st November, 1941.

AIR OPERATIONS IN GREECE 1940-1941



Air Commodore J H D'Albiac, Air Officer Commanding British Forces in Greece, sitting at his desk in his Headquarters at the Grande Bretagne Hotel, Athens. He was promoted acting Air Vice-Marshal on 15 November 1940.

The following report was submitted to the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, on August 15th, 1941, by Air Vice-Marshal J. H. D'Albiac, D.S.O., commanding the Royal Air Force in Greece.

REPORT ON THE OPERATIONS CARRIED OUT BY THE ROYAL AIR FORCE IN GREECE : NOVEMBER, 1940, TO APRIL, 1941.

*Appendix "A"—Memorandum on Air Policy in Greece. (not reproduced)

*Appendix "B"—Lessons of the Campaign. (not reproduced)

Sir,

I have the honour to forward the following report on the operations carried out by the Royal Air Force under my command in Greece from November, 1940, to April, 1941.

Introduction:

2. In framing this report, my object is to describe the various problems with which we were confronted from time to time and how we attempted to solve them; our reasons for adopting certain definite lines of policy; the difficulties with which we were faced; our successes and failures; and finally to draw attention to some of the lessons we learnt in a campaign which, although perhaps not entirely successful in its highest conception, contributed materially to the prosecution of the war as a whole and formed a chapter in history of which the Royal Air Force may well be proud. I do not propose to compile a day to day record of all the activities of the Command. Apart from the immensity of such a task, an account of this description would not serve any useful purpose and would only tend to obscure those

particular points which I wish to emphasise. Nevertheless in order to obtain some form of continuity, it is necessary to deal with the campaign in chronological sequence. I propose, therefore, dividing it into three periods of two months into which arrangement the campaign conveniently divides itself from the strategical point of view.

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER, 1940.

Declaration of War:

3. At 3 o'clock in the morning of 28th October, 1940, the Italian Minister in Athens handed to the Prime Minister of Greece a note from his Government complaining in strong terms of alleged Greek assistance to the Allies and demanding for the Italians the right to occupy certain strategic bases in Greece. General Metaxas regarded this note as an ultimatum which he promptly refused and a few hours later, Greece was at war with Italy. Unlike the Italians, the Greek forces were little prepared for war. Their regular Army units were at their peace time stations throughout the country and general mobilisation had not been ordered. On being attacked, the Greek units holding the frontier posts on the mountainous borders of Albania, although fighting with the greatest gallantry, were overwhelmed in some cases by sheer weight of numbers and compelled to give ground. This was particularly the case in regions where conditions were suitable for the employment of Italian mechanised forces. The progress of the Italian army was, however, slow for although Italy had concentrated large forces on the Greek frontier, the firm attitude adopted by the Greek government came as somewhat of a surprise as it had been thought that all Italian demands would be met without resort to arms. It was confirmed also from the reports of prisoners taken in the first few

days that the opening of hostilities was quite unexpected by the Italian soldiers themselves, who had been led to expect a diplomatic victory and a peaceful advance into Greek territory.

The Greek Problem:

4. It was clear that the problem confronting the Greeks was largely one of time. Could her frontier units hold the Italian forces sufficiently long to enable her armies to be mobilised and concentrated? As is well known, Greece is badly served by communications. Roads and railways on the mainland are few in number and the former are in most cases bad. A number of her reservists had to come from the Greek islands and it was estimated that it would take at least three weeks for the Greek mobilisation to be completed and for sufficient forces to be concentrated in the battle area before she could really consider herself reasonably safe. In the meantime, the Italian air force could, if handled properly, play havoc with their mobilisation and concentration arrangements. This, for some unaccountable reason, the Italians failed completely to do and wasted their comparatively strong air force in abortive attacks on undefended islands and hospitals in Salonika.

The Greek Air Force.

5. The Greek Air Force, although small and outnumbered by the Italian, fought most gallantly during this initial stage. Their pilots, many of whom had attended courses in England at the C.F.S. and elsewhere, were keen and what they lacked in modern war technique they made up for in personal bravery. Their aircraft, like those of most small independent nations not possessing an aircraft industry of their own, consisted of a number of different foreign types, French and Polish predominating, with a limited range of spares.

6. Operationally, the Greek Air Force was controlled by the General Staff and was used almost entirely in direct support of their army. They were quite unable to obtain any degree of air superiority and in consequence they suffered severe casualties. In addition, owing to the difficulty of obtaining spares, an abnormally high proportion of unserviceability soon existed and in a comparatively short time, their effort was reduced to negligible proportions.

Decision to send an R.A.F. Contingent.

7. In response to an urgent appeal for help, the British Government decided to send a contingent of the Royal Air Force to Greece from the Middle East. The force decided upon was to consist of two medium bomber squadrons, one mixed medium bomber and two-seater fighter squadron—all armed with Blenheim aircraft, and two single-seater fighter squadrons armed with Gladiator aircraft. On my arrival in Athens on 6th November, 1940, the advance elements of this force had already arrived and were ready for action.

Air Policy.

8. That evening I attended a conference with the Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief to discuss the war situation generally. Every pressure was brought to bear on me to employ my force in the same manner as the

Greek Air Force, in close support of the land forces. I appreciated, however, that the best help I could give to the Greek armies was to concentrate my small bomber force on the enemy's disembarkation ports in Albania and the important centres in his lines of communication. I argued that such a plan would do far more to delay his advance than if I attacked his forward elements. If, however, the situation deteriorated considerably, and a break through occurred, I would of course devote the whole of my force to the immediate task of stemming the enemy's advance. I finally obtained agreement on this policy and attacks were directed forthwith on the enemy's back areas. These attacks were maintained at maximum intensity with the few day bomber aircraft at my disposal and the detachments of Wellington aircraft sent over from Egypt to operate during the periods of moonlight. By the end of November, the Italian advance had been stemmed and the Greek forces who had by then completed their concentration were able to take the offensive. The Greek General Staff were most appreciative of the prompt and valuable help we had been able to provide for their gallant soldiers who, with ferocious intensity, had disputed every foot of the Greek soil, and they expressed the view that it was largely due to our assistance that the situation had now become satisfactory.

Selection of Aerodromes.

9. One of the main difficulties I experienced in establishing my force and one which was a constant handicap throughout the whole campaign, was the extreme scarcity of aerodromes suitable for the employment of modern aircraft. There were no all weather aerodromes, and on the mainland of Greece there are few areas in which aerodromes of any size can be made. In the Salonika area, the country is flat and a number of dry weather aerodromes already exists. For political reasons, however, I was not even allowed to reconnoitre these grounds, let alone use them. In the Larissa plain, there were many sites possible but by November, the rains had already commenced and, although I did station a fighter squadron in that area on its arrival, it was soon flooded out and aircraft were grounded for a period of ten days before they could be moved. There are few other sites in Greece except an occasional flat stretch on the coast and a certain number of level areas in the valleys, but the heavy rainfall and the prevalence of low clouds and mist make the latter quite unsuitable for operational purposes during the winter months, at any rate for modern bombers. I was forced, therefore, to concentrate my bomber force on the two aerodromes in the vicinity of Athens, and station my fighter squadrons on whatever grounds I could find near the front line, where they had to operate under conditions of the greatest discomfort and difficulty.

10. The main disadvantage of the aerodromes near Athens was that they were a long way from the front and it meant long hours of flying to and from the targets. They were, however, better drained and were only out of action for a few days after heavy rain. Furthermore, being near the sea, they were not so liable to get completely covered in by low clouds. Criticism has been made that the initial force which was sent to Greece was inadequate and many more squadrons should have

been provided. I should like to point out, however, that even if these squadrons had been available, which they were not at the time, the lack of suitable aerodrome accommodation would, in my opinion, have prevented us from accepting them. During my first week in Greece, I made a tour of all possible sites and on my return pressed the Prime Minister to undertake immediately the construction of all weather runways at Araxos and Agrinion. I pointed out to him the operational disadvantages of the existing situation and that, unless suitable runways were provided near the front, the support that we could give to the Greek nation during the winter months would be severely limited. He agreed fully with any recommendations and arranged for the construction of runways to proceed immediately. After consulting with the head of the department concerned, he informed me that the runways would be completed by the end of January, 1941. (NOTE.—Unfortunately, owing to weather conditions and shortages of material, this forecast proved over optimistic, and neither of these was ready for use when I left the country at the end of April.)

Arrival of the Force:

11. Units of the force continued to arrive throughout the months of November and December and by the end of the year the concentration was complete and the whole command functioning smoothly. When the composition of the force was being considered in the Middle East, it was decided that all the ancillary services such as hospital, works, rationing, etc., should be provided by the Army, with appropriate Army officers on my Headquarters staff to deal with them. This arrangement was particularly successful. Although, even in our respective services, few of us had served together before, officers of this combined staff soon settled down and worked with the greatest enthusiasm and co-operation. This happy atmosphere which existed at the top had, I consider, a beneficial effect on the relationship between the operational units and the actual services themselves who at all times provided our requirements in spite of countless difficulties occasioned by weather and terrain. Similarly, the liaison that existed between the British forces in Greece and the Greeks was at all times close and cordial. Every evening I attended a conference with the Commander-in-Chief and the Greek General Staff to discuss the day's land and air operations and to plan the programme of work for my force and for the Greek air force for the following day. These nightly meetings which were attended frequently by His Majesty the King and General Metaxas, when matters of higher policy were freely discussed, were carried on throughout the whole of my stay in Greece and were invaluable from a co-operation point of view.

Progress of Operations:

12. As regards the actual operations themselves, the Greeks had by now taken the offensive on land and, although handicapped by severe weather conditions and shortage of equipment, had managed to drive all the Italian forces off Greek territory and in some sectors had even advanced into Albania. In the air, our continued bombing offensive against the ports of Valona and Durazzo and the focal points on the enemy's rearward system was having a serious effect on his supply

organisation. In addition, during moonlight periods, our bomber effort was being extended to targets on the mainland of Italy by means of Wellington aircraft detached from Egypt for the purpose, and considerable damage was being inflicted on ports on both sides of the Adriatic. Similarly, our fighter aircraft were establishing a definite atmosphere of moral if not of numerical superiority, in this theatre.

JANUARY-FEBRUARY, 1941.

Operational Difficulties.

13. The new year opened with a deterioration in the weather conditions. Heavy falls of snow and much low cloud made flying conditions difficult and dangerous. A further handicap now appeared in the form of severe icing conditions which were experienced by our aircraft over the mountainous country between their bases and the targets in Albania. To avoid this serious state of affairs, we were forced to route our bomber aircraft by way of the coast. Over the sea, the flying conditions were considerably better, but this longer route limited the operational radius of action of our aircraft and militated against effecting surprise. Furthermore, enemy aircraft opposition was now becoming increasingly stronger, and large numbers of modern enemy fighters were being encountered constantly over the targets. These reinforcements were undoubtedly being brought over in an effort to reduce the scale of our attacks on the enemy's rearward communication system, which were obviously causing him growing embarrassment. Whilst it was comforting to think that our bomber offensive was presumably having the desired effect, this addition to the enemy's fighter strength increased considerably our operational difficulties. It was now necessary to make full use of cloud cover and to adopt a system of fighter escorts for our day bomber raids if heavy casualties were to be avoided. Our lack of modern fighter aircraft and the difficulties encountered in arranging for bombers and their escorts to meet, owing to the distance between our bomber and fighter aerodromes, badly connected by communications, with weather conditions constantly changing, all tended to reduce the operational effort of my bomber force and it became increasingly obvious that, until the fine weather came and more aerodromes were made available, there would be little opportunity for any decisive action on our part.

14. I would here like to pay a tribute to the magnificent spirit in which the pilots and air crews carried out their work during an exceedingly difficult period of operations. Based as they were in the Athens area, every raid carried out by the bomber squadrons involved a preliminary flight of at least 200 miles to the theatre of operations in weather conditions which were at times quite indescribable. Throughout the journey, the pilots and air crews were fully aware that they would meet strong fighter opposition over the targets, and would have to engage the enemy before they were able to deliver their attacks. The number of lucrative targets in Albania was strictly limited and the Italians had by this time been able to concentrate a high scale of anti-aircraft artillery to defend them, and it was seldom that our aircraft came through unscathed. Having carried out their task, the long and arduous journey home had to be

completed. Direction finding aids existed but the very nature of the country made their results unreliable and much had to be left to the skill, judgment and determination of the individual pilots. In spite of all these difficulties, however, squadrons cheerfully accepted all the tasks I gave them and maintained a scale of effort far beyond that which is normally expected from Service squadrons working under more favourable conditions. This same spirit prevailed in the fighter squadrons which were operating from forward aerodromes in conditions of extreme discomfort. Although outnumbered and armed with aircraft inferior in performance to those of the enemy, the pilots never hesitated to give battle whenever the enemy appeared.

Reinforcement Plan.

15. Early in the new year, I visited Cairo in order to discuss the question of reinforcement which was then under revision. Operations in the Western Desert were being brought to a successful conclusion and it was hoped that, by the time the weather conditions had improved in Greece so as to allow occupation of more aerodromes, it would be possible to spare additional squadrons from the Middle East Command. The reinforcement plan envisaged a total force in Greece of fourteen squadrons and I intimated that I would be prepared to start accepting the additional squadrons by 15th January. It was hoped that the whole programme would be complete by 15th April. In planning the reinforcement programme, I again endeavoured to get permission to use the aerodromes in the Salonika area, some of which had remained generally serviceable throughout the winter and could be occupied forthwith. The Germans, however, had commenced their infiltration into Roumania, and the Greek Government were particularly anxious to avoid giving them any idea that we had any hostile intentions in Macedonia which could be directed only against German interests.

The Greek Air Force.

16. As I have stated already in this report, the Greek Air Force had suffered severe casualties in the early stages of the war and by the end of the year, it was reduced to a mere token force of a few serviceable operational aircraft. Promises of the provision of modern fighter aircraft had been received from the U.S.A., and the British Government had agreed also to supply aircraft as and when they became available. Whilst admiring the esprit de corps and enthusiasm of the officers and airmen of the Greek air force, I considered that operationally they had a lot to learn before they would get full value out of really modern aircraft. Similarly, from the maintenance point of view, a considerable amount of re-organisation was necessary before they would be able to maintain a reasonable degree of serviceability. As these American and British aircraft would be provided presumably at the expense of the R.A.F. reinforcement or expansion programme, I was determined to do all I could to ensure that full use was made of them. I had previously discussed the whole problem with H.M. the King of Greece and the Prime Minister and had made the suggestion to them that a British Mission of qualified R.A.F. officers and airmen should be appointed to help them in the reconstruction of their flying service. They welcomed

the suggestion and in due course a mission was provided, and the work of reorganising the Greek air force on modern lines was commenced. In addition to their primary role, the Mission undertook also to reconnoitre and supervise the work on all the new aerodromes which it was desired to use in spring, and much valuable work they did in this respect.

Offer of British Expeditionary Force.

17. Early in January, conferences were held to discuss the possibility of sending a British expeditionary force to Greece, but the Greek General Staff, on learning the limited size of the force that could be made available at the time, decided that its presence would only tend to provoke Germany, whilst it was not strong enough to be able to provide any very material support.

Battle for Valona.

18. The Greek General Staff now realised that, if as seemed probable the Germans intended to make a move through the Balkans, they might be faced in the spring with a campaign on two fronts. They therefore considered it essential that every effort should be made to bring the Italian campaign to an end before such an eventuality arose, or at any rate to shorten their front in Albania as much as possible so as to have troops available to strengthen their front in Macedonia. They appreciated that an advance to a line north of Valona would certainly accomplish the latter and might conceivably, in view of the low morale of the Italians at that time, achieve the former. Consequently, early in February, the Greek armies in Albania started a fierce offensive in the direction of Valona. The preliminary attacks were successful and a certain amount of progress was made. Bad weather, however, intervened and, although the Greek soldiers fought with their customary heroic disregard of danger, the Italians were able to bring up reinforcements and the advance was held up just north of Tepelene.

Change of Air Policy.

19. This 'battle for Valona is interesting from the air point of view inasmuch as a change of policy was forced upon us. Hitherto, my bombing offensive had been directed almost entirely upon lines of communication, ports and aerodromes to the rear, and with the limited means at my disposal was, I think, instrumental in reducing the flow of reinforcements and supplies to the Italian armies in the field. When discussing this new operation both with His Majesty the King and the Commander-in-Chief, they stressed the vital importance of a success, particularly as the morale of the nation had recently been badly shaken by the death of their Prime Minister, General Metaxas. They pointed out that the Greek soldiers on the front had experienced a severe winter and, although full of fight, were not too well off for munitions and supplies. Consequently, it was essential that they should have the utmost encouragement and support that could be provided. This could best be given by my bomber force being used in close support of the Greek attack. I produced all the stock arguments against this form of cooperation, and stressed the fact that by bombing enemy communications leading to the battlefield a greater degree of help would be given to their troops fighting the actual battle.

However, they reminded me that the morale of some of the Greek soldiers had been shaken severely by enemy bombing attacks, and that the success of the whole operation might depend on the stimulus afforded by seeing the Italians treated in the same way. I therefore acceded to their requests.

Reorganisation of Command.

20. It was obvious that, if successful close support was to be provided, a certain reorganization of my forces was necessary. It was quite out of the question to attempt to keep in touch with a fluctuating battle in Albania from a headquarters in Athens, and if immediate and constant support was to be given, my aircraft must operate nearer the front. Accordingly, I formed a wing headquarters in the area of operations, and moved part of my bomber force to a landing ground which was found to be sufficiently dry close to the front. For the first few days, until road communication could be established, this landing ground was provisioned by air. I delegated the command and operation of all the bomber aircraft engaged in this operation, and a fighter squadron, to the commander of the wing, who was in constant touch with the Greek commander conducting the land operations. From a purely local and spectacular point of view, this form of co-operation was an instant and complete success. The morale of the Greek soldiers was raised considerably and I received fulsome praise and appreciation of the work carried out by the pilots. I was even approached by one divisional commander who implored me to order my pilots not to fly so low over the Italians for fear they would be shot down. Our efforts were made much of in official communiques, and I think that, during this particular period, the prestige of the R. A.F. was higher in the minds of the Greek nation than at any other period during our stay. I felt the whole time, however, that this high regard was based on false premises for, although we were invigorating our friends, we were misemploying our aircraft. Later events proved this to be the case. If the weather had been kinder, the Greeks might have succeeded in attaining their objective, but heavy falls of snow and rain held up their progress, and early in March, the Italians who had been able to assemble reinforcements, staged a heavy counter attack which, although held by the Greek forces, destroyed all hopes of capturing Valona. Actually, even if we had employed our bomber force solely on ports of disembarkation in Albania, I doubt very much whether we could have interfered to any great extent with the flow of Italian reinforcements. Our available bomber force was small, the weather was bad, and it was clear that, after their recent defeat in Cyrenaica, the Italians were determined to avoid another reverse which, might have had disastrous results on the nation as a whole. Freed from the necessity of supporting their North African front, they had the troops available, and under the conditions prevailing at the time it would have been difficult to prevent their arrival in Albania.

Arrival of Hurricane Aircraft.

21. During the latter part of this period, an event of considerable importance concerning our fighter strength occurred. The first six Hurricane aircraft appeared in Greece. Up till now, the pilots in our two fighter squadrons had been doing grand work with their

Gladiators, but with the gradual appearance of faster and better types of Italian aircraft, they were finding themselves at a disadvantage, and their re-equipment with a more modern type was most welcome. The first appearance of these well known fighter aircraft over Athens was greeted with the greatest enthusiasm by the local population and it was not long before they justified fully their reputation of being first class fighting aircraft. On their first sortie over the lines on 20th February, they shot down four enemy aircraft, and on 28th February, in company with a formation of Gladiators, destroyed 27 enemy aircraft without a single loss to themselves. This fight, which was the biggest ever fought in the air in Albania, was staged over the Greek lines in full view of both armies. All the enemy aircraft destroyed were confirmed from the ground and caused the greatest jubilation.

MARCH-APRIL, 1941.

Decision to send a British expeditionary force.

22. The opening of this final phase of the campaign in Greece was notable for the decision taken at long last to send a British expeditionary force to the country. The Germans had by now completed their subjugation of Roumania and were repeating their customary penetration tactics this time into Bulgaria. The usual stories of the arrival of tourists and reports of preparations being carried out on aerodromes and lines of communication had been coming in for some time, and it was all too clear that it was only a matter of time before the German armies would be ensconced on the Greek northern frontier. The attitude of the Yugoslavs, on whom the defence of the northern Greek territory depended so much, was strictly non-committal and unsatisfactory. The Greeks, realising fully the seriousness of the situation, were in no doubts that, if they allowed British fighting troops to enter their country, war with Germany was ultimately unavoidable. To their lasting credit, however, they preferred to accept such a situation rather than have to submit when the time came to a tame capitulation in face of overwhelming force. In consequence of this decision, a British force was rapidly assembled in Egypt and the first troops started to arrive in Greece on the 7th of March.

23. I do not propose to give a description of the dispositions or activities of this force, which presumably are included in detail in the G.O.C.'s report, except in so far as they affect the air operations in my command. The general role of this force was to support the Greek armies against a German threat from the north, and much discussion took place as to where this help could best be given. It was eventually decided that, owing to the shortage of time available before it was considered that Germany's preparations would be completed, and to the doubtful attitude of Yugo-Slavia, it would be unwise to move up to the Greek-Bulgarian frontier. Arrangements were therefore made for a defensive line to be prepared and occupied in suitable country west of Salonika, covering the Larissa plain.

Preparations for the Arrival of the B.E.F.

24. As time was all important now, everything had to be subordinated to get this defensive position prepared and

the force assembled. Engineering works on aerodromes which were not of immediate importance had to be stopped so that camps could be constructed, roads repaired, and all the preparations necessary to receive the force could be made. Similarly, in view of the necessity to avoid congestion at the docks, we were forced to use all our available transport to move the incoming munitions, stores, etc. On the arrival of G.H.Q., the army services which had hitherto been under my command, together with the appropriate army staff officers, were transferred to Army control. These commitments and re-arrangements meant a certain amount of disorganisation in my command. The weather, however, was now improving and the landing grounds in the plains and valleys drying up. Therefore, no very great delays in our arrangements occurred.

Reorganisation of R.A.F.

25. The arrival of the British expeditionary force and the establishment of a new front, meant a further reorganisation of any force and a readjustment of my slender resources. Although very few reinforcements had arrived as yet, and my pilots and air crews were beginning to feel the strain of heavy and continuous operations throughout the winter months, an additional burden was now thrust upon us. I still had to provide air support for the Greeks who were being ferociously attacked in Albania by the Italians, spurred on by the presence of Mussolini himself. I had to provide air escorts for incoming convoys, also some form of air defence for the ports of disembarkation of British troops which were becoming alarmingly congested. I had to deliver occasional attacks on the Dodecanese Islands to reduce the scale of enemy attacks on convoys which were becoming embarrassingly frequent, and finally, I had to allocate a portion of my force to support the position in process of occupation by British troops. I attach as Appendix " A " (* not reproduced) to this report a memorandum which I issued on 18th March, pointing out the very parlous condition we were in at that time and describing how I proposed to attempt an almost impossible task. Apart from the fact that all my squadrons were much below strength in serviceable aircraft, due to the heavy casualties we had suffered and the unavoidable inability to keep us supplied with replacements, the re-equipping of my fighter squadrons with Hurricanes was not proceeding as rapidly as I had hoped. Furthermore, the arrival of reinforcing squadrons was not keeping pace with the programme decided upon and those that did arrive were much below establishment in aircraft and equipment. In spite of these difficulties and disappointments, however, I still hoped that time would be on our side and that, when the German attack developed, we would be in a reasonable state of preparedness to meet it.

The Battle of Cape Matapan.

26. On the 28th of March, a refreshing interlude to our troubles on land was afforded by the naval engagement off Cape Matapan. All our bombing squadrons took part and the Mediterranean fleet was able to bring the enemy to battle and inflict on them a smashing defeat.

The Fleet Air Arm.

27. At this juncture it is appropriate to mention the good work carried out by the Fleet Air Arm operating from western Greece. Six Swordfish aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm arrived in Greece on 11th March, and proceeded to Paramythia from where they operated against Valona and Durazzo harbours. Their task was beset by various difficulties. The high country surrounding Valona made a night approach awkward and hazardous, while it was almost impossible to get into the bay undetected. At Durazzo, the water was shallow and the approaches were thereby limited. Pilots reported the presence of night fighters over Valona. However, in spite of all this, several ships were sunk and many more hit and damaged during the period the Fleet Air Arm were with us.

Germany declares War on Yugo-Slavia and Greece.

28. In the meantime, events were moving rapidly in the Balkans. While the Regent of Yugo-Slavia was signing away the freedom of his country, a coup d'etat was staged and we had a new ally. Large German forces had crossed the Danube and were moving into Bulgaria. Time was clearly running short. In spite of every effort, we were only able to arrange one so called "staff conference" with the Yugo-Slavs which did little beyond providing an opportunity for mutual criticism as to our state of unpreparedness for war, before the Germans declared war against both Greece and Yugo-Slavia on 6th April, and commenced invading both countries.

THE GERMAN INVASION.

29. I propose to deal with the air campaign against the German air force in somewhat greater detail than the operations hitherto carried out in Albania. I do this because I believe there are valuable lessons to be learned which, owing to the great disparity between the British and German air forces in this campaign, are shown up in high relief. In addition, our air force gave support to a British army which may, perhaps, consider that the major cause which forced it to withdraw from its positions and eventually evacuate Greece altogether, lay in the lack of this very air support. I was fully aware that the air forces at my disposal could not give the support which the army desired and which we would like to have given. Although I stressed the fact, the full consequences were perhaps not clearly recognised by the army. I feel, however, that if various aspects of our air inferiority are discussed, a more complete comprehension of the issues which are at stake may be gained, and that we may thereby pave the way to a better mutual understanding between the Services, a state of affairs which is essential for the efficient conduct of modern war.

Organisation of R.A.F. Component.

30. At the time when Germany commenced the invasion, my force was organised as follows:

A Western 'Wing—consisting of one bomber and one fighter squadron (Gladiator) supporting the Greeks in Albania.

An Eastern Wing—consisting of two bomber and one Hurricane fighter squadrons supporting the Anglo-Greek forces facing the German advance. The squadrons of this wing occupied landing grounds on the Larissa plain

which, although still soft after the winter rains, was now drying rapidly.

In the Athens area, I had one bomber squadron and one fighter squadron in process of re-arming with Hurricanes. Expressed in terms of aircraft my total serviceable strength in the country was some eighty aircraft, to which were opposed, according to all reports, approximately 800 German aircraft on the Eastern front (Bulgaria and Roumania) and 160 Italian aircraft based in Albania plus 150 based in Italy but operating over Albania and Greece, mainly from advanced landing grounds in Albania.

Disposition of Squadrons in Eastern Wing.

31. The first problem with which I was faced in forming the Eastern Wing was that of disposing the air forces I could -make available. My intention was to provide each squadron with a base aerodrome, and at least one and if possible two satellite landing grounds.

The location of the fighter squadron was influenced by its role. This was threefold:

- (a) to protect the base area, which included the army L. of C., the port of Volos and our aerodromes in the Larissa plain.
- (b) to provide fighter escort to our bombers, and
- (c) to deal with enemy fighter aircraft in the battle area.

Larissa aerodrome was the most suitable from the geographical and communications point of view, and was one of the few aerodromes which was serviceable for all but a comparatively short period during the winter. Accordingly, the fighter squadron was based there with a satellite on a piece of suitable ground 7 miles to the west. At Larissa the camp was well dispersed at the opposite end of the aerodrome to the hangars, which would be likely to attract bombing attack. Aircraft pens of sandbags capable of taking Hurricanes, though open at the top, were constructed in dispersed positions.

32. As regards the two bomber squadrons, it was my original intention to station them at Almyros, where I hoped they would be sufficiently far back to be immune from escorted bomber raids and low flying fighter attack. Unfortunately, the Greek Air Force were already in occupation of this ground and I did not consider it safe for reasons of congestion to station more than one squadron there. The other squadron had to be sited temporarily at Larissa, pending the discovery of a more suitable ground. This was found eventually at Niamata, which in spite of a nearby marsh and consequent malarial infection, and in spite of the poor strategical position it occupied in the event of the withdrawal of an army to the Olympus line, was the only other which possessed a satisfactory surface and was suitable for night flying in the whole area north of Attica. Thus the Blenheim squadrons were located at Almyros and Niamata. At each aerodrome every endeavour was made to gain the maximum dispersion of aircraft and encampments. Except at Larissa, the limits of the squadron camps lay at least a kilometre from the aerodrome. Aircraft were widely dispersed off the

aerodrome at Almyros, but at Niamata this was hindered by a dyke and drainage ditch which protected the aerodrome from the marsh and lake beyond.

33. The one army co-operation squadron which arrived as the German attack developed I stationed at Kazaklar, where it was suitably sited for meeting the army needs. Unfortunately, however, this squadron rarely had more than one Hurricane serviceable at a time and, since the remainder of its aircraft were Lysanders, which it was quite impossible to use in the face of enemy air opposition, the squadron did very little useful work.

34. It should be realised that the German invasion of Greece started at a time when very few landing grounds were fit for use on account of rain. They were just beginning to dry, and had the attack been delayed for even a week, we would at least have had several more satellite landing grounds at our disposal. As it was, the change in the weather favoured the Germans.

Position of Eastern Wing H.Q.

35. Considerations influencing the location of the Eastern Wing Headquarters were:

- (a) ability of the wing commander to make quick personal contact with force commander.
- (b) reliability of communications.
- (c) ease of access to operational squadrons under wing control.
- (d) reasonable propinquity to aerodrome.

The overriding consideration in locating Wing Headquarters supporting the army on this front was that it should be close enough to Force H.Q. to allow the wing commander and the force commander to be within easy personal touch. It was considered undesirable, however, to locate the H.Q. beside Force H.Q., since the combined encampment would be of excessive proportions, difficult to conceal from the air, marked by deeply worn tracks, congested with vehicles and unwieldy to move. The fully established wing headquarters failed to arrive in Greece by the outbreak of the campaign and, therefore, after consultation with the force commander, I decided to locate the skeleton wing headquarters beside Force H.Q. at Elason. The wing commander lived in the force commander's mess and so the closest liaison was formed.

Control of Squadrons.

36. At the end of March, the Army Signals detachment attached to wing headquarters was asked to link up all the aerodromes which were eventually used with direct lines to wing headquarters at Elason. This task was far beyond the scope and resources of the Army Signals detachment, with the inevitable result that land line communications were extremely poor. The factors leading to this state of affairs were as follows. The shortage of Royal Signals personnel resulting from the rapid R.A.F. build-up in Eastern Greece, had stretched to the limit the resources of the Signals Company despatched to Greece in July, 1940. Furthermore, priority for such equipment as was available was given to the forces in Libya, and the situation in Greece was acute, particularly as regards landline cable and wire.

Technical limitations were a further cause. The trunk landline system was limited to overhead alignments which were frequently out of action as a result of hostile air activity, and reliable maintenance was beyond the resources of the Greek Postal and Telegraph administration. Accordingly the Army was faced with providing the R.A.F. with field cable systems which automatically precluded long distance speech facilities. Thus, although the wing had a direct line to Larissa 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 strafing 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 watercourses and the surrounding mountainous country. The escort of Hurricanes destroyed a Dornier. A large proportion of the German forces moving west against the Yugo-Slav armies had to pass through Strumitsa, as well as all the forces advancing on Salonika and those about to deploy themselves before our positions on the Mt. Olympus region. Consequently, as many heavy attacks as possible were made against targets in this area.

On the following day, the bad weather continued but in spite of it, we were able to get some of our reconnaissance machines through, and again in the evening we bombed enemy M.T. in considerable concentration near Strumitsa.

Since the army co-operation squadron was short of aircraft, and since it was considered expedient to avoid sending unescorted Blenheims on long reconnaissances, the fighter squadron was asked to help out with reconnaissance. This squadron was thereafter frequently asked to provide recce aircraft, and although the pilots had had no reconnaissance training, they carried out the most valuable work throughout this period of great stress.

The wing commander had received an appeal to give bombing support to the Greeks who were cut off in the Salonika area. On consulting the force commander as to the relative danger to the army of the various points which the German advance was threatening, the wing commander decided, in view of the limited opportunities for air operations offered by the weather, and in view of his limited air resources, not to dissipate any effort on a front which was already lost in spite of the gallant action still being fought in the Rupel area by the Greeks. Nevertheless, the powerful bombing attacks against Strumitsa were bound to have a direct effect upon the situation in the area of Kilkis and Salonika, since German columns passing through Strumitsa and south to Lake Doiran were attempting to encircle the Mt. Beles position.

On the following day, the weather was again very bad. From the information available, however, it was now clear that very considerable German forces were passing through Strumitsa, some advancing south by Lake Doiran were already in or around Salonika, whilst the greater part continued west and north west and were threatening the Monastir Gap.

The situation was beginning to unfold, contact was expected shortly on the Olympus line but anxiety was felt on account of the ineffectiveness of the Yugo-Slav resistance and the lack of information as to the situation in the north. Every effort was made by our air force to alleviate the pressure on the Yugo-Slav army in order to give them time to withdraw in front of the highly mobile

German forces, and to take up strong positions in the mountains and gorges.

9th-15th April—1st Withdrawal.

40. Communications between Force H.Q. and Wing H.Q. to Athens were now becoming extremely poor, and I was virtually out of touch not only with the wing commander but with the G.O.C., with whom it was essential for me to be in constant communication. Accordingly, I sent an officer of air rank to take over operations in the forward area. The air officer took over at a time when, in view of the intention of the army to withdraw to the Olympus line, plans were being drawn up to withdraw the ground party of the squadron of Blenheims at Niamata and to use it only as an advanced landing ground.

During the next few days, until the complete evacuation of the Larissa plain on the 15th, enemy M.T. columns and concentrations on the roads between Prilep and Bitolj and in the Amyntaion Area were bombed successfully by our aircraft. Our army had had little time to prepare strong positions in this area, which they had hoped would be protected for some time by the resistance of the Yugo-Slavs. A heavy burden was therefore thrown upon our air forces which now virtually had to make up for the time lost by the caving-in of the Yugo-Slav forces. No stone was left unturned to delay the enemy and to shield our ground forces. Meanwhile, our army was engaged in fighting a rearguard action in the areas around Amyntaion and Kleisoura.

No sooner was the withdrawal to the Aliakmon line complete when, on account of the threat to its left flank, it became necessary for the army to make a further withdrawal to the Thermopylae line. Consequently, all R.A.F. units on the Larissa plain had to be withdrawn at once with the utmost speed along roads which were already congested. At the same time, the R.A.F. continued to throw all its power into delaying tactics. On 14th April, the weather improved and German air activity intensified. The Germans had brought their fighters forward to the Prilep and Monastir areas, where their engineers had prepared the necessary landing strips. The German air force was mainly directed in close support of their army, and heavy dive bombing attacks were made against our troops. Our Hurricanes, escorting our bombers in attacking enemy M.T. on the roads near Ptolemais and disorganising his lines of communication, shot down many enemy aircraft.

41. On 15th April, the main effort of the German Air Force was directed against our air force, which had been delaying their military operations and had taken toll of their aircraft. Large numbers of short range fighters made their appearance over the Larissa plain and ground strafed Niamata. In spite of A.A., every aircraft of the Blenheim squadron located there was destroyed. Owing to the breakdown of the Greek observer system, our fighters were at a hopeless disadvantage. When, on one occasion, Me. 109s appeared over their aerodrome at Larissa without any warning, three Hurricanes were attacked whilst taking off and two were shot down. The third shot down one Me. 109. Although, when our fighters were able to get off, they played havoc with the enemy, the situation was obviously untenable. I was

present on the Larissa aerodrome whilst this attack was in progress and I ordered the squadrons to withdraw to the Athens area forthwith.

The Albanian Front.

42. Meanwhile, the wide manoeuvre of the German forces advancing swiftly through the mountain passes north west and west of Skoplje was developing. Their intention was to force contact with the helpless Italian forces near Kukes in northern Albania and to threaten the right flank of the Greek armies in Albania from the Lake Ochrida area. The Greeks, who had fought so valiantly against the Italians throughout the winter months, were hardly in a position to withstand the extra pressure of the German forces. Withdrawal from Albania in the Koritsa area had been considered expedient by British commanders before the German invasion began. However, the Greeks did not take a sufficiently strategic view of warfare to allow such a withdrawal to be carried out without seriously affecting the morale of the army. This was especially the case when wrested from the despised Italian invaders. To give up their acquisition of their own free will and to see it fall once more into the hands of the Italians was for the Greek fighting soldier in the line an intolerable idea. When in fact, the withdrawal was eventually forced upon them, it was too late for the Greeks, reliant upon mule and bullock-cart transport, to conduct an orderly retreat. Morale and organisation collapsed. The Greek army commander at Yannina capitulated to the Germans.

As the situation in this area deteriorated, it became increasingly obvious that it was necessary to withdraw the R.A.F. Western Wing, consisting of one Blenheim and one Gladiator squadron. This was successfully carried out in spite of difficulties which arose as the result of numbers of Yugo-Slav aircraft and personnel arriving at Paramythia aerodrome and requiring fuel and food right up to the last moment.

15th—24th April. 2nd Withdrawal.

43. At this juncture, I decided to abolish the Eastern Wing and take over control of all operations from Athens. I left an R.A.F. officer at Force H.Q. to act as liaison between the army commander in the field and myself. Later, when Force handed over the direction of the withdrawal to Anzac Corps, this officer was attached there. The army commander desired only reconnaissance and fighter protection which we did all we could to provide.

Throughout the withdrawal, the army cooperation squadron carried out what reconnaissance they could. After they had evacuated Kazaklar, north of Larissa, they operated their few aircraft from Pharsala, which by this time was serviceable. Later they operated from Amphiklia, just behind the Thermopylae line. Here there was a Greek Gladiator squadron which was ground strafed and destroyed as soon as the Germans were able to locate their fighters on the aerodromes on the Larissa plain. The army co-operation squadron's Hurricanes were not on the aerodrome at the time of the ground strafing, and so luckily escaped, but I considered it wiser to bring them back to the Athens area.

In view of the complete numerical superiority enjoyed by the enemy, I decided to operate my Blenheim squadrons by night as much as possible in efforts to delay, as far as lay in our power, the enemy's advance. But after the decision to evacuate had been taken, the whole weight of the German Air Force was turned on the Athens area and there was no alternative but to save what air crews and material remained. These squadrons ferried the remainder of the personnel of their squadrons to Crete and carried out their instructions with discipline and courage in the face of great peril.

Direction of Bombing Effort.

44. As far as the direction of bombing is concerned, the operations against the Germans followed four clearly defined phases: The first phase, lasting for about two days, was the disclosure of the enemy plan prior to gaining contact with our troops. During this phase, bombing was directed at previously arranged targets in the Struma valley, including Petrich, Simitli, Gorna Djumaya and Sofia.

During the second phase, in which the direction of the German advance was recognised and in which every possible effort was made to alleviate pressure thrown against the Yugo-Slav armies in the west and the Greek armies in the Salonika area, bombing was directed against supply columns and concentrations of enemy M.T. at the bottleneck around Strumitsa, where the German forces divided into two columns.

The third phase, in which a serious threat developed against the British armies in the region of the Monastir gap, was devoted to the bombing of bottlenecks, railway junctions, stations, bridges, defiles and concentrations of enemy M.T. on roads leading towards the Monastir Gap, from Skoplje, Veles, Prilep to Bitolj.

The fourth phase was the direction of all our air effort in hindering and delaying the advancing Germans to allow our army to conduct a successful withdrawal. All our resources were thrown into the task of alleviating the pressure on our forces in order to allow them the maximum amount of time to withdraw and to prepare new positions.

Targets were chosen at points where it was calculated that the effect of dislocation would be most widespread amongst advancing German columns, and yet close enough to the rear of the German fighting troops to have the maximum immediate effect upon the progress of their advance.

It is impossible to calculate the degree of success which this policy attained, but German prisoners who fell into our hands told woeful tales of the heavy bombing which they had suffered from the R.A.F. throughout their advance. On the night 14/15th, our Wellingtons created much chaos at Veles and broke the bridge across the Vardar. A glance at the map will at once show the importance of a dislocation in the German L. of C. at this point. It is the hinge upon which one, perhaps the greatest, of the main German drives depended.

The continual bombing of M.T. which presented some of the best targets which our Blenheim pilots, accustomed to such targets as dispersed vehicles in the desert, had ever known, caused much confusion

amongst the enemy.

Withdrawal of Fighter Squadrons.

45. The fighters were withdrawn to the Athens area, since no aerodrome north of this was free from ground straffing. The constant lack of intermediary aerodromes made it inevitable that, if our fighters were placed on an aerodrome from which they could give protection to our troops, they were in imminent danger of destruction by ground straffing as soon as they were on the ground. If, on the other hand, they were placed beyond the range of ground straffing, they were unable to protect our troops and the tightly packed columns of M.T. withdrawing along the roads. The utmost efforts were made to give the maximum protection to our continually harassed troops. All our machines were working to maximum capacity. Many of our pilots were working at extreme range, challenging untold odds and at times, after they had used up their ammunition, pursuing enemy aircraft engaged in ground straffing our troops.

On 20th April, approximately 100 dive bombers and fighters attacked the Athens area; my whole force of fighters of fifteen Hurricanes intercepted them, bringing down a total of 22 enemy aircraft confirmed and eight unconfirmed for a loss of five Hurricanes. Small as our losses were, they were crippling to our small force. Even after having been shot down, our fighter pilots would immediately take the air in aircraft which had been riddled with bullets and by all normal standards were totally unserviceable. The courage of these men never failed nor looked like failing. Each day their fellows died, each day they stepped into their battered aircraft, not without a sensation of fear but quite undismayed. Each man was aware of his great responsibility in the face of great odds.

Final Evacuation of Air Forces.

46. On 22nd April, I sent the remaining Hurricanes to Argos. From here, I intended that they should cover the evacuation of the British Army, but the German air attack became so concentrated, that after a number of Hurricanes had been destroyed on the ground on 23rd April, the remainder were ordered to leave for Crete. In Crete, Blenheim fighter patrols were organised to cover the ships evacuating the troops from the beaches. These escorts were maintained throughout the evacuation without respite, and I consider it was due largely to their efforts that such a large proportion of the total British forces in Greece were evacuated.

47. A reference to the evacuation would not be complete without a tribute being paid to the flying boats, both of the R.A.F. and the B.O.A.C. These boats carried out magnificent work ferrying parties of airmen and soldiers both from the mainland to Crete and from Crete to Egypt. A number of their flights were carried out in conditions of the utmost danger, and, throughout, the pilots and crews displayed the utmost gallantry and devotion to duty. From the point of view of interest, the record number of personnel carried in one single Sunderland on one trip was 84.

CONCLUSION.

48. The lessons and conclusions to be drawn from a

campaign of this description are many, and in Appendix " B " (*not reproduced) to this report, I have included those which I consider are of the chief interest. In bringing out the various points that come to my mind, I find it difficult to avoid criticising various aspects of service organisation and doctrines. I would like to point out, however, that these criticisms are made in an entirely constructive sense and in the hope that profit may be gained by our experience.

49. Where we are in possession of totally inadequate air forces, there will always be requests from every direction for the air support which in ideal circumstances we would comfortably be able to provide, and which indeed we would be only too pleased to give. In Greece, we had the minimum,, and in order to produce any results at all, it was essential that all available force was directed in accordance with a carefully conceived plan. As our bombing forces were inadequate to deal decisive and instantaneous blows on the enemy, our policy had to be to sustain our small efforts for as long as possible at points where the resultant dislocation caused the enemy the utmost embarrassment. This we were able to do in Albania, for the Italian air strategy was extremely weak, and the numerical odds were only some four or five to one against us. When, however, we had to face the full force of the German onslaught in addition, the odds became too great in spite of the superb gallantry of our pilots and crews.

50. In spite of the strategic and tactical disadvantages under which our air forces laboured in Greece, in spite of the great enemy superiority in numbers, and in spite of the weather conditions which there can be no doubt were the worst in which British air forces have had to operate throughout the world, a considerable offensive effort was developed. During the Albanian and German campaigns in Greece, our fighters destroyed 232 enemy aircraft confirmed, and a further 112 unconfirmed. Our bombers operating by day and night dropped 550 tons of bombs on the enemy. There was no indiscriminate or area bombing. Each bomb was carefully aimed in order to obtain the maximum effect to ensure that the efforts required to overcome the disadvantages which beset our air crews were not in vain.

51. The participation of our land forces in the Greek campaign was dictated entirely by political considerations, and we were fully aware of our weaknesses both in the air and on the ground. I have heard criticisms made that, under these conditions, we should never have sent a land force to Greece. I attended all the conferences held in Greece to discuss this matter and I would like to say without any hesitation, and in the light of subsequent events, that in my opinion the decision made was a right one and in accordance with the best traditions of our race. There was always the chance that, in the first place, Germany would respect the neutrality of Yugo-Slavia and that her advancing armies might be delayed sufficiently long to enable our forces to be strengthened and our position made secure. On the other hand, if Yugo-Slavia threw in her lot with us, which eventually she did, it was reasonable to suppose that her soldiers, renowned for their fighting qualities, would prove a tough nut for the Germans to crack and they would be able to protect our left flank. In any case, we would be containing large

enemy land forces and air forces at a time when Britain needed a breathing space to perfect her defensive arrangements.

Furthermore, the assistance which we were considering was to be given to a nation which had sacrificed her all in our cause and was herself quite prepared to face complete extinction rather than capitulate. I suggest that it would have been difficult to refuse her this help and our conduct would have been most reprehensible in the eyes of our countrymen and those of important neutrals had we failed to do so.

52. Finally, I would like to express on behalf of each individual under my command, my sincere appreciation of the generous hospitality and friendship which were unfailingly shown to us by Greeks in every walk of life. We will never forget the brave and courteous spirit of these people, whose kindness and sympathy towards us were as great when we finally had to leave Greece to the occupation of the Germans, as when we arrived in November last in the fever and anxiety of the opening days of the war against Italy. It was with a feeling of deep regret but of profound admiration and affection for this heroic people that we left the shores of Greece.

53. Under separate cover, I have forwarded to you the names of officers and airmen who I would particularly like to bring to your notice for their excellent work and devotion to duty during this campaign. I have nothing but praise for all the officers and airmen whom I had the honour to command, whose conduct was at all times exemplary and who, even during periods of the greatest stress, continued to work with that cool and calm efficiency which we have become accustomed to expect from the members of the Service.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

J.H. d'ALBIAC.

Air Vice-Marshal,

Commanding R.A.F. in Greece.

November, 1940, to April, 1941.