

## CHAPTER 4

### GREECE, SYRIA AND THE WESTERN DESERT

WHEN, early in May 1941, No. 3 Squadron moved to Aqir and then to Lydda in Palestine to re-equip with Tomahawk fighter aircraft, the situation in the Middle East was full of anxiety. Cyrenaica and Greece had been lost; an invasion of Crete was imminent; revolt had broken out in Iraq; Syria was a most undependable neutral and the campaigns in East Africa were still in progress. British resources to meet these commitments were woefully inadequate, for during April losses and wastage of armoured vehicles and aircraft had been very heavy. It appeared that the division of meagre ground and air forces to meet threats from all directions would mean a repetition of the unhappy experiences in Cyrenaica and Greece, where the Germans had shown prompt ability to concentrate their forces in decisive numbers.

In Greece Australian participation in air operations was very small, and although Australian ground forces had a major role in the campaign proper, it must be remembered that the army-cooperation squadron (No. 3 R.A.A.F.) originally intended by the Australian Government to work in close concert with these troops was not available because it was then engaged in a purely defensive fighter role at Benina. Repercussions of the Greek campaign, not only in military and political but also in service and interservice spheres, were so important, however, that it warrants some description, albeit brief.

British planning in the event of war had consistently envisaged a Balkans and Levantine *bloc* to resist the Axis. Army Council Instructions dated 24th July 1939 to the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief in the Middle East ordered him to effect coordination with “. . . French military authorities in North Africa, Syria and French Somaliland; the Turkish General Staff; and possibly ultimately the Greek and Rumanian General Staffs”. Air Marshal Longmore’s directive of 11th June 1940 clearly stated his responsibility for any air action necessary in “. . . Turkey, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece . . .” These instructions sprang in part from the guarantees which Britain and France gave to Greece and Rumania shortly after the Italian seizure of Albania in April 1939, and a joint declaration by Britain and Turkey on 12th May 1939, that, in the event of aggression leading to war in the Levant, the two countries would mutually aid each other. This Anglo-Turkish declaration lacked the force of a definite agreement but great efforts continued to be made to secure such a pact because Turkish cooperation was considered particularly important, not only because of military and geographical factors, but also because, as a prominent member of the Balkan *Entente*, she might be able to influence other countries to make a bold stand.

Military and political events during the first year of war made it extremely difficult to achieve the objects of these plans. The guarantee to

Poland did not prevent her being overrun; Britain and France were unable to save Denmark and Norway or even Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg along whose frontiers their main forces had been massed. France herself was tottering before Italy entered the war and the threat of "aggression leading to war in the Mediterranean" assumed real proportions. Neutral opinion throughout the world could not but consider that Britain, heavily beset in her own islands, must use what scanty forces were available in the Middle East for a desperate defence of her own prime needs and would have little to spare to help others. Egypt, which had apparently most to lose, declined to declare war on Italy; Iraq did nothing and Turkey remained a benevolent non-belligerent. On 1st July, before the Battle of Britain began, Rumania denounced the Anglo-French guarantee, while others neutrals were influenced by the apparent moderation of the Vienna Awards. Nevertheless British policy continued to aim at stronger links with Greece and Turkey, although little specific help could be promised at the very time when these countries were in ever-growing need of reassurance.

From mid-1940 despite official protestations of friendly intentions Italy showed increasing hostility towards Greece, but it required the major outrage of the flagrant sinking of the cruiser *Helle* by an Italian submarine on 15th August before General Metaxas, the Greek Prime Minister, inquired of Britain what aid she could give in the event of war. In an atmosphere of doing everything to prevent any Italian excuses for invasion, nothing had definitely been decided when at dawn on 28th October, Italian troops moved into Greece from Albania, hard on the heels of an ultimatum which gave the Greeks only the choice of capitulation or war. General Metaxas immediately invoked the British guarantee and though welcoming the promptness with which a British survey party arrived in Crete to establish a naval base at Suda Bay, he expressed strong desires for more positive (and in particular air) assistance on the mainland itself. On his own initiative Longmore ordered No. 30 (Blenheim) Squadron which consisted of one flight of fighters and one of bombers to proceed to Greece because, as he cabled to the Chiefs of Staff, ". . . it has become politically absolutely essential to send a token force to Greece even at the expense of my forces here". The British War Cabinet, conscious that if Britain did not give positive aid to the Greeks who were fighting with great determination then all hope of gaining Turkey as an active ally would lapse, approved Longmore's act and on 4th November decided to give further air support. Air Commodore D'Albiac,<sup>1</sup> then commanding the air forces in Palestine and Transjordan, was chosen to command the "British Air Forces in Greece", and No. 30 Squadron was to be joined by two Blenheim-bomber squadrons and a Gladiator-fighter squadron as soon as administrative arrangements could be made. Wellingtons from the Canal Zone, staging through Eleusis, were to bomb Italy and Albania on suitable nights.

<sup>1</sup> Air Marshal Sir John D'Albiac, KBE, CB, DSO, RAF (RM 1914-15, RNAS 1915-18, RAF 1918). AOC Palestine-Transjordan 1939-40, RAF in Greece 1940-41, RAF Iraq 1941-42, RAF Ceylon 1942-43; Dep Cdr Med Allied TAF 1944; Dir-Gen Personnel Air Ministry 1945-46. Regular air force off; b. 28 Jan 1894.

This force, although by no means large, taxed the resources of the three Commanders-in-Chief who at this time were also required to undertake the defence of Crete so that Greek forces could be withdrawn to the mainland. Longmore was promised one Hurricane and two Wellington squadrons from the United Kingdom, but until these and other Wellingtons which were to attack Italy from Malta should arrive, he considered that the defence of Egypt, on which all else depended, was in jeopardy. The expedition which sailed for Greece in mid-November was heterogeneous, with most of the engineer, signals and anti-aircraft personnel and equipment hastily collected from army units. However, Nos. 84 and 211 (Blenheim) Squadrons established themselves at Eleusis and Tatoi to bomb Valona, Durazzo and other Italian communications centres in Albania, while the Gladiators of No. 80 attempted to give what support they could from inadequate airfields at Trikkala and Yannina, there being none available nearer the front line.

Meanwhile Hitler, who had not been consulted before the Italian attack on Greece, took no immediate action to mitigate the discomfiture of his ally. Germany, however, was making obvious preparations to control both Rumania and Bulgaria. This would not only permit her to invade Greece almost at will, but also threatened Turkey, a potential ally on which British hopes were still focused. Neither of these countries, however, was willing to commit any overt act which could be construed by the Germans as hostile and, in particular, D'Albiac was not allowed to site airfields in northern Greece which would not only have given some insurance against a German invasion, but would greatly have facilitated his existing operations against the Italians. By early January 1941, with affairs going very well in Libya and Albania, the British War Cabinet was inclined to meet the potential threat from Germany by increasing military aid to Greece in order that she would resist any demands put on her by Hitler. Wavell and Longmore were ordered to visit Greece and discuss arrangements for a somewhat larger British contingent there. During these talks in mid-January Longmore asked for the preparation of airfields in the area south and west of Mount Olympus, adequate to accommodate a proposed eventual force of fourteen squadrons although only three could be sent immediately to join the four already in Greece; Wavell found that General Papagos, the Greek commander-in-chief, required chiefly the very type of units and equipment (i.e. anti-aircraft and transport) of which he himself was desperately short. The final Greek decision was that what Wavell was able to offer would constitute a danger, as it would antagonise Germany without giving any real defence; similarly Longmore's requirements in the Salonika area were not approved, although some airfields would be developed there ostensibly for the rehabilitation of the Greek Air Force itself, and an increase in British squadrons in other areas was welcomed.

There is little doubt that the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East then waging campaigns in East Africa and Libya, which if fought to a conclusion might have turned the Italians completely out of Africa, were



*(Air Ministry)*

Pilots of No. 3 Squadron at Rosh Pinna airfield in northern Palestine during the Syrian campaign. A Tomahawk aircraft is in the background. Left to right: Sgts R. K. Wilson, T. D. Parker, D. Scott, G. E. Hiller; F-O's W. G. Kloster, P. St G. B. Turnbull; F-Lt J. R. Perrin; Sqn Ldr P. Jeffrey; Sgt A. C. Cameron; F-Lt A. C. Rawlinson; Sqn Ldr J. C. Laver (medical officer); F-Os J. H. W. Saunders, W. E. Jewell; F-Lt L. E. S. Knowles; F-O T. H. Trimble.



Tomahawks of No. 3 Squadron on patrol over Syria in July 1941.

*(Air Ministry)*



*(Air Ministry)*

At Rosh Pinna airfield in northern Palestine during the Syrian campaign; pilots of No. 3 Squadron bivouacked in a stand of Australian eucalypts.



*(Air Ministry)*

Back in the Western Desert after the Syrian campaign, a No. 3 Squadron Tomahawk is refueled, September 1941.



Permanent barracks at Pembroke Dock, 1940.

(R.A.A.F.)



Dug-in camp in Western Desert, 1943.

(R.A.A.F.)

somewhat relieved at the Greek decision not to accept the proposed increased assistance. The Chiefs of Staff, however, were still seriously perturbed by German infiltration into Bulgaria and they proposed operations to seize Rhodes and other Dodecanese Islands, while on 31st January Mr Churchill sent a personal appeal to President Inonu of Turkey, pointing out the rapidly growing danger to that country, and offering a minimum contribution of ten squadrons of aircraft and 100 anti-aircraft guns to assist in its defence. This latter offer was refused, again to the temporary relief of Longmore, but the Commanders-in-Chief were told to halt the Libyan offensive after the capture of Benghazi, reduce both air and ground forces in Cyrenaica to bare garrison proportions, and to prepare a maximum force for employment in Greece should events require it. Meanwhile, General Metaxas had died on 29th January and his successor M. Koryzis re-affirmed both the Greek intention to resist and a disinclination to allow British forces in Macedonia until a German invasion actually occurred. The new Prime Minister was, however, anxious to discuss the nature and extent of probable British aid should Germany attack, and accordingly the British Foreign Minister, Mr Eden, as plenipotentiary with General Dill, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, as his military adviser arrived in Greece for a second meeting on 22nd February, following preliminary staff talks in Cairo. At this meeting the Eden Mission and the Greeks devised a plan to oppose a German invasion of Greece, irrespective of the attitude of Yugoslavia and Turkey, although it was hoped that both would aid Greece. This Aliakmon line plan was endorsed by the British War Cabinet, and administrative arrangements for the transport of British forces to Greece went forward while Mr Eden made approaches to the Regent of Yugoslavia and the President of Turkey, soliciting their active help now that Britain was pledged to definite large-scale action. Mr Eden did not reach Athens again until 2nd March when Bulgaria had already formally joined the Axis, and as neither Yugoslavia nor Turkey had agreed to joint action, he counselled immediate withdrawal to and consolidation of the Aliakmon line. The Greeks, however, largely for nationalistic reasons, no longer desired to do this. The first convoys were due to sail from Alexandria on 4th March and if the British were to withdraw their offer of an expeditionary force because of the changed circumstances which now gave little real hope of successful defence, a very swift decision was necessary. Finally the War Cabinet on 7th March authorised the enterprise to proceed, but political rather than military issues were paramount in the interchange of views which reached this agreement. Politically it would have been fatal to withdraw while militarily, although the strategic aim was accepted as correct, there were grave doubts in many quarters as to the ability of the ground, naval and air forces actually available to carry it out.

Such was the broad flow of events which led up to the arrival of a British Commonwealth force in Greece. It will be seen that negotiations, conducted with ever-growing sense of urgency, left much room for recrimination should the enterprise, as it did, fail in the end. Throughout dis-



cussions, not only with Greece but also with Turkey, air assistance was a focal point of interest and very widely differing accounts of these commitments have survived. General Blamey<sup>2</sup> at the time was under the firm impression that twenty-three squadrons would go to Greece<sup>3</sup> and although this was clearly a misunderstanding it was to have many repercussions later. The story is quite clear in the early months when an almost exclusively Italo-Greek war was in progress. Britain offered and did dispatch four squadrons during November 1940. The only additional help projected at this stage was the possible addition of a second Gladiator squadron and this was partly effected by the dispatch of "A" Flight of No. 112 Squadron on 4th December to work in conjunction with No. 80 at Yannina. Confusion began in January 1941 when British fears of imminent German moves towards the Balkans led to intense political activity during which the offer of air squadrons was to be the cement to build up a Graeco-Turkish defence wall against the Axis. The War Cabinet, when ordering the Commanders-in-Chief to open discussions with Metaxas in January, certainly had in mind the provision of three Hurricane and two Blenheim squadrons. Longmore, however, would not commit himself during these discussions to allot a definite number of squadrons, although he clearly implied that, if suitable airfields were available in the Salonika region, an additional ten squadrons might be established there under certain circumstances. In fact, these squadrons, all that could be safely operated from airfields which the Greeks were willing to make available, were provided shortly afterwards to assist the Greek counter-offensive in Albania. Then came the offer of ten squadrons to Turkey, although these would almost certainly be alternative rather than additional to squadrons sent to Greece. During the final discussions with Greece late in February the air picture was obscure. The assumption in London had been that possibly an additional five squadrons might go to Greece immediately and that, depending on events, the total force might rise to a strength of perhaps twenty squadrons by mid-1941. Longmore, however, was concerned at the slow arrival of aircraft for re-equipment and expansion, and at the same time had to meet the threat of *Fliegerkorps X* in Sicily by stationing two of his much-needed Hurricane squadrons to defend Benghazi and Tobruk. He expressed hopes of increasing the force in Greece but could give no firm dates. In the event, only one more squadron transferred permanently to Greece and that only towards the end of the campaign.

Even this calculation by squadrons is very misleading. Apart from the restriction of operations because of weather, none of the squadrons based in Greece was ever at full fighting strength because maintenance facilities were poor, salvage of crashed aircraft almost impossible, and replacements tardy. Also, for the greater part of the time squadrons were dispersed,

<sup>2</sup> Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey, GBE, KCB, CMG, DSO, VX1. (Brig-Gen GS Aust Corps 1918-19.) GOC 6 Div 1939-40, I Corps 1940, AIF in ME 1940-41; Dep C-in-C ME 1941; GOC-in-C AMF 1942-46. Of Melbourne; b. Wagga Wagga, NSW, 24 Jan 1884. Died 27 May 1951.

<sup>3</sup> This matter is discussed in G. Long's *Greece, Crete and Syria* (in the army series of this history), Chapter 1. It is most probable that Blamey was actually informed that Longmore had 23 sqns in the eastern Mediterranean and that these would support the campaign, as indeed all of them did in varying senses, although only a few were physically located in Greece.

because of political considerations, on airfields geographically inappropriate for their chosen role or physically incapable of sustaining a high rate of effort. There were divergent opinions between British and Greeks concerning the tactical employment of aircraft, and, although early in 1941 the squadrons were applied to the Greeks' own expressed needs, they were never in a position to secure decisive results even on the Albanian front. When Germany also entered the war the rapid surge of events on land, entailing constant loss of airfields, put the air forces in the position of being virtually unable to influence the battle at all, although they did valuable work in a defensive role.

As previously stated, Australian representation in these air events was very small, although in skeletal fashion it may serve to indicate the main themes. Seven Australian officers serving in Wellington-bomber squadrons made periodic raids commencing on 7th November against Valona, Brindisi and other supply ports, but although individual sorties were successful the scale of effort was quite inadequate to have any appreciable effect on enemy build-up. The Wellingtons were also required to support the Libyan campaign during December and January; to bomb Rhodes and other Dodecanese islands from which enemy aircraft at this time were successfully blocking the Suez Canal with mines; and then, as a matter of urgency, to attack Tripoli and ports along the Gulf of Sirte through which Italian and German forces were arriving to poise a new threat



to Egypt. Several other Australians flew reconnaissance and convoy-escort patrols during March and April both in connection with the movement of troops to Greece and in preparation for their withdrawal. Only six engaged in the air fighting proper from bases in Greece but their achievements, even accepting the fallibility of contemporary estimates, were out of all proportion to their numbers.

The first Australians to arrive were Squadron Leader Hickey and Flying Officer Graham<sup>4</sup> on 17th November with the first flight of No. 80 Squadron R.A.F. On the next day, following the arrival of the rest of the squadron

<sup>4</sup> Sqn Ldr G. F. Graham, 40049 RAF, 257525; 80 Sqn RAF. Regular air force off; of Gun-bower, Vic; b. Foster, Vic, 10 Mar 1917.

at Eleusis, Hickey moved one flight up to Trikkala where it operated immediately and successfully during the afternoon in a clash with a large Italian patrol. The second flight arrived on the 23rd but the squadron remained on the ground because the airfield was unserviceable.<sup>5</sup>

By the 27th, however, it was possible to move one flight to Yannina on the western side of the Pindus Mountains, and therefore more suitably placed than Trikkala for operations over the battlefield. Several such patrols were flown and on the 28th Hickey led 6 Gladiators in an exhilarating dog-fight against 20 Fiat CR-42's, during which 7 of the enemy were claimed as shot down.<sup>6</sup> Fry arrived at Yannina on 4th December with a flight of No. 112 but by this time Hickey found that it was almost impossible to keep the aircraft properly serviced at Yannina and on the 6th the whole detachment transferred to Larisa, to which airfield the Trikkala flight had already moved. The serviceability rate of the squadron was very low, but although a major repair organisation existed in the Athens area the roads to Larisa were too bad for aircraft to be transferred and accordingly all available manpower on the squadron set to work to do its own repairs, and within a week full serviceability had been restored.

Meanwhile the Italians had strengthened their fighter forces in the frontier area, so early on 19th December fourteen Gladiators were flown back to Yannina. Then occurred a typical incident illustrating not only the difficulties of operations but also the great loyalty and humanity of Hickey who so impressed his contemporaries that Longmore took the unusual step of mentioning him by name in the main body of his dispatch dealing with this campaign.<sup>7</sup> At 11 a.m. that day Hickey set out leading 13 Gladiators for an offensive patrol over the Tepelene area. Five Savoia 79's were met and one was apparently shot down but at the same time one British pilot was severely wounded and forced to bale out. Hickey, ever mindful of his junior pilots, circled the descending parachute until he had attracted the attention of Greek troops nearby. He then flew off to land in difficult country near Argyrokastron and organised a relief party to seek and bring in the wounded man. He led this party over miles of mountain country, frequently under heavy shell fire, and on return he remained all night with the pilot to see that everything possible was

<sup>5</sup> "There were no all-weather aerodromes," writes D'Albiac (*Despatch on Air Operations in Greece 1940-41* (1947) para 9) "and on the mainland of Greece there are few areas in which aerodromes of any size can be made . . . . In the Larisa 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 ten days before they could be moved."

Longmore was in Greece at this time and was anxious to visit No. 80 so he flew up to Trikkala but "the landing ground was waterlogged so we had to land at the adjacent aerodrome of Larisa". (A. M. Longmore, *From Sea to Sky, 1910-45* (1946), p. 241.)

<sup>6</sup> There is more than the usual difficulty in assessing the results of air fighting in Greece because some of the operational records are palpably reconstructions after the event, the originals being lost or deliberately destroyed during the withdrawal. There is an air of self-justification about some of these documents which inhibits full credence. However, in this instance the operations record book records "seven shot down—confirmed" (but confirmed by whom?). Longmore's dispatch (para 30) gives No. 80 Squadron credit for shooting down 42 enemy aircraft with 12 more unconfirmed for the loss of 5 pilots before the end of 1940. On the other hand enemy records make this total, and by implication the score of 28 Nov, appear to be inflated.

<sup>7</sup> The fragmentary records give few details of Hickey's combats, but in his official dispatch, Longmore, in paying tribute to No. 80's successes against the Italians concludes: "I cannot speak too highly of their gallant commander, Sqn Ldr W. J. Hickey D.F.C., who was killed in an air fight on December 21st."

done for his comfort. Only then did he return to his squadron and within twenty-four hours he too died of wounds received during a similar battle. On the 21st he was leading the ten serviceable Gladiators in an attack against six Italian bombers over Argyrokastron when very heavy enemy fighter escorts (54 CR-42's according to the operations record book) intervened. Greek eye-witnesses alleged that he was fired on by an enemy fighter while descending by parachute but it is impossible to tell whether his wounds were caused in this manner or during the combat itself.

Meanwhile the Blenheim bombers with whom there were only two Australians exerted what pressure they could from Menidi and Eleusis airfields against the Albanian front and communications in the rear. Both these airfields were 200 miles distant from the Italian lines and the absence of fighter escort made it necessary to restrict attack mainly to those periods when cloud cover was available. Severe icing conditions and almost continual cloud over the Pindus Mountains added to the normal hazards; on 7th December of nine aircraft which set out to bomb Valona only two found the target, five losing their way and two crashing in the mountains. The alternative route along the coast reduced considerably the radius of action of the bombers and also lessened the possibilities of surprise attacks. Graham, Fry and Flying Officer Cullen<sup>8</sup> remained with the fighters at Yannina and Larisa but during the severe winter months the Gladiators could do little.

The Greek General Staff planned a counter-offensive for February with the object of capturing Valona. Success would not only give much greater strength in combating increasing Italian pressure but would help to secure the left flank in the event of a German drive from the north. Accordingly strong pressure was put on D'Albiac to employ his squadrons in a ground-support role during this campaign. He agreed somewhat reluctantly and established a wing headquarters in the forward area. Detachments of Nos. 30, 84 and 211 Squadrons moved up to Paramythia so that their activities could be coordinated with those of the fighters based at Yannina. The Greek offensive opened on the 13th and the morale of front-line soldiers reached its greatest height with the success of the fighter pilots in low strafing attacks and in a series of victories which were won over their own lines.<sup>9</sup> It is impossible to escape the conclusion that this enthusiasm engendered a situation in which hero-worshipping local authorities exaggerated the results of air battles although the pilots, who were rarely in a position to see their victims crash, put forward their claims in good faith. Thus on 14th February Cullen and Graham joined in a fight during which seven CR-42's were reported shot down over Tepelene, and six days later Cullen personally destroyed two more Italian fighters over Paramythia. On 27th February newly-acquired Hurricanes of No. 80 were given the credit of shooting down nine CR-42's but the greatest air battle of this period developed on the following day when nine Hurricanes (No.

<sup>8</sup> F-Lt R. N. Cullen, DFC, 39967 RAF; 80 Sqn RAF. Regular air force offr; b. Newcastle, NSW, 5 Jun 1917. Killed in action 4 Mar 1941.

<sup>9</sup> Congratulatory messages were received almost daily, although AVM D'Albiac seems to have believed throughout that his aircraft were being misemployed. (See his dispatch, para 20.)

80 Squadron) and nineteen Gladiators (No. 112 Squadron) met large numbers of Italian fighters and bombers over the front line. At the end of an hour and a half No. 80 claimed fifteen victories and No. 112 another ten, and of these Cullen was credited with five—a squadron record—and Fry with two.<sup>1</sup> Cullen was building up a formidable reputation for on the 23rd he had shot down a chance-encountered enemy seaplane, and on 3rd March south-west of Corfu he shot down four more aircraft bringing his assessed victories during the campaign to thirteen. His tally was to go no higher, however, for on the following day while escorting Blenheims he was shot down, although Fry claimed one of the seven enemy aircraft destroyed in the same action.

Early in March bad weather interfered seriously not only with air operations but also the general progress of the Greek offensive so that the advantage gained on the ground could not be exploited. The decision to send a Commonwealth expeditionary force to Greece also increased the demands on the small air force (now seven squadrons). No. 84 devoted a considerable number of sorties to attacking airfields in the Dodecanese from which British convoys might be threatened and Flight Lieutenant Boehm<sup>2</sup> met with some personal success in attacks on Maritza and Calato on Rhodes. The great event of the period, however, was the Battle of Matapan. On 27th March an Australian pilot of No. 230 (Sunderland) Squadron (Flying Officer Bohm<sup>3</sup>) reported a force of Italian cruisers and destroyers eighty miles east of Cape Passero in Sicily, steering south-east and possibly en route to attack convoys then passing between Alexandria and Greek ports. On the basis of this and subsequent reports D'Albiac ordered Nos. 84 and 113 at Paramythia to provide striking forces. On 28th March Boehm led five Blenheims on this task and although two were forced to return through engine trouble he continued with the others and personally claimed two direct hits<sup>4</sup> on a cruiser with 500-lb semi-armour-piercing bombs.

By 6th April when the Germans invaded Greece, of the Australians only Fry and Graham were left. In the fortnight which followed, as the operational record book of No. 112 somewhat feelingly states: "The squadron went out alone with from twelve to sixteen Gladiators to meet anything

<sup>1</sup> Official and semi-official British and Greek accounts of this action give figures varying between 25 and 35 enemy aircraft destroyed. D'Albiac in his dispatch (para 21) states quite categorically "... destroyed 27 enemy aircraft without a single loss to themselves . . . . All the enemy aircraft destroyed were confirmed from the ground and caused the greatest jubilation". On the other hand Santoro in *L'Aeronautica Italiana nella IIa Guerra Mondiale*. p. 189, is particularly scathing about this particular claim. Italian records purport that only 46 aircraft were lost from all causes over Greece and Albania during the first quarter of 1941. Whatever the exact results of this battle it had a tremendous effect on Greek morale: "Civilians and soldiers passing us in the streets made the Sign of the Cross, saying 'Long life to you. Thank the Almighty who sent you to us,'" reported the CO of the RAF Wing.

<sup>2</sup> F-Lt D. G. Boehm, 39452 RAF; 84 Sqn RAF. Regular air force offr; of Torrens Park, SA; b. Adelaide, 11 Sep 1915.

<sup>3</sup> Sqn Ldr R. S. Bohm, 40596 RAF. 230, 547 and 190 Sqns RAF. Regular air force offr; of Rockhampton, Qld; b. 18 Jan 1915.

<sup>4</sup> Although the operational record book of 84 Sqn gives circumstantial detail thus: "Much yellow and black smoke was seen issuing for over ten minutes, the ship steered towards the other vessel and then stopped"—it is practically certain that no damage was caused. Cunningham in his *Dispatch on the Battle of Matapan* (para 11) pays, however, high tribute to the indirect effect of the Blenheim attack.

which might come out of Albania, or in other words, the Italian Air Force . . . these Gladiators were not armour plated, had no self-sealing tanks, and were nearly 100 miles per hour slower than the Italian machines . . .” On one occasion Fry is reputed to have engaged alone fifteen enemy aircraft over the airfield at Yannina. The collapse of Yugoslavia and of the Greek armies in the west followed by the withdrawal of Commonwealth forces to the Thermopylae line forced the gallant Gladiators to abandon Yannina and at the same time brought Athens within range of German fighters. Hopelessly outnumbered, a handful of fighters were allotted the task of defending the capital and the Piraeus, at first from Eleusis and later from Argos, but in the absence of satisfactory early-warning procedures continuous enemy ground-strafting attacks took their toll.<sup>5</sup>

On occasions the Hurricanes performed with great credit but they were unable to withstand the enormous enemy superiority in numbers and disposition. On 24th April (four days after the Greek Government stated its inability to resist further and asked the British to withdraw) to avoid almost certain destruction on the ground, the aircraft were flown to Crete. Here they were joined by Blenheim fighters hurriedly transferred from Aden to protect convoys evacuating troops from Greece. Flight Lieutenant Whittall<sup>6</sup> of No. 203 Squadron R.A.F. was lost during a typical battle on 27th April when three Blenheims challenged vastly superior enemy forces searching for British ships, and the Blenheims were withdrawn after one week. Only No. 112 remained on Crete when the German airborne assault began and the Gladiators were restricted almost entirely to sorties over the airfield and to usually vain attempts to intercept enemy reconnaissance aircraft. Fry figured in one more hopeless but magnificent episode when he attacked single-handed a large force of Me-110's but he was shot down and captured before the few remaining serviceable aircraft were withdrawn to Egypt on 19th May.

British air power in Greece had thus achieved little in a military sense. The force was never strong enough or suitably based to wage a successful offensive against enemy supply centres and lines of communication as D'Albiac intended during the first phases. There was much individual heroism but little direct benefit from the brief employment in a tactical role to support the Greek offensive against Valona. When the main struggle opened military reverses prevented the basing of air forces in forward areas, just as previously physical and political factors had done.

<sup>5</sup> On 15 Apr HQ BAF Greece signalled HQ RAF ME that sqn strengths were:

113	Sqn—nil	Blenheims
33	”	5 Hurricanes
11	”	8 Blenheims
84	”	1 ”
211	”	5 ”
80	”	11 Hurricanes and Gladiators
30	”	4 Blenheim-fighters
112	”	12 Gladiators

<sup>6</sup> F-Lt J. C. Whittall, 39356 RAF; 203 Sqn RAF. Regular air force offr; of Worcester Park, Surrey, Eng; b. Neutral Bay, NSW, 10 Jan 1916. Killed in action 27 Apr 1941.

This circumstance and the fact that the campaign generally was going badly entailed almost entire concentration on purely defensive measures in rear areas, so that, entirely off balance, and denied the general protection which would have given them some measure of tactical freedom, the squadrons were eventually withdrawn. This experience was in apparent contrast to enemy air forces which in superior numbers could concentrate effective blows on any chosen target from numerous safe and well-supplied bases disposed to the west and north of Greece. In effect Greece duplicated the bitter disappointments of the Norwegian campaign a year earlier, although this time there was a marked tendency for air to act as a scapegoat for defeat. Political and public reaction especially in Australia and New Zealand was distinctly unfavourable and crystallised later into a vehement (though vague) demand that Dominion troops should not be committed to battle "without adequate air support". Relations between junior elements of the three fighting Services also suffered,<sup>7</sup> while at higher levels the army and navy which had suffered considerably under enemy attack, and although appreciating the difficulties under which the air force had operated, demanded a much higher degree of purely defensive air effort.

Thus during May 1941 the British military position in the Middle East deteriorated further. However, after some anxious days, the revolt in Iraq was suppressed, and Tobruk held firm thus preventing an immediate enemy invasion of Egypt; but an attempt to recapture Salum and Capuzzo miscarried, relations with Syria worsened and by the end of the month Crete was in German hands. The enemy now possessed, in Cyrenaica, Crete and the Dodecanese, air bases from which Alexandria, the Suez Canal, dumps and depots in the Delta area, and Suez (the main British disembarkation port) could all be attacked in strength. Air power largely replaced sea power in the eastern Mediterranean basin, for naval vessels and convoys were subject to crippling attacks once outside the very limited range of fighters operating from Sidi Barrani, while conversely Axis convoys to Libya could move with relative freedom across the central Mediterranean, subject only to the attacks of submarines and such aircraft as could operate from Malta. That all the dangerous potentialities latent in this situation did not lead to complete collapse was due in part to reinforcement and rapid adaptation of British forces, and partly to German pre-occupation with plans to invade Russia, together with failure to employ their air strength in the Mediterranean against vital objectives. After the capture of Crete, German air units of *Luftflotte 4* were withdrawn from the Balkans, and *Fliegerkorps X*, formerly based on Sicily, moved to Crete and Greece. Targets in Egypt and the Levant were attacked only sporadic-

<sup>7</sup> 112 Sqn, which was withdrawn to Crete and attempted first to prevent enemy reconnaissance and then to meet the tremendous shock of invasion, gives a typical example in its O.R.B.: "Throughout this period our lot was made no easier by the attitude of the army units round our aerodrome . . . the spiteful and ignorant criticisms which were hurled at us were most annoying . . . To the army an aircraft on the ground was an aircraft fit to fly."

This bad feeling manifested itself far from the battleground. In Australia aircrew trainees previously known with somewhat affectionate irony as "Menzie's Blue Orchids" became overnight "Daffodils—beautiful but oh so yellow!" a designation which, at least at first, had a savage bite.

ally, and while Tobruk bore the brunt of *Fliegerkorps X* attack, British strength was allowed to recover. The task of subduing Malta was now left to the Italian Air Force and the departure of the Germans from Sicily saw an almost immediate resurgence of British power in the central Mediterranean.

Before these developments became clear, however, it seemed necessary that the Syrian question should be resolved.<sup>8</sup> While the Levant had remained remote from the battle area nothing had been done to challenge the Vichy forces, but now, should the Germans succeed in establishing themselves there, the oilfields of Persia and Iraq and the Suez Canal would be threatened. Although the British Chiefs of Staff were well aware at this time that Germany was probably intending to attack Russia, the possibility of the enemy securing Syria with relatively small forces could not be overlooked. Syria had already sent arms to the Iraqi rebels and during May had allowed German aircraft to refuel at Syrian airfields. The British Chiefs of Staff ordered General Wavell to negotiate with General Dentz in Syria for joint action against any German incursion, and meanwhile himself to prepare the largest practicable force should he be forced to take independent action. Wavell had immediately available in Palestine only one incomplete cavalry brigade and General Legentilhomme's Free French Division (actually at less than half a division in strength) whose employment in Syria was certain to intensify resistance. However, independent action by the R.A.F. was authorised by the Air Ministry and began on 14th May when Blenheims of No. 84 Squadron attacked German aircraft near Damascus.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously in the House of Commons Mr Eden warned Vichy of the consequences of allowing Germany facilities in Syria, and on 18th and 19th May airfields at Rayak and Palmyra were bombed, while Hurricanes strafed Damascus airfield. Late in May definite orders came from England to invade Syria, and while Wavell with difficulty mustered a military force, air attacks on airfields and fuel installations were continued on a small scale until 8th June when the invasion of Syria began.

A British offensive in the Western Desert designed to relieve Tobruk was already projected for mid-June, so both land and air forces available for a Syrian expedition were small. The incomplete 7th Australian Division,<sup>1</sup> the 5th Indian Brigade, some composite mechanised units and the Free French Division operated under the command of General Maitland Wilson.<sup>2</sup> One light-bomber, one army-cooperation, one Fleet Air Arm, and two and a half fighter squadrons were initially under the command of

<sup>8</sup> G. Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria* (in the army series of this history), Chapter 15 gives a full description of the tangled background and negotiations concerning Syria.

<sup>9</sup> They were escorted by 2 Tomahawks of 250 Sqn RAF flown by recently-arrived Australian pilots.

<sup>1</sup> One brigade was in Tobruk.

<sup>2</sup> Field Marshal Lord Wilson, GCB, GBE, DSO. GOC-in-C Egypt 1939, Brit Tps in Greece 1941, Allied Forces in Syria 1941; C-in-C ME 1943; Supreme Allied Cdr, Medit Theatre, 1944. Regular soldier; of London; b. 5 Sep 1881.



Air Commodore Brown,<sup>3</sup> air officer commanding in Palestine and Transjordan, though he could call, if necessary, on No. 84 (Blenheim) Squadron in Iraq and the heavy bombers based in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> The total number of aircraft immediately available was seventy and there was some doubt whether No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F., which had suffered a plethora of accidents and setbacks during its conversion to Tomahawks, would be ready,<sup>5</sup> but fortunately these difficulties were overcome in time. Action by these small forces against a French air force and army, numerically superior, far stronger in tanks and capable of reinforcement from France or the Balkans, contained all the elements of a gamble, but it was hoped that divided loyalties and lack of purpose would detract from French resistance.

Great emphasis was placed on the importance of capturing the main Syrian airfields which lay chiefly in Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon, or in the depression between Aleppo and Lake Tiberias. Thus, while one brigade of the 7th Australian Division was to drive along the coast from Haifa to Beirut and the other via Metulla and Merdjayoun, the 5th Indian Brigade was to follow the Transjordan-Damascus railway line; when Sheikh Meskine and Deraa had been captured, the Free French Division was to pass through and advance on Damascus. Besides the desirability of securing the airfields and thus forestalling enemy occupation, quasi-political motives played a part in this division of a very small force into three columns. It was thought that if an apparent show of force were made in several directions, then the French sense of military honour might not be outraged and a speedy capitulation or mutual agreement would be possible. There were many, however, who warned that should the French decide to resist, their defensive task would be much simpler by having to oppose relatively weak uncoordinated columns instead of a focused attack. Furthermore, the local populace might be apathetic but the French were almost certainly commanded by officers and N.C.O.'s who mistrusted Britain because of her naval actions at Oran and Dakar and who regarded De Gaulle at best as a wilful, would-be patriot whose irresponsible defiance of Vichy was making the lot of Frenchmen everywhere more difficult than otherwise it might have been.<sup>6</sup>

The general R.A.F. plan was to give maximum support to these advances, while providing air protection for the ports of Haifa and Cyprus. The particular tasks soon became defined as:

<sup>3</sup> AVM Sir Leslie Brown, KCB, CBE, DSC, AFC. Comd Adv Wing, West Desert 1939-40; AOC Palestine, Transjordan 1941-42, 84 Gp Allied Expeditionary Air Force 1943-44; Comdt School Land/Air Warfare 1944-49. Regular air force offr; of Durban, S Af; b. Pietermaritzburg, S Af, 11 Jul 1893.

<sup>4</sup> Sqns under Air Cmdre Brown's command were: 80, Hurricanes; 208, army cooperation (1 flight Hurricanes); 3 RAAF, Tomahawks; "X" Flight, Gladiators; 815, FAA (Cyprus).

<sup>5</sup> Air Marshal Tedder wrote pessimistically to the Air Ministry on 3 Jun: "I am afraid that No. 3 with their Tomahawks will not be ready for operations. The Australians are very unexpectedly making very heavy weather over the Tomahawks, but I have applied a little ginger which, I hope, will have the necessary effect." Apart from this delay in mastering the new type, six experienced pilots of No. 3 were detached to Cyprus between 25 May and 3 Jun to fly interception patrols in Hurricanes of No. 80 until that squadron received replacement pilots.

<sup>6</sup> G. Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Chapter 16, gives the details of army planning and of the issues involved.

1. Provision of close and direct support for the army.
2. Fighter cover for 15th Cruiser Squadron operating off the Syrian coast.
3. Attack on strategical objectives: ports, shipping and oil installations.
4. Attack on French airfields to limit enemy air opposition.

All of these tasks were to be achieved with a force of seventy aircraft so that at first it was impossible to decentralise or attach any units to military forces as was requested. However, air liaison officers were appointed to each of the two army headquarters to forward requests for specific air action to Brown who was anxious to provide air support where practicable and when resources permitted. Base facilities and flying conditions were infinitely better than those encountered in Greece and there was some confidence that all of the main tasks could be done by judicious juggling. Later, as will be seen, when reinforcements became available, a limited decentralisation was possible.

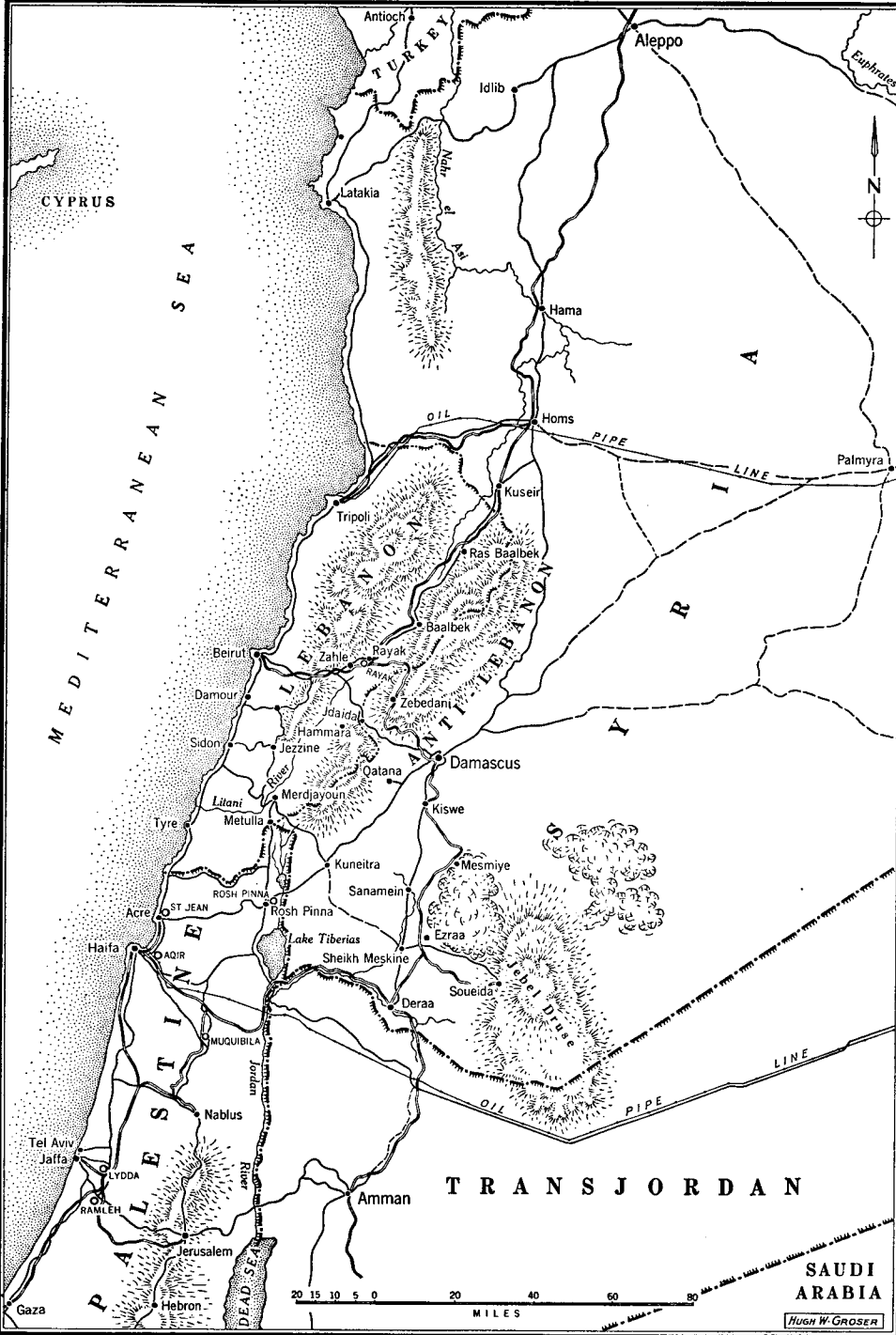
For No. 3 Squadron the Syrian campaign opened with an attack by five Tomahawks on Rayak satellite airfield at 6.15 a.m. on 8th June. The pilots found no French aircraft in the air, but shot up six Morane fighters on the ground. The same evening four Tomahawks escorted Blenheims attacking oil tanks at Beirut. Until the 21st the squadron was constantly switched from one pressing duty to another, according to priorities determined by Air Headquarters Palestine and Transjordan. During this period 199 sorties, an average of fifteen daily, were flown with varying emphasis on interception duties; naval patrols; tactical reconnaissance; strafing of enemy land forces; protective patrols over forward troops; bomber-escort duties and escort for reconnoitring Gladiators.

The task of defending their own air base and other possible targets in Palestine was a light one for the Australians because French air effort was consistently directed against army dispositions and naval units. Between 9th and 16th June only eleven sorties were flown to intercept aircraft reported over the Haifa-Tel Aviv area. There was practically no incident connected with these interception flights, because on some occasions the alleged raiders could not be found, on others the reported aircraft proved friendly, and on 10th June the hostile aircraft against which two Tomahawks were directed was shot down by ground fire before they themselves reached its position. Naval patrols were more frequent for it was early apparent that the Fulmars could not protect 15th Cruiser Squadron,<sup>7</sup> and between 9th and 21st June the Australians flew sixty-two protective sorties.

On the 14th, when our naval units were off Tyre and Sidon to prevent French ships from bombarding the 21st Australian Brigade, eight Tomahawks on the afternoon patrol arrived just in time to find eight Ju-88's, with Italian markings, at 15,000 feet preparing to attack our ships. Led by Squadron Leader Jeffrey the Tomahawks attacked immediately and with success, Flight Lieutenant Perrin, Flying Officer Saunders and Jeffrey himself, each shooting down one bomber. Confidence in the Tomahawk,

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<sup>7</sup> 3 Fulmars were lost and 2 destroyers damaged during the first week.



MEDITERRANEAN SEA

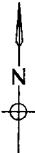
PALESTINE

TRANSJORDAN

SAUDI ARABIA

HUGH W. GROSER

20 15 10 5 0 20 40 60 80 MILES



Euphrates

CYPRUS

Antioch

Aleppo

Idlib

Latakia

Hama

Homs

Palmyra

Tripoli

Kuseir

Ras Baalbek

Baalbek

Beirut

Zahle

Damour

Sidon

Hammara

Jezzine

Litani

Merjayoun

Tyre

Metulla

Rosh Pinna

St. Jean

Acre

Haifa

Qaafir

Muqibila

Nablus

Jerusalem

Hebron

Gaza

Amman

Kiswe

Kuneitra

Sanamein

Lake Tiberias

Sheikh Meskine

Deraa

Souaida

Ezraa

Mesmiye

Zebedani

Royak

RAVAK

DAIDAN

Oil

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sorely tried during the re-equipment period, was now fully restored,<sup>8</sup> but no further chance came on these patrols over the 15th Cruiser Squadron to prove its worth in combat. On the 16th, Swordfish aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm, based in Cyprus, torpedoed and sank a large French destroyer, *Le Chevalier Paul*, off the Syrian coast, as the Frenchman, in company with another destroyer, was attempting to reach Beirut from the western Mediterranean.

In the initial stages of the land campaign objectives were quickly taken, but after a few days French resistance stiffened. The Australians were halted beyond Merdjayoun, and although Legentilhomme's division advanced as arranged from Deraa to within twelve miles of Damascus by 12th June, it could make no further progress in the face of determined Vichy counter-attacks supported by medium tanks. Accordingly as early as 10th June direct support from the R.A.F. was requested and during the following ten days No. 3 flew fifty-one sorties against Vichy motor transport and tanks. On the 11th, after scouting over Beirut harbour, seven Tomahawks attacked enemy concentrations confronting the right wing of the 7th Australian Division near Merdjayoun. The following day Legentilhomme's column was to have been aided by low-flying attacks on enemy forces between Sanamein and Mesmiye but unfortunately the three aircraft lost formation and the patrol was abandoned. On the 15th strong French counter-attacks opened at Merdjayoun, Kuneitra and later at Jezzine. A noon-reconnaissance patrol made that day by Australian Tomahawks discovered twelve tanks and thirty motor vehicles near Sheikh Meskine, and the same evening these were successfully attacked by seven aircraft, Jeffrey and Flying Officer Turnbull<sup>9</sup> in addition each shooting down a Glenn Martin bomber. Targets in the Kuneitra area were attacked twice on 16th June and the following day, when Kuneitra itself was again in French hands, Tomahawks patrolled the roads leading into the town. The strain on fighter resources was, however, so great that only four aircraft could be spared for this duty although the French success threatened British lines of communication. The Indian brigade continued to attack at Damascus, however, and on 20th and 21st French forces retiring towards Beirut were harassed by the Tomahawks which damaged or set on fire many trucks and light fighting vehicles. On this occasion the Australian aircraft for the first time met resistance from the ground and three aircraft returned with slight damage from anti-aircraft fire.

Another result of French counter-attacks, which were made with air support, was the demand for protective patrols over our forward troops, but although forty-three sorties were flown over Legentilhomme's forces near Kiswe and the Australians in the Damour-Jezzine sector, no action resulted. Ground troops had great difficulty in distinguishing French aircraft from British because of a confusing similarity between their identification roundels. However, although the protective patrols were too light to

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey's combat report comments: "It appears that a Tomahawk can easily catch a Ju-88 and manoeuvre so as to make any attack desired by the pilot."

<sup>9</sup> Sqn Ldr P. St G. Turnbull, DFC, 481. 3 and 75 Sqn; comd 76 Sqn 1942. Electrician; of Glen Innes, NSW; b. Armidale, NSW, 9 Feb 1917. Killed in action 27 Aug 1942.

prevent very determined French attacks, casualties in the sector were light.<sup>1</sup> Bomber-escort duties which accounted for twenty-seven sorties were also uneventful until the evening of 19th June, when, after bringing the Blenheims safely home, the Tomahawks dispersed eight Glenn Martin aircraft which were attempting to bomb Australian troops near Sidon.

The grim defence and determined counter-attacks of the French soon dashed any hopes of a solution by agreement and also exposed the faults of the plan to advance with three weak columns. Accordingly both reinforcements and reorganisation were deemed necessary to secure a speedy decision in Syria. One brigade of the 6th British Division and an artillery regiment became mobile and joined the invading force, which on 18th June was placed under the command of I Australian Corps (Lieut-General Lavarack<sup>2</sup>). Three days later an independent force ("Habforce") began to move from Iraq against Palmyra. Air reinforcements included No. 45 (Blenheim) Squadron and No. 260/450 (Hurricane) Squadron<sup>3</sup> and this at last permitted a limited decentralisation of the air squadrons, No. 208 Squadron and "X" Flight being allocated to Habforce and No. 3 Squadron to I Australian Corps after the fall of Damascus on 21st June.

The revised army plan was to capture Beirut by an outflanking move, but Vichy resistance remained stubborn both west of Damascus and farther south in the Jebel Druse and Merdjayoun areas. Wellingtons from the Canal zone began on 23rd June to increase the air pressure on Syria, and No. 3, although now freed from naval patrols and the air defence of Palestine, still had a variety of tasks under I Australian Corps. Four attacks involving twenty-five sorties were made against tactical targets, one on 22nd June against Vichy transport south of Jdaida and the others, after an interval of other pressing duties, early in July in the Rayak area. The policy of strafing French airfields was also resumed with great success, and although the Australians were not always available for these duties, forty-two such sorties were flown and the squadron destroyed seven aircraft and damaged thirteen on various days. Airfield defences were poor and the Tomahawks had complete freedom of action. In one particularly damaging attack on Kuseir on 29th June, a hangar was set ablaze, a petrol and an ammunition dump destroyed and many trucks damaged, while

<sup>1</sup> Unit histories of Australian formations engaged in this campaign say relatively little about air matters, and only annoying enemy attacks are cited. Typical instances are: W. B. Russell, *The Second Fourteenth Battalion* (1948), pp. 57-8: "D Company was moved forward to the Merdjayoun road which had been reached earlier by one section of 16 Platoon. On the way the company was very heavily strafed by enemy aircraft but was sheltered by terraces and a dry creek bed . . . the enemy continued bombing and strafing by day and night, but Pte Clarrie Smith . . . was the only casualty." R. L. Henry, *The Story of the 2/4th Field Regiment* (1950), p. 126: "All gun positions of both batteries during the 13th of June were subjected to heavy bombing and strafing attacks. Some Troop positions received as many as five bombings. The roads were strafed by enemy fighters and the Navy received sticks of bombs on several occasions. Altogether it was a hectic day for everybody. Few escaped these experiences. Slit trenches were dug earnestly by all and the value of their protection was learned fully. Despite all the metal dropped and shot at the gun positions and along the road only three casualties occurred. Some Troop positions looked like ploughed fields after bombing attacks."

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Gen Sir John Lavarack, KBE, CB, CMG, DSO. (1914-18: Brit Army and AIF.) GOC S CD 1939-40, 7 Div AIF 1940-41, I Aust Corps 1941-42, First Aust Army 1942-44; Head Aust Military Mission Washington 1944-46. Governor of Qld since 1946. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Brisbane, 19 Dec 1885.

<sup>3</sup> Formed by wedding the aircraft and pilots of 260 Sqn RAF, newly arrived from U.K. without its ground organisation, to 450 Sqn RAAF which had no pilots.

Flying Officer Knowles<sup>4</sup> also shot down a Glenn Martin encountered en route. Six Tomahawks also on 2nd July attacked and sank two Loire flying-boats in Tripoli harbour. The Blenheims were escorted on six raids (involving seventy-seven sorties), two of which on 28th and 29th June were to aid Habforce which was making very slow progress in its advance on Palmyra. On each occasion the Tomahawks flew first to Damascus, refuelled and then flew on with the Blenheims to Palmyra. On the 28th, after the bombing was completed, the nine escorting Tomahawks patrolled east of Palmyra and encountered six Glenn Martins attacking Habforce units. Battle was joined and all six bombers were shot down, Flight Lieutenant Rawlinson destroying three, Flying Officer Turnbull two and Sergeant Wilson<sup>5</sup> the remaining one. Two of the four offensive patrols undertaken during this period by No. 3 had also been in support of Habforce on the 25th and 26th, and, on the first of these, eight Tomahawks had little difficulty in shooting down three of four Potez 63 aircraft found fifteen miles south-west of Palmyra. No opposition was encountered on the other patrols, although it was against this ground force that the French made their most persistent and successful air attacks.

On 1st July one brigade of the 10th Indian Division also began to move from Iraq up the Euphrates River towards Aleppo. Habforce captured Palmyra on the 3rd after a bitter defence by a small French group which held out against four regiments, and, while Legentilhomme moved against Homs, and a brigade of the 6th British Division towards Rayak, the 7th Australian Division reinforced by battalions of the 6th Australian Division prepared to assault Damour and Beirut. French hopes were now centred on the arrival of reinforcements by sea,<sup>6</sup> and all available bomber and torpedo aircraft in Palestine and Transjordan Command stood by from the beginning of July to attack any Vichy convoy. When eventually the attempt was made, naval Swordfish from Cyprus sank one troopship, and the others turned back. This could not, however, be foreseen and early in July, despite the loss of Palmyra, the French seemed determined to fight on. A conference on 4th July to re-arrange air support for the army transferred No. 3 and a newly-arrived Blenheim squadron (No. 45 R.A.F.) to operate under the control of the 7th Australian Division during the battle for Damour which opened on 6th July. No. 3 remained at Rosh Pinna and No. 45 at Muquibila, respectively forty and seventy-five miles from the Australian divisional headquarters at Sidon. This occasioned some difficulty in coordinating actual flying with army requirements. Personal contact between the three headquarters was impossible and direct landline communication could be effected only between the airfields and corps headquarters and thence to divisional headquarters via the general operational line. Traffic congestion between corps and division

<sup>4</sup> F-Lt L. E. S. Knowles, 456; 3 Sqn. Regular air force offr; of Canberra; b. Hawthorn, Vic, 18 Aug 1917. Killed in action 22 Nov 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Sgt R. K. Wilson, DFM, 407088; 3 Sqn. Clerk; of Glen Osmond, SA; b. Dulwich, SA, 11 Sep 1919. Killed in action 9 Dec 1941.

<sup>6</sup> Turkish permission for the passage of French troops through Turkey to Syria had been refused on 1 Jul.

caused such frequent delays that special wireless-telegraphy links were provided between divisional headquarters and squadrons, and between divisional headquarters and the air liaison officers with the forward brigades. Despite these measures delays continued, although communications did improve after 8th July. Another weakness in these arrangements for close air support lay in the absence of targets really suitable for the aircraft available. The terrain in which the Vichy forces were entrenched provided excellent cover and adequate dispersal areas. Road movement was rare except by night, and as the enemy was falling back steadily towards supply bases, he required few road convoys.

The principal employment of No. 3 during this culminating phase of the Syrian campaign was to escort the Blenheims of No. 45. Cloud frequently hampered operations and on the 6th caused one raid to be cancelled as the fighters could not find the bombers at the appointed rendezvous. A total of forty-six sorties was flown without incident until the 10th, when en route to Hammara, five Dewoitine fighters attacking from below shot down three Blenheims before the seven escorting Tomahawks could intervene. The Australians then dived and all five Dewoitines were destroyed, two by Turnbull and one each by Flying Officer Jackson,<sup>7</sup> Pilot Officer Lane<sup>8</sup> and Sergeant Hiller.<sup>9</sup> This unfortunate incident, the first occasion on which a bomber had been lost while escorted by No. 3, was due largely to the nature of the country, mountainous and split by deep gorges, against which background it was difficult to see even the Blenheims.

During the same period fifty-one sorties were flown to attack traffic on the roads leading to the Vichy positions and on 11th July No. 3 joined with No. 260/450 Squadron in an attack on airfields in the Aleppo-Hama area. On this the last day of the campaign the squadron suffered its first loss in combat, Flying Officer Fischer<sup>1</sup> being shot down by a Dewoitine which was itself promptly destroyed by Flying Officer Gibbes.<sup>2</sup> Fischer managed to crash-land unhurt, hid in an Arab village and subsequently returned to the unit.

Although all operations in Syria were suspended soon after midnight on 11th-12th July, squadrons remained at immediate readiness until the 14th in case negotiations with the Vichy authorities should break down. By comparison with past campaigns and others yet to come, the fighting in Syria was of minor importance, but it had special interest in that not only were Australian army, air and naval units engaged, but, as in Greece, an Australian commander and staff directed the main operations; and in the principal attempt at air cooperation, No. 3 Squadron and the

<sup>7</sup> Sqn Ldr J. F. Jackson, DFC, 493. 3 and 4 Sqns, comd 75 Sqn 1942. Grazier; of St George, Qld; b. Brisbane, 23 Feb 1908. Killed in action 28 Apr 1942. Jackson's Strip at Port Moresby was named after him.

<sup>8</sup> F-O E. H. Lane, 406002; 3 Sqn. Engineering cadet; of Yallingup, WA; b. Busselton, WA, 9 Jan 1919. Killed in action 22 Nov 1941.

<sup>9</sup> Sgt G. E. Hiller, 407075; 3 Sqn. Clerk; of Glenelg, SA; b. Glenelg, 27 Feb 1916. Died of wounds POW 2 Dec 1941.

<sup>1</sup> Sqn Ldr F. Fischer, DFC, 250626; 3 Sqn. Student civil pilot; of Melbourne; b. South Yarra, Vic, 1 Feb 1920.

<sup>2</sup> W Cdr R. H. M. Gibbes, DSO, DFC, 260714. 450 Sqn; comd 3 Sqn 1942-43, 80 Wing 1944-45. Salesman; of Manly, NSW; b. Balgowlah, NSW, 6 May 1916.

7th Australian Division were intimately concerned. From an air viewpoint the outstanding success was the use of fighter planes to destroy aircraft on the ground; this compelled the enemy to retire to rear airfields. This neutralisation of enemy airfields proved of much greater help in diminishing the scale of French air attack than protective patrols to the front-line troops,<sup>3</sup> and together with lessons learned from the attempts at close support during the last week of the campaign, was to become the basis for future air tactics.

In the meantime No. 3 moved on the 20th to assist in the defence of Beirut and to give additional cover to Cyprus where an advanced landing ground was prepared. The German Air Force, however, although possessing adequate bases in Crete and the Dodecanese Islands, made little attempt at offensive action in the Levant, and for the Australians the last half of July passed uneventfully. No operational flying was recorded by the squadron during August, although three precautionary flights were made to show the flag over Arab villages evincing signs of unrest. This lull in combat duties permitted practically everyone to take a few days leave, but intensive flying training was also given to new pilots. Many of the experienced personnel, notably Perrin, returned to Australia or were withdrawn for other duties, and the replacement pilots obtained either from Australia or the Middle East Pool had not been to operational training units. No. 3 Squadron was then ordered to return to the Western Desert, and leaving Rayak on 3rd September, moved first to Amiriya and then to Sidi Haneish where it was ready to resume operations on 13th September. The composite No. 260/450 Squadron had gone to Haifa to undertake static-defence duties following the stand-down on 14th July, but flew only eleven uneventful interception sorties during July.<sup>4</sup> On 10th August the R.A.F. ground complement for No. 260 reached Haifa and five days later No. 450 moved to Rayak to sort captured French equipment. This task ended on 13th September and the Australian ground crews then stood by hoping that at last pilots would be available to enable the squadron to begin operating. A few weeks later, however, on 3rd October the squadron was detailed as a temporary Hurricane operational training unit to train pilots for Palestine and Transjordan Command, but although this activity commenced on the 11th, it had short duration, for after only eight days, the Australian ground crews were posted to Burg el Arab to be employed on maintenance duties. The only pilot on strength even at this late date was Steege temporarily attached from No. 3 as commanding officer.

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<sup>3</sup>The Australian sectors were relatively free from air attack after airfield raids were resumed. The French could still, however, strike at Habforce. There were never sufficient fighters available for continuous defensive patrols and it was quite coincidental when one of the many small-scale French raids was intercepted.

<sup>4</sup>This sqn operated for 10 days only and flew 61 sorties against airfields, 20 on offensive patrols over Palmyra, 30 on naval patrols and 6 on bomber-escort duties during the Syrian campaign. Effort was chiefly against the more remote French airfields and normal procedure was to fly to Damascus, refuel, attack the objective and return either to Damascus or to base. On one occasion (9 Jul) the aircraft flew first to Damascus and then to Palmyra before setting out on the patrol proper.



The misfortunes of No. 450, which had been in the Middle East since May and was not to become fully operational until February 1942, upset the planned development of R.A.A.F. strength in that theatre. It was not simply a lack of Australian pilots, who were indeed concurrently serving in considerable numbers on R.A.F. squadrons, which caused this setback, nor any lack of cooperation on the part of R.A.F. authorities. The main difficulty arose through the interaction of the serious military position in the Middle East with the determined policy of the Australian Air Board to keep apart, for reasons which will be given below, personnel of its permanent air force and those airmen trained under the Empire Air Scheme. Negotiations for the dispatch of more R.A.A.F. squadrons to the Middle East had begun in November 1940 when, in consultation with General Blamey, Air Marshal Longmore suggested to Air Marshal Sir Charles Burnett that a second army-cooperation squadron should be sent.<sup>5</sup> Late in January 1941 the Air Board accordingly offered to form an army-cooperation squadron under the provisions of *Article XV* of the Ottawa Agreement, and Air Ministry gladly accepted. When the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East was informed he suggested that each flight of the new squadron should first be attached to No. 3 in the field; his main problem in creating new squadrons was the lack of operational training facilities due to a shortage of service-type aircraft. Earlier in January 1941 the Air Ministry had already suggested the formation of a R.A.A.F. fighter squadron by the linking of R.A.A.F. pilots to experienced ground staffs of No. 91 Squadron R.A.F. then on their way to the Middle East—the resultant squadron to be known as No. 450 Squadron R.A.A.F. Some confusion was caused in these three-cornered negotiations between the Air Board, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East, and the Air Ministry because the terms “army cooperation” and “fighter” were used to describe the same type of squadron,<sup>6</sup> and before repeated signals had established clearly that two and not one R.A.A.F. squadrons were proposed, the chance to form one immediately with the ground staffs of No. 91 had gone. The Air Board, however, was willing to send ground staffs for both Nos. 450 and 451 to the Middle East and requested accommodation on the first practicable convoy. These men finally left Sydney on 9th April, and arrived in Egypt on 3rd May, the necessary aircraft and equipment promised by the United Kingdom to await them. It was unfortunate that they arrived in the Middle East at a time of such great difficulty with Libya and Greece lost, Crete threatened, and every experienced squadron desperately short of aircraft to continue the battle. Equipment could only be given to squadrons capable of operating immediately and this the two new Australian formations, numerically intact but composed entirely of tradesmen experienced only on training airframes and engines, were manifestly unable to do.

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<sup>5</sup> At this time 3 Sqn RAAF was an “army-cooperation sqn”.

<sup>6</sup> “I call it an army-cooperation squadron,” wrote Longmore to Burnett, “but what I really want is a squadron of close-support fighters.”

With No. 3 withdrawn for re-equipping it would have been possible by stiffening the new units with experienced key personnel from that squadron to have brought them all to battle-worthy condition with little delay, and this was the declared intention of Air Marshal Longmore and his successor as Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East, Air Marshal Tedder.<sup>7</sup> The Australian Air Board's ruling, however, that there must be no inter-postings between Home Defence and *Article XV* squadrons, except as a temporary measure,<sup>8</sup> made this impossible, and Headquarters R.A.F. in the Middle East, hard pressed both for resources and time, inevitably had to maintain experienced squadrons rather than develop two units whose members, excellent material though they were, were almost entirely non-regular, had only just completed initial training, and had never seen a Hurricane engine.

On 13th June Tedder explained his difficulties in a cable to the Air Ministry:

Complete segregation of No. 3 RAAF and 450 and 451 squadrons present insuperable difficulties. Personnel came without General Duties officers and we must provide leavening experienced officers. Have been instructed further by Air Board, Melbourne, to post surplus other ranks personnel from No. 3 RAAF to 450 and 451. As stated in my (previous signal) unable to form these units as squadrons in immediate future and am using them to supplement depots. Flight Lieutenant Steege from No. 3 RAAF already posted to command 450. 451 still in abeyance. No flight commanders yet appointed owing to extent which Command below establishment in trained pilots . . . .

and on the following day came a statement of policy from the Australian Air Board:

Apparently a misunderstanding exists regarding posting of 3 Squadron personnel from that Squadron to fill vacancies in your Command.

Subject always repeat always to the immediate operational requirements which may necessitate a temporary attachment of personnel from one unit to another our policy is to keep units of Australia's permanent Air Force up to strength from Australia mainly to allow of exchange and promotion within the home defence units and E.A.T.S. establishments remaining in Australia. There is no means other than by exchanges with R.A.F. personnel by which we can give Australians here any chance of getting war experience which is essential to this force. Exchange with R.A.F. is difficult and takes time. Number 3 Squadron is a unit of Australia's permanent Air Force serving in the Middle East and while we have no objection in emergency to you attaching personnel from this squadron to other units as a temporary measure it must be understood that such attachments cannot continue indefinitely and personnel should return to No. 3 Squadron or to Australia as soon as the situation will permit. This policy is applied to such officers and other ranks as otherwise we are faced with large numbers of very efficient personnel who will be forced to remain here for the duration of the war or at best until we have a surplus of personnel Australia which we cannot foresee until next year. Postings between R.A.F. and E.A.T.S. Australian units is a matter for you and is no concern of ours other than that Australians should be employed when possible in accordance with the arrangements reached between U.K. and Australian Governments under

<sup>7</sup> Marshal of RAF Lord Tedder, GCB. Dep AOC-in-C RAF ME 1940-41; AOC-in-C RAF ME 1941-43; Air C-in-C Medit Air Cd, 1943; Dep Supreme Cdr, Europe, 1944-45. Regular air force off; of London; b. Glenguin, Stirling, Scot, 11 Jul 1890.

<sup>8</sup> On 12 Mar Air Board advised RAAF Liaison Office London that "although infiltration sqns are in name Australian, there will be no inter-posting between these sqns and regular RAAF sqns except as a temporary measure".

the E.A.T.S. agreement to implement the clause in that agreement which requires that Dominion personnel serving with the R.A.F. will be identified by forming where possible units consisting of 100 per cent Dominion personnel. Air Ministry is however not forced to appoint officers of Australian origin to command or otherwise serve in R.A.A.F. E.A.T.S. Squadrons if Australians with suitable experience are not available for these appointments. It is realised that in the early stages of formation of units sufficient experienced Australians are unlikely to be available. If our policy is not clear to you or if any part of this signal is not understood please signal me urgently.

A week later, Tedder replied that the Air Board's policy was now understood and that he would endeavour to maintain it in principle. He also explained the use he had made of the surplus personnel of No. 3 and sought permission to employ pilots of No. 3 outside the Australian squadron, justifying his request by instancing the help given by the R.A.F. to keep No. 3 up to strength:

3 Squadron has no personnel surplus to establishment except photographers and wireless operators. With regard to pilots, 3 Squadron has only 14 effective pilots posted by you as against establishment of 26 with 10 reserves. In past R.A.F. and S.A.A.F. pilots have been posted to keep 3 Squadron at reasonable operational strength as replacements from Australia are always delayed. 11 Australian E.A.T.S. now in 3 Squadron. There are 8 other R.A.A.F. pilots posted to 3 Squadron by you in this Command including W Cdr McLachlan who is too senior and is acting as Australian Liaison Officer. 5 pilots are operationally tired, 3 of these being returned to Australia and intended to rest 2 as C.O.'s 450 and 451 Squadrons. 2 pilots are medically unfit for over 3 months. Surplus senior N.C.Os from No. 3 Squadron are being exchanged with A.Cs of No. 450 and 451 Squadrons. As these squadrons deficient senior N.C.Os and such exchange will introduce new blood into 3 Squadron. It is not considered good policy for disciplinary purposes to have large body of Australians serving under English N.C.Os.<sup>9</sup> Urge no objection to using few R.A.A.F. pilots outside 3 Squadron when we are forced to provide large numbers to keep 3 Squadron operational strength. Cannot return personnel held against 3 Squadron establishment to Australia until replacements personnel arrive here.

A further exposition of the Air Board's policy followed on 30th June.

Subject always to operational requirements surplus photographic personnel and wireless operators in number 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. should be returned Australia. If wireless operators must be retained to meet your operational requirements they may be retained as a temporary measure and they should be attached to Air Headquarters Middle East for employment as required not repeat not posted and should remain on strength of number 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. Regarding pilots for number 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. you have seventeen R.A.A.F. pilots, excluding McLachlan, Steege, Pelly, East,<sup>1</sup> Boyd and Bracegirdle,<sup>2</sup> and six pilot reinforce-

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that early in November 1940 Sqn Ldr McLachlan of 3 Sqn sought full powers of a commanding officer "on the grounds that Australian airmen were likely to feel resentment if punished by an officer of another service". HQ RAF ME on 11 Nov passed this request to the Air Ministry. The Air Board, however, when consulted ruled that the *Visiting Forces Act* and *King's Regulations* adequately covered the situation, and the request was refused.

Partly from a reputation gained in the previous war and partly because of their somewhat independent attitude, Australians were frequently regarded as not amenable to the finer points of discipline. There were inevitably minor troubles but on the whole the fears implicit in Tedder's signal were never realised. Under good NCOs or offrs of any nationality Australians worked well and hard; restiveness appeared only in slack periods or when control itself was faulty.

<sup>1</sup> Sqn Ldr V. East, AFC, 572, 3 Sqn, 1 Rescue and Commn Sqn. Student; of East Fremantle, WA; b. Perth, WA, 9 Aug 1918.

<sup>2</sup> Sqn Ldr B. L. Bracegirdle, 484, 3, 4 and 75 Sqns; comd 4 Fighter Sector HQ 1943; 11 and 42 Sqns; comd Air Defence HQ Darwin 1945. Regular air force offr; of Canberra; b. Melbourne, 25 Sep 1918.

ments are now en route. Consequent upon changes in number 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. establishment you absorbed reinforcement pool therefore we will send fifteen further pilots to complete present establishment and pool.<sup>3</sup> Australian Empire Air Scheme pilots sent to you in accordance with the Empire Air Scheme agreement should not repeat not be employed in No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. except as temporary measure and if so employed should be attached to No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. not repeat not posted as they belong to R.A.F. As regards surplus N.C.Os No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. these should be returned to Australia subject again to your operational requirements. If however these surplus N.C.Os have to be employed in 450 or 451 Squadrons they should be attached and returned to Australia as soon as airmen of those squadrons are suitable for promotion. If for any reason R.A.A.F. ground personnel sent to you for Empire Air Scheme Squadrons such as 450 and 451 have to be employed in No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. they should be attached as a temporary measure pending the arrival of ground personnel from Australia to fill No. 3 Squadron's establishment. Such ground personnel will be sent as soon as possible embarking about late July.

More cables passed between the Middle East and Australia during July but none solved the basic difficulty that until a proportion of fully-experienced fighter pilots and technical tradesmen were available it was militarily unsound to allocate any of the all-too-few fighter aircraft to No. 450 in order to give it operational status. The ground crews of this unit continued to gain experience on modern aircraft by employment at various aircraft depots.

Tedder had already on 25th June attempted to bring No. 451 into action by emergency means. Flight Lieutenant Pelly was ordered to take his ground staffs, hitherto employed at No. 103 Maintenance Unit, forward to Qasaba to take over the Hurricanes, transport and equipment of No. 6 (Army Cooperation) Squadron R.A.F. Pelly himself was due to return to

\* The Air Board was perplexed and at a great disadvantage because of the rapidity with which the establishment (i.e. the calculated optimum strength in all categories of personnel and types of equipment) of sqns were changed according to the rapidly shifting needs of war. Remote from the scene Air Board found it impossible to forecast requirements in advance and difficult to supply men suddenly required by such changes.

The establishment problems of 3 Sqn, perhaps, were larger than those of the average sqn. When first the possibility of an army-cooperation sqn going overseas was raised in Nov 1939, the Air Board applied itself to Establishment ME/809 which called for 20 officers, 205 airmen plus locally recruited labour. When 3 Sqn actually sailed in Jul 1940 the revised war needs of a Lysander sqn were 24 officers and 268 airmen (War/ME/115) and it was fully up to strength. As No. 3 never operated with Lysanders it shed some personnel and the Air Board on 17 Jan 1941 agreed that it should conform to War/ME/153 suitable for a Gladiator sqn. At the same time the reinforcement pool of pilots to offset losses was increased to a strength of ten. The Air Board began to prepare No. 450 to conform with War/ME/123a (normal Hurricane-fighter sqn) and No. 451 to War/ME/153, but on 7 Mar HQ RAF ME equipped No. 3 with Hurricanes and requested that it work to War/ME/123a which called for a considerable increase in pilots. The question then arose in London whether all three Australian sqns should be working to War/ME/123a but McNamara (RAAF Liaison Offr) was somewhat nonplussed when Air Marshal Hollinghurst, Director of Organisation, Air Ministry, ruled on 15 Mar that Nos. 3 and 451 as A.C. sqns should really be equipped according to War/ME/177. On 4 Apr HQ RAF ME formally requested that all three R.A.A.F. sqns conform to War/ME/123a.

In all this (and there were other changes later) there was ample scope for misunderstanding. The related topic of the pilots reinforcement pool provided more. When No. 3 converted to Hurricanes it virtually incorporated all pilots then in the Middle East. McNamara asked the Air Ministry for its future requirements. The Director of Personnel, Air Ministry, unaware of any difference between permanent R.A.A.F. and E.A.T.S. pilots advised that so long as the existing monthly allocation of 30 pilots, 30 observers and 45 WT/AG from Australia to the Middle East continued, no difficulty was seen in getting pilots for all three Australian sqns. Even though this allocation was due to end in Jul 1941, it was expected that the output of E.A.T.S. schools in Rhodesia would supply sufficient R.A.A.F. pilots. No request was made therefore for the reinforcement pool for No. 3 to be replenished. Neither McNamara nor the Air Board at this stage questioned the basis on which this calculation was made by the Air Ministry.

All parties were obviously working in good faith and trying to meet each other's needs, but there appears to be a distinct gap in awareness of what those needs really were.

Australia and immediately handed over command to Squadron Leader Pope.<sup>4</sup> Hence the squadron's career began with inexperienced ground crews,<sup>5</sup> poor equipment<sup>6</sup> and a motley collection of pilots assembled from various parts of the command, many of whom proved completely unsuitable for army-cooperation duties.<sup>7</sup> At first only one pilot was an Australian, but four more arrived on 11th July and slowly the proportion of Australians increased. This unit, whose members had no squadron, desert or operational experience, went straight into No. 253 Wing to provide together with one fighter (No. 229 R.A.F.) and one light-bomber squadron (No. 113 R.A.F.),<sup>8</sup> the total needs of Western Desert Force in air support. An exercise on 11th to 12th July showed that No. 253 Wing was still very inexperienced and a large training program was instituted to overcome the generally inadequate state of air-to-ground cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

Between 15th July and 15th August No. 451 flew seventeen practice tactical reconnaissances, four practice photographic sorties, thirty-two sorties on dummy artillery shoots and twelve on live shoots. The problem of recognition from the air of land forces was explored, and courses in radio-telephone, clock-code observation and ground-signals code were begun by the squadron with ground operators from Australian, Polish and Indian artillery units. Two series of live shoots with batteries of the 9th Australian Division showed that Hurricanes with radio-telephones could be used effectively for artillery cooperation (Arty/R).

The general lines upon which army-cooperation squadrons should work was given much thought in mid-1941. Tedder ruled that consequent on the arrival of German fighter aircraft of superior performance in the

<sup>4</sup> Gp Capt V. A. Pope, DSO, 37071 RAF, 208 Sqn RAF; comd RAF Stn Haifa 1940-41, 451 Sqn 1941, 231 Sqn RAF 1942-43, 644 Sqn RAF 1944, RAF Stn Rivenhall 1944-45, 906 Wing RAF 1945. Regular air force offr; b. Newcastle-on-Tyne, Eng, 26 Jul 1912.

<sup>5</sup> There was at this time in the sqn only one w-o; one f-sgt on loan from No. 3; 8 sgts, of whom 6 were from No. 3; and 28 cpls, of whom 4 were from No. 3. The senior airman in each flight was a cpl. Workshops were in charge of a sgt. There was no engineer offr, nor w-o, nor even a f-sgt.

<sup>6</sup> For one month there were insufficient parachutes for all pilots; for two months insufficient flying clothing and life-saving waistcoats. Oxygen supplies were very low.

<sup>7</sup> Of 45 pilots posted to 451 Sqn before Oct 1941, no fewer than 14 were reposted as quite unsuitable, another 10 left the squadron for various reasons and 9 had not yet arrived. Pope himself had not flown a Hurricane before he joined the squadron.

<sup>8</sup> Replaced on 18 Aug by 24 Sqn SAAF.

<sup>9</sup> One Australian offr, Capt J. W. London AIF was serving with 200 Air Intelligence Liaison (AIL) Section, British Army, which was attached to 451 Sqn.

It is interesting to note that I Aust Corps AIL Section was at this time still serving with 3 Sqn and continued to do so until recalled to Australia in Jan 1942. This section had been formed as part of the Intell Corps early in 1940 with an establishment of 2 offr and 6 ORs. After experience with 6 Sqn RAF in Palestine the section joined No. 3 when it was established at Helwan during Sep 1940. At McLachlan's request all his pilots were given thorough army-cooperation training which included not only practical exercises with 6 Aust Div but also written examinations; at that time importance was placed on a thorough knowledge of army terminology and proficiency in Morse code, then the most reliable means of maintaining ground/air communications.

During Wavell's first campaign the section was placed under HQ Western Desert Force and worked conjointly with the G (Air) Staff of that HQ and HQ XIII Corps. Liaison was maintained with 4 Indian Div and at one period an Australian offr was also attached to HQ 7 Armoured Div. When 19 Aust Inf Brigade arrived in the desert the section was linked by land line to the forward companies of 2/11 Aust Inf Bn.

As No. 3 progressively changed its role from full army-cooperation to fighter duties, the section was concerned almost entirely with Tac-R but accompanied the sqn to Benina and even briefed from the ALG at El Aghella.

After the first withdrawal in Libya the section accompanied 3 Sqn to Palestine and worked with No. 3 throughout the Syrian campaign, also briefing RAF light-bomber sqns both for direct and indirect support.

Western Desert there must be husbanding of resources during periods when the land battle was static. Individual aircraft must no longer carry out lengthy tactical reconnaissances, and such tasks would only be done under cover of adequate fighter protection. The operations of No. 451 conformed almost completely to these principles and between 1st July and 14th October only 372 sorties were flown—divided by task into 253 tactical-reconnaissance, 115 photographic-reconnaissance and 4 artillery-cooperation flights. Naturally during the first month aircraft were rarely sent beyond the enemy lines, but in August, as casualties had been negligible and photographs were required of enemy dispositions around Tobruk, the Hurricanes began to penetrate more deeply into Cyrenaica. Pope inaugurated these Tobruk flights on 9th August when he made an intensive reconnaissance of the eastern and western perimeter sectors, and fifteen similar sorties were completed successfully before the end of the month, each time strong escorts of fighters being provided. Photographs taken during these flights were immediately taken to Bagush (H.Q. Desforce), developed, and then flown back to Tobruk by squadron aircraft to be dropped on the landing ground there after a slow approach from the sea at 1,000 feet with wheels down so that the friendly nature of the visit would be evident.

The success of these Tobruk sorties led on 13th September to a proposal that two Hurricanes should proceed to Tobruk on attachment<sup>1</sup> while the main squadron party continued to operate as before until the siege was raised. Increasing operations on short-range reconnaissances which were authorised to be conducted by pairs of aircraft (one to watch and one to ward) brought a number of casualties at this time, mainly due to the reinforcement of eastern Cyrenaica with enemy fighters to support an enemy thrust timed for mid-September. On 3rd September one pilot was lost over Salum after his companion had engaged three Me-110's but had been forced to break away when his guns jammed. Ten days later an aircraft which set off alone, failed to return and on the 14th Pilot Officer Hutley<sup>2</sup> and Sergeant Rowlands<sup>3</sup> were attacked by six Me-109's. Hutley crash-landed safely with wheels up and was rescued by an armoured patrol, and Rowlands was forced down to ground level and chased most of the way home by the enemy aircraft, finally landing safely at Bir el Thalata severely wounded in the legs. Two aircraft were lost over Bardia on 27th September, and a further one in unknown circumstances on 10th October.

The increasing efficiency of No. 451 was shown, however, on 11th September when aircraft on the Tobruk reconnaissance reported an

<sup>1</sup> The author has found no proof at sqn, wing, gp or cd level, nor in the records of AIL0 Tobruk, nor fortnightly operational summaries, that this transfer ever took place. It was clearly projected, however, because 451 Sqn ORB, although it is a poorly compiled and incomplete document at this period, definitely records that two aircraft were "instructed to proceed to Tobruk on attachment", and names the pilots. These two men were certainly to make a reconnaissance that day; one was delayed and the other set out alone but was shot down. It is possible that this caused a cancellation of the plan.

<sup>2</sup> F-Lt W. D. Hutley, 402358. 3 and 451 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Gordon, NSW; b. Semaphore, SA, 2 Oct 1915.

<sup>3</sup> F-Lt H. R. Rowlands, DFC, 402404. 451 Sqn, 213 Sqn RAF. Clerk; of Rockdale, NSW; b. Cwmcarm, S Wales, 2 May 1921. Killed in aircraft accident, 25 Mar 1944.

unusual concentration of enemy tanks and armoured vehicles near Acroma. Rommel's supply position had eased following the arrival of a convoy at Tripoli and the completion of a road by-passing the Tobruk perimeter, so this concentration was thought to herald some forward thrust. Two photographic sorties the next day confirmed the visual report and on the 13th fourteen more reconnaissance sorties revealed further increases in the enemy force which duly moved east the following day in two strong columns. Our own light forces on the Libyan frontier were withdrawn while No. 451 flew sixteen sorties to present hourly information of enemy progress. By nightfall the Germans reached Rabia and seemed to threaten Sidi Barrani, but almost immediately began to retire to their original positions again closely watched by pilots of No. 451, then the only army-cooperation squadron in this forward area. In all, fifty tactical reconnaissances devoted to this incident were flown after the first sighting on 11th September.

The ground crews of No. 1 Air Ambulance Unit R.A.A.F. proceeded to the Middle East with those of the two *Article XV* squadrons and they too experienced early difficulties. The ambulance unit had begun to form in February 1941 as an integral part of the home defence force, but designed to operate closely with the Australian Imperial Force on active service. Although two of the three DH-86's with which the unit was equipped left Laverton, Victoria, on 30th April, they did not reach Heliopolis in Egypt until 3rd July because of constant maintenance trouble en route. After overhaul Flight Lieutenant MacDonald<sup>4</sup> flew one DH-86 to Gaza on 29th July to open the unit's first base in close proximity to the 1st Australian General Hospital. No spare parts had been sent from Australia, and although the Deputy Director of Medical Services of I Australian Corps wished MacDonald to evacuate patients from Syria it was impossible to keep the aircraft serviceable; and even when the second DH-86 reached Gaza on 9th September little effective work was done. Fortunately No. 206 (Maintenance) Group R.A.F. was able to procure essential items, and repeated appeals through the R.A.A.F. Liaison Office, London, finally resulted in two cases of spare parts being dispatched from Australia late in September 1941. Early in October, the unit transferred to the Western Desert, where it was reinforced by a third DH-86 flown from Australia and by the attachment of a South African Air Force Lodestar.

Thus of the three new R.A.A.F. units sent to the Middle East during the spring of 1941 only one had become fully effective by October, and even No. 451 was still far from being wholly Australian. At the same time, however, a considerable number of R.A.A.F. individuals had arrived on R.A.F. squadrons in the same area. Some, principally crews for Wellington aircraft of squadrons on No. 257 Wing, came from operational training units in the United Kingdom but many came direct from Aus-

<sup>4</sup> Sqn Ldr J. G. MacDonald, AFC, 270292. Comd 1 AAU 1941, 2 AAU and 4 Commn Flight 1942, 4 OTU 1945. Commercial pilot; of Stawell, Vic; b. Ballarat, Vic, 14 Sep 1915.

tralian service flying training schools under an agreement to provide 30 pilots, 30 observers and 45 wireless-operator air gunners monthly for the Middle East aircrew pool. Arriving at a time of crisis many of these relatively untrained men were on active operations as early as April 1941, gaining their experience in the hardest of all schools. About fifty Australians were distributed among four Wellington squadrons by the end of May and their number increased during the following months: fifteen had joined No. 39 Squadron R.A.F. (Marylands), and slightly smaller numbers appeared on all the Blenheim squadrons. Fighter pilots went principally to Nos. 112 and 250 Squadrons where they quickly comprised about 45 per cent of the aircrew strength. Fighter pilots, however, were sent to other R.A.F. squadrons and also to No. 3 because of the inability to secure adequate reinforcements from Australia to keep pace with operational wastage.<sup>5</sup> The spread of those Australian individuals continued among all squadrons in varying intensity throughout 1941.

The work of Australians on medium- and light-bomber squadrons is exceedingly difficult to assess for often they served in crews of mixed nationality, so that individual contribution is submerged firstly in crew performance, then in squadron performance and finally by the over-all intention of any particular operation. Nor does bombing activity lend itself to obvious chances of personal distinction, for throughout this period the bombers, when not drawn into the land battle, were doggedly engaged on routine attacks against Libyan and Balkan ports. Sergeant Clowry,<sup>6</sup> of No. 38 (Wellington) Squadron R.A.F. failed to return from an experimental mine-laying attack against Benghazi harbour on 14th July. Sergeants Mellor<sup>7</sup> and Barnes<sup>8</sup> of No. 37 (Wellington) Squadron R.A.F. also achieved prominence some weeks later. Temporarily based at Malta they volunteered for the task of laying mines inside Tripoli harbour. During September Mellor made four flights and Barnes five, dropping their mines from 150 feet. During his last attack on 30th September Barnes' Wellington was hit by a 3.7-inch shell which blew away the starboard petrol tank and disabled one engine and all the hydraulic controls, entailing a nightmare return flight over the sea.

It is only the over-all effect of this constant battering of enemy supply ports, primarily a question of logistics and secondly one of morale, which can have any significance. But although the work of these men must necessarily be dismissed by a few generalisations in parentheses to the description of the main struggle, their efforts were collectively of great importance. Though normally the risks they ran from enemy air opposition were not as great as over Germany, the majority of their targets were heavily

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<sup>5</sup> It was comparatively easy to infiltrate raw pilots, even in considerable numbers, into a well-established fighter sqn organisation.

<sup>6</sup> Sgt F. Clowry, 402110; 38 Sqn RAF. Public servant; of Canberra; b. Sydney, 2 Apr 1918. Killed in action, 14 Jul 1941. A brother, W-O T. P. Clowry, also served with 38 Sqn at this time and later with 14 Sqn RAF. He was shot down and captured off Sicily in 1943.

<sup>7</sup> F-Lt L. H. Mellor, DFM, 404048. 37 and 267 Sqns RAF, 38 Sqn. Despatch driver; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 6 Oct 1919.

<sup>8</sup> F-Lt J. W. Barnes, DFM, 404050. 37 Sqn RAF, 37 and 36 Sqns. Structural engineer; of Highgate Hill, Qld; b. Oakey, Qld, 27 Feb 1916.



defended by guns, and they faced special hazards operating by day during the intensive periods when the battle surged to and fro across Cyrenaica. The light-bomber crews especially knew all the dangers and discomfort of constantly moving forward and retreating.

The first eight R.A.A.F. fighter pilots reached the newly-formed No. 250 Squadron R.A.F. at Aqir, Palestine, on 5th May and were almost immediately employed on a variety of tasks. One flight of ten Tomahawks were sent to Amiriya to assist in the defence of Alexandria; it will be recalled that on the 14th and 15th May two aircraft of this squadron escorted No. 84 Squadron Blenheims bombing German aircraft at Palmyra and Damascus; a day later two Tomahawks were sent to Cyprus. By 25th May, however, the whole squadron was reunited at Lake Maryut, engaged on shipping-escort patrols and the defence of Alexandria. The pilots benefited from a quiet spell before moving forward on 11th June to Sidi Haneish to take part in the impending army campaign designed to relieve Tobruk.

Operation BATTLEAXE, which opened on 14th June, is chiefly interesting from an air viewpoint because the general commanding in the Western Desert pressed successfully for the employment of R.A.F. fighters as an "umbrella" directly above his troops. For three days No. 250 flew a series of standing patrols over the battlefield, meeting very few enemy aircraft; but when, on 18th June, the land battle swung very much in the enemy's favour, Tedder intervened and ordered all fighters to concentrate on ground strafing. This was done, the Tomahawks of No. 250 concentrating on the main Capuzzo-El Adem roads. Although effective this was relatively costly, as four pilots including one Australian were lost on one such operation. Because of its tank losses the Western Desert Force had already begun to withdraw to its original positions and the enemy made no attempt to exploit his success on the ground.

The remainder of June was spent by the Australians in No. 250 making sweeps over eastern Cyrenaica, escorting Blenheims to attack Axis air-fields, and covering Tobruk convoys, now vital because the failure of the land operation inevitably meant prolongation of siege conditions. Their first positive engagement came on 26th June while escorting bombers to Gazala, and, raw as they were, the Australians acquitted themselves with distinction. Pilot Officer Caldwell<sup>9</sup> and Sergeant Coward<sup>1</sup> each shot down an Me-109 from a force of thirty enemy aircraft which attacked between Capuzzo and Tobruk, while Pilot Officer Kent,<sup>2</sup> after badly damaging a Messerschmitt last seen spinning away in a dense cloud of smoke over Gazala, dispatched a G-50 and came down low to destroy a staff car on the escarpment near Salum. One Australian was lost on this sortie and

<sup>9</sup> Gp Capt C. R. Caldwell, DSO, DFC, 402107. 250 Sqn RAF; comd 112 Sqn RAF 1942; W Ldr 1 Wing 1942-43; comd 1 Wing 1943, 80 Wing 1944-45. Commission agent; of Rose Bay, NSW; b. Sydney, 28 Jul 1911. When Caldwell left the ME, Tedder wrote a personal assessment in Caldwell's log book: "An excellent leader and a first-class shot." This was a rare and highly-valued honour from the AOC-in-C.

<sup>1</sup> Sqn Ldr G. C. Coward, DFC, 404004. 250 Sqn RAF, 3 Sqn. Butcher; of North Ipswich, Qld; b. Charters Towers, Qld, 4 Feb 1918.

<sup>2</sup> P-O J. F. S. Kent, 402124; 250 Sqn RAF. Departmental manager; of Edgecliff, NSW; b. Sydney, 17 Jul 1913. Killed in action 30 Jun 1941.

four days later Kent himself was shot down when nine Tomahawks escorting a Tobruk convoy met the attack of twenty Stukas escorted by thirty enemy fighters. Caldwell again figured prominently, shooting down two Ju-87's and sharing with Sergeant Whittle<sup>3</sup> an Me-110 claimed badly damaged but almost certainly destroyed. The month of July passed with the squadron almost entirely engaged in uneventful convoy escort but on 7th July one large-scale sweep with other squadrons was staged over Bardia. Nothing was seen by the main body of fighters, but Caldwell, who had become separated from his companions, claimed that he shot down one of two G-50's seen returning to their airfield, and, on his way home, strafed car parks near Salum and killed a number of enemy soldiers. Caldwell was already developing an uncanny gunnery sense which was to bring him great success, and he assiduously practised this by low-level firing at his own aircraft's shadow when other targets were lacking. Twice during August enemy attacks came while No. 250 was escorting convoys. The first time was on 18th August when twenty-five Messerschmitts appeared first in an attempt to split up the escort and thus allow following bombers freedom of action. In a hectic battle which lasted for thirty-five minutes and ended at dusk, several enemy fighters were damaged but one Australian was killed. Eleven days later the other attack developed on a convoy north of Sidi Barrani and this also was beaten off. On this occasion Caldwell further demonstrated his extraordinary fighting qualities:

At approximately 1905 hours whilst acting as weaver<sup>4</sup> . . . I was attacked by two Me-109's, one coming from astern and the other from port side, neither of which I saw personally. Bullets from astern damaged tail, tail trimming gear, fuselage and starboard main plane, while the aileron on that side was destroyed and a sizeable hole made in the trailing edge and flap . . . evidently by cannon shells, a quantity of splinters from which pierced the cowling and side of the cockpit some entering my right side and legs. Fire from the port side . . . damaged the fuselage, a number of bullets entering my left shoulder and hip, small pieces of glass embedding in my face, my helmet and goggles being pulled askew across my nose and eyes—no doubt by a near miss. As a result of the hits on the mainplane and probable excessive avoiding action the aircraft spun out of control. Checking the spin I blacked out when pulling out of the ensuing dive, recovering to find flames in the cockpit. Pulling the pin from the safety harness I started to climb out to abandon the aircraft, when the fire, evidently caused by burning oil and not petrol as I thought, died out, so I decided to remain and attempt a landing.

Looking behind me as I crossed the coast at about 500 feet some six miles east of Sidi Barrani . . . I saw a number of planes manoeuvring . . . in a manner suggesting an engagement. As my plane seemed to answer controls fairly well, apart from turns . . . I made a gradual turn and climbed back towards said aircraft finally carrying out an attack on what I believed to be an Me-109 . . . Having previously lost the pin to my harness I was holding the straps in my left hand for security which together with damage sustained to aircraft . . . [made it] inadvisable to attempt much in the way of quick change of altitude so I carried straight on to very low level and continued to base arriving at 2010 hours. Using half flap only [because of damage] I landed to find the starboard tyre flat as the result of a bullet hole . . . .

<sup>3</sup> Sqn Ldr R. J. C. Whittle, DFM, 404009. 250 Sqn RAF; comd 86 Sqn 1943-44. Pharmaceutical chemist; of Murwillumbah, NSW; b. Brisbane, 10 Jul 1914.

<sup>4</sup> One or more fighters normally protected the rear of their formation by independent scanning to avoid surprise attack. The constant change in altitude and direction of these protective rear-guards gave rise to the term "weaving" (simile of weaver's shuttle).

The lull in the desert was temporarily broken by Rommel's reconnaissance thrust towards Sidi Barrani on 14th September. No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. had arrived back at Sidi Haneish the previous day and sent six Tomahawks to strafe Gambut with success, although vigorous fighter opposition was met and two Australians were lost. Apart from this raid, No. 3, together with No. 250 and No. 112 R.A.F. newly arrived at Sidi Haneish, spent September mainly in local standing patrols and escort to convoys. The use of fighters on standing patrols had repeatedly been condemned as wasteful but the determined opportunist forays of the superior Me-109F at this period made this unsatisfactory method of defence temporarily inevitable. The "decoy" tactics employed by the Germans were well illustrated on 24th September when at 12.45 p.m. Flight Lieutenant Saunders attacked and set on fire a lone Ju-88, only to be attacked himself and forced down by five Me-109's which had been lurking above. Saunders escaped with superficial wounds only but his aircraft was destroyed on the ground by the enemy fighters. The other fighter squadrons reported little activity although Caldwell, on 27th and 28th September, claimed severe damage to one of several Me-109's when they attacked a bomber force which No. 250 was escorting to Bardia on each of these two days.

At the beginning of October there was a noticeable change in fighter operations. The air plan for Operation CRUSADER was to begin on the 14th, and already experimental fighter formations of two and three squadrons, alone and in company with bombers, were flown over Cyrenaica to test enemy reactions. No. 3 flew on five such sweeps during the first half of the month, twice (on the 9th and 10th) partly to cause a diversion while Hurricanes of No. 451 reconnoitred elsewhere. The only positive result came on the 12th when No. 3 with No. 2 Squadron S.A.A.F. covered an army ground-reconnaissance thrust near Bir Sheferzen. At 9.10 a.m. No. 3 was attacked by Me-109's and a very bitter struggle resulted. Sergeant Cameron<sup>5</sup> shot one down, Flying Officer Jewell<sup>6</sup> probably destroyed another and four other Messerschmitts were damaged. One Australian pilot, forced to bale out, was killed when the enemy fired at him as he parachuted down. Another Tomahawk was hit by cannon fire and was forced to land, being flown back to base later, while a third landed damaged at Sidi Haneish. Later in the day No. 112 covered the same area and they too engaged a mixed force of fifteen Me-109's and ten G-50's. Pilot Officer Jeffries<sup>7</sup> shot down an Me-109F but the other Australians on that squadron fared badly, one being wounded, another reaching base with a badly-damaged aircraft, and two more being shot down, although both were picked up that night by the Coldstream Guards.

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<sup>5</sup> F-Lt A. C. Cameron, DFM, 404085; 3 Sqn. Station overseer; of Biddeston, Qld; b. Toowoomba, Qld, 15 Sep 1912.

<sup>6</sup> Sqn Ldr W. E. Jewell, 260725; 3 Sqn. Hotel manager; of Brighton, Vic; b. Carnegie, Vic, 21 Jan 1917.

<sup>7</sup> P-O R. J. D. Jeffries, 406179; 112 Sqn RAF. Civil servant; of Mosman Park, WA; b. Midland Junction, WA, 14 Feb 1918. Killed in action 12 Dec 1941.