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THE GERMAN AIR FORCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

THEATER OF WAR by

Lt.Gen. (General d. Flieger) (Retired)

Hellmuth Felmy

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Introduction

The Cultural and Political Significance of the Mediterranean and Its Border States

Chapter One

The Political Power Relationships in the Mediterranean Basin before the Beginning of World War II

Section One: Great Britain, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Spain

Section Two: The March toward Rome. The Abyssinian Crisis.
Germany and Italy.
The Spanish Civil War.
The Occupation of Abyssinia.

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I-N T R O D U C-T I O-N

The classical culture has its roots in the Mediterranean. It found its highest stage of development in the Greek culture, in the Roman Empire, ad in Christianity. These cultures created values that are recognized to this day, and made the Mediterranean the center of attraction of all peoples. The domination of the Mediterranean was subject to the changes and variations in the economic and military systems of coalition. Wars and military campaigns, commerce and communications added strange and foreign influences that had a beneficial effect.

Situated at the crossing point between the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, art and science, commerce and communications reached high levels. The "holy Roman Empire of of German Nations" contributed greatly to the creation of a European cultural community. The Mediterranean had grown far beyond its purely geographical confines.

When the ocean shipping routes to East India and America were opened, the Mediterranean lost much of its importance. Its economic decline dates from that time.

The European continent extended far beyond the "classical world." The center of gravity of European progress moved away completely from the Mediterranean; for every practical purpose it was relocated in the northern and oceanic parts of Europe.

The industrial era had begun.

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The countries bordering the Mediterranean lacked almost completely the two most important natural resources required for industrial development: coal and iron. For this reason they had at first no part in and no benefit from modern inventions and technical progress.

None of the nations bordering the Mediterranean had been able to assume the succession to the Roman Empire. Arab attempts to extend the empire even beyond its former boundaries had been thwarted. The East Roman-Byzantine Empire exerted its cultural influence for one thousand years, but it never played a truly significant role in power politics. After its collapse, the Osman-Turkish Empire was able to maintain itself in the Balkans and in the Eastern Mediterranean for a surprisingly long time.

The construction of the Suez Canal and its opening on 7 November 1869 finally brought the Mediterranean out of its stagnation. An entirely new era began. The Suez Canal turned the Mediterranean Sea into the highway of navigation between Europe and the Eastern hemisphere. The countries bordering the Mediterranean made tremendous economic progress. But politically, also, the old cradle of culture became once again a focus of interest.

Once the narrow confines of the Mediterranean area had been transcended, decisions that were made in the northern parts of the European continent simultaneously affected the nations along the shores of the Mediterranean. On the other hand,

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the problems of the Mediterranean basin began to affect the policies of the entire European continent progressively.

The Mediterranean area's importance in the economic and strategic spheres led to frequent conflicts of interest among the great European nations. Great Britain, the most powerful naval and commercial power, employed the "balance-of-power" policy that had proved so successful in the northern parts of Europe also in the Mediterranean basin. Thus, a status of equilibre was maintained in that area, the continuity of which was ascertained by force, if necessary.

The construction of major tunnels, thus enabling the railroads to cross under the Alpine peaks, brought Central Europe closer to the Mediterranean basin. The traffic across the body of water was further increased by the export of wheat and oil produced in southern Russia and Romania; most of these goods passed through the Mediterranean. The construction of the Bagdhad railway brought even Mesopotamia (Iraq) within reasonable distance of the Mediterranean.

In Egypt and in the Sudan the British performed excellent cultural services. The availability of water through the major dams on the Nile made it possible to grow cotton in that area and provided millions of people with their daily bread. Then only did the Nile become a truly Mediterranean river whose riparian territories thus also became Mediterranean countries.

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The economic expansion of the world powers after the beginning of the 20th century eventually led to power groupings and coalitions of common interests which caused the outbreak of World War I. The Mediterranean area, also, suffered in the course of that war.

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Chapter I

Despite its losses during World War I, Great Britain had been able to reinforce its position in the Mediterranean quite considerably. The League of Nations mandates over Palestine, Transjordania, and Iraq effectively supplemented the naval bases already in its possession.

In Gibraltar and Alexandria Britain stationed strong naval forces whose dominance was no longer contested by Germany. Their mobility -- and thus also their strategic significance -- was enhanced by the availability of ports on Malta, Cyprus, and at Haifa.

The oil production of Iraq and the pipeline leading to Haifa assured the flow of oil for the Navy after Great Britain had succeeded in keeping France out of the Mossul oil lands at the conference of San Remo in April 1920.

Egypt, the Suez Canal, and the mandate territories were protected by ground and air forces; the railroad across the Sinai Desert, which had been constructed during the course of World War I, was extended to Gaza. New air bases established in the madatory territories were intergated into the existing air base system

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linking Gibraltar and the Mediterranean islands with Egypt. The air communications across the African continent led to East and South Africa via the Sudan. The newly established British-Arab bastion between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea protected simultaneously also the access to India. After its acquisitions of territories along the Mediterranean, Great Britain had become vulnerable also to ground attacks, which previously had not been the case to the same extent.

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The revolts in Iraq and particularly in Palestine created the first dangers, which also carried over to the Arab nationalists in Egypt. Great Britain had promised the Arabs the establishment of an independent kingdom and had not kept its promise. (Letter of McMahon to the Cherif Hussein of Mecca in October 1915). Moreover, Britain had opened a national home in Palestine for the Jews; these settled there and competed with the native Arab population, thus creating additional areas of conflict. (Balfour declaration of November 1917.) These measures contributed greatly to Great Britain's loss of prestige in the eyes of the Mohammedans.

But British policy was obvious to anybody: the Mediterranean belonged to its innermost sphere of interest, and Britain was intent on safeguarding its predominance in this area.

After World War I France had acquired full possession of Morocco. The formation of its North African Empire -- La France d'outre mer -- which extended from Tunisia to the Atlantic was

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thus completed. The Railroad from Tunisia to Algeria was extended via Fez to Casablanca.

The "Force Noir" (Black or Colored Force), which France maintained in its colonial territories, represented a formidable combat strength. It could be used as a political pawn at a given moment.

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With its ports at Toulon, on Corsica, in Oran and Biserta, the French fleet dominates the western Mediterranean with a distinctive threat against Italy.

Ever since the medieval crusades France's strongest compulsion was to play also a role in the eastern Mediterranean. When it received the mandate over Syria this wish was finally fullfilled. (San Remo, April 1920). Possessing the port of Beirut, France has excellent port installations at its disposal. The loss of the Mossul oil fields was partly compensated for by the construction of a branch pipeline to Tripolis and Syria.

The occupation of Syria led to heavy fighting with Arab nationalists. The twoday bombardment of Damascus in October 1925 will probably not so soon be eradicated from the "book of bloody revenge." France must therefore maintain a strong army of occupation in Syria. It is the second strongest Mediterranean power after Great Britain.

Italy juts into the Mediterranean like a wedge, dividing it into an eatsern and western basin. This reflects on its strategic

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balance. As a result, the Italian Navy is based on the Gulf of Taranto, permitting its employment on either side of the Mediterranean Sea.

From the south the Straits of Messian leads to the Italian peninsula; it is secured by fortifications along the southest coast of Sicily. The small islands of Pantelleria and Lampedusa form advance posts against any threat from the direction of Tunisia. Sicily and Sardinia give flank protection to the access to the Thyrrenean Sea. The northern flank between Corsica and the Italian mainland is unprotected.

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In the northern part of the Mediterranean Italy predominates since it possesses Triest and Fiume. The central sector and the Straits of Otranto are not dominated by Italy so long as the east coast of the Adriatic is in the hands of another power.

In the eastern Mediterranean Italy had gained access to the Aegean Sea after having taken over Rhodes and the Dodekanese Islands; this turn of events had been resented by Greece and Turkey.

After World War I Italy had to reconquer its colonial possessions in Libya for all practical purposes. Situated between Britain's and France's African colonies, Libya had strategic potentialities. The communications between the colony and Italy proper could easily be disrupted by attacks from Malta.

After Italy had been unified under a king in 1861 -- a unification that France had been unable to prevent -- the affinity

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to the "Latin sister" changed with the political situation of the moment. Both France and Italy were situated along the shores of the western Mediterranean. The Roman Empire had formerly colonized Gaul, but since then the former Roman colony had risen to great power.

Exhausted by World War I and internally divided by political strife, Italy ranked third behind Britain and France as a Mediterranean power.

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Greece ahd achieved its independence only in the 19th century after it had rid itself of Turkish domination in 1829. It gave up its neutral status during World War I. Venizelos was able to make his country join the Allies against the opposition of the royal family.

Greece, with its irregular coastline and Aegean Islands and Crete blocks the entrance to the eastern Mediterranean. In the west the Ionian Islands block the Straits of Otranto. If opposed by the more powerful Italy, Greece alone is impotent in the Dodecanese Islands and along the Adriatic Sea.

To maintain the balance of power, Great Britain therefore protects Greece. Supported by the British, Greece directed its expansionist drives against weakened Turkey, pursuing objectives based on outdated ideologies. Greek forces advanced via Smyrna into the interior of Anatolia and suffered a disastrous defeat near Eskischehir on 26 August 1923. Smyrna was retaken by the Turks

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some two months later. The dream of a greater Greece had been dreamed in vain. The impoverished country is no longer capable of maintaining major ground, naval or air forces.

Of all Mediterranean powers Turkey had suffered the worst losses by the time World War I had ended. It lost all its Arab provinces, and the victorious Allied powers confined the borders of defeated Turkey to the Anatolian highland.

But Turkey was fortunate to have General Mustafa Kemal who initiated its national reformation. Russia, the perennial enemy of Turkey, had been sidetracked by the Bolshevist Revolution; as early as spring 1921 Kemal came to an agreement with that country. The disdain, which the British had shown toward the French during the solution of the mandate problems, France answered by retaliating with the Franklin-Bouillion Pact of October 1921. It returned Cilicia to Turkey. Mustafa Kemal had thus created the prerequisites for refuting the Greek demands. Turkey's victory over Greece led to the Treaty of Lausanne in the summer of 1924, which liberated Turkey from all the shackles of the dictated peace treaty of Sevres (1920). As a result of the Treaty of Montreux(1936), Turkey even obtained full control over the Dardanelles Straits. Once again Turkey was the "gatekeeper of the Black Sea" which forced Great Britain to resume its traditional pro-Turkish policy. Turkey has relatively strong ground forces and, because of the determined course steered by Kemal Pasha and his consistent policies, that

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country has become an important power in the Mediterranean.

Since the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, Spain plays only an insignificant role in the Mediterranean. After having lost its rich overseas possessions in central and south America, Spain was impoverished and had become impotent.

Only in the Moroccan Rif area did Spain possess a protectorat; its important port Tangier, however, had been internationalized in 1904. During the first 10 years after World War I, Spain was only a pawn in the political game of the major powers.

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The balance of power in the Mediterranean, which was supervised by the British, was not of long duration. In Italy the inner-political differences lad to ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ vacillating foreign policies, which sometimes favored Britain and then again France.

At sea, Great Britain barred any expansionist tendencies. On land, France had created the Little Entente, composed of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, in orde to counteract Germany and Austria. The Little Entente was also supposed to bar simultaneously any demands Italy might make on the territory of the former Austrian Empire, for Italy and Yugoslavia had become neighbors along the Adriatic by taking over Trieste and Fiume, respectively.

The economic crisis weighed heavily on that country. The Communist influences gained ground. During the summer 1922, when strikes and sabotage became prevalent, conditions grew more and

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more intolerable. Applauded by the active elements of the Italian people, who were anxious to live in peace and order, and benefiting from the neutrality of the royal family and the armed forces, Mussolini was able to assume supreme power by his "march on Rome" on 28 October 1922.

He consolidated the domestic situation and laid the foundation for a modern armed force. To Mussolini, the Mediterranean was the real objective of Italian foreign policy.

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His first attention went to reorganizing the colony of Libya. The well-known minister of aerial communications Balbo transformed Libya into a stratggic fortress and colonized its territory. But only the eastern part, Cyrenaica, was suitable for colonization. Italy's excess of population -- some 400,000 people per annum -- Libya could not possibly absorb. In earlier days America had taken in most of these people, but after World War I the immigration quota had been considerably reduced.

The Italian expansionist policy was therefore directed toward Abyssinia, which had once before been under Italian influence. North of that country, in Erytrea, Italy had a jump-off point. The Roman Treaties of 7 January 1935 had stipulated that France was abandoning its claims on Abyssinia and turning them over to Italy. But in Paris one was convinced that Italy would never take up arms for this cause. In the event that Italy took armed action, Britain would surely object since the Blue Nile flows across

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Tana Lake in the western part of Abyssinia. The Ual-Ual incident in December 1934 gave Mussolini the desired opportunity to carry out his plans. Since both Abyssinia and Italy were members of the League of Nations, this assembly ~~XX~~ was first asked to arbitrate the conflict. The decision was delayed interminably. To show its interest in the case, Great Britain assembled almost its entire navy -- 144 ships with some 800,000 tons displacement -- in the Mediterranean by autumn 1935. But even this tremendous naval demonstration did not intimidate Mussolini -- on 3 October 1935 he crossed the Abyssinian river Magreb that formed the border. Upon British proposals, the League of Nations thereupon imposed economic sanctions, against Italy. As many as 52 nations completely broke off all commercial relations with the condemned country. In addition, France put its Mediterranean ports and its entire armed force at Great Britain's disposal.

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Germany had no reason to participate in the economic sanctions. It had left the League of Nations in the autumn of 1933. Italy received all the raw materials it lacked from Germany in sufficient quantities.

Mussolini employed large amounts of manpower and materiel not only in Abyssinia but also in Libya. Once Abyssinia had been defeated, he planned to apply pincers against the British and Egypt by moving from Lybia and via the Sudan. This was a seemingly fantastic plan, which nevertheless was feasible and which would

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have put the entire burden of the land battle upon Great Britain. Against all prognostications, Abyssinia was defeated within a very short time by the Italians who used the most modern weapons of the day in conducting their offensive. On 5 May 1936 General Badoglio entered AddisAbbeba.

But a very significant political event had taken place on the European continent even before the end of the Abyssinian War. The close interrelationship between Europe and the affairs of the Mediterranean became only too obvious at that time. On 7 March 1936 Germany invalidated the Locarno Treaty of 1925-26 and marched its troops into the so-called demilitarized zone of the Reich territory, the status of which resulted from the Versailles Treaty. France felt particularly threatened; its European interests prevailed over Mediterranean considerations, so that it turned away from the Mediterranean. Great Britain lost its partners and had to rely on itself. The sanctions, which the League of Nations was supposed to apply against Germany upon France's demands, were opposed by Great Britain. Its interests in the Mediterranean, not those on the European continent, had been affected. But the British were not sufficiently strong for an attack on the Italians in Abyssinia and Libya. The League of Nations action failed.

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But Mussolini was intelligent enough not to exaggerate after his victory in Abyssinia. He made concessions to the Western Powers. As a result, the tension relaxed. The Abyssinian War had

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demonstrated two facts very clearly to Mussolini: to join the Western Powers in Mediterranean conquests seemed hopeless because Italy had become too powerful for their liking and was thus threatening the balance of power. Germany, however, had no political objectives in the Mediterranean since it was situated in central Europe. Moreover, the two countries did not compete economically. Both nations had profited for centuries from the intermingling of Roman with Germanic culture. Germany was therefore the ideal ally since in addition its domestic policies had developed similarly to those in Italy.

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In October 1937 the Berlin conferences brought about the basic understanding and agreements between Germany and Italy, which Mussolini has designated as the Rome-Berlin Axis.

A few months later, after the excitement about Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia had died down, the Spanish Civil War started in the summer 1936. This brought about a new crisis in Europe. France refused Italy's suggestion to maintain "absolute neutrality" mainly because of its distrust of Italy. Its popular front government sympathized with the "anti-fascist revolt" in Spain and supplied its ideological comrades with weapons. The "Red Brigades" received communist party members from many countries in their ranks. The Soviet Union also gave active assistance.

General Franco, the old colonial soldier, was supported by the conservative elements of the population and by the church. He

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moved up his "muros" from the Spanish protectorate in the Rif area to give him support. Both Mussolini and Hitler, as absolute opponents of communism, sent volunteers and equipment, namely the "Black Shirt" units and the "Legion Condor." With their support General Franco was able to suppress the revolt in the spring 1939 after long and bloody fighting.

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Great Britain's efforts to prevent an expansion of the Spanish conflict were successful (Nonintervention Commission, London, 1936). In summer 1937 Great Britain concluded a "gentleman's agreement" with Mussolini, according to which the status quo was to be maintained in the Mediterranean. The danger of a general war had been avoided.

The bottling-up process that France applied to Italy in the Adriatic with the assistance of the Little Entente, led to tension between Italy and Yugoslavia in the Triest area, where a number of incidents occurred. The conflicts within the "United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes" with its mixture of various peoples also carried over into the adjacent Albania, a state that had retained its identity from the time of the Balkans Wars.

It was of decisive significance for Italy that no unfriendly power dominate Albania, since that country controled the exit from the Adriatic to the Ionian Sea. After Great Britain had given its approval, Mussolini concluded the Tirana Treaties in 1926 and 1927 with the later King Ahmed Zogu of Albania who received some money

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as a reward. Albania's territorial integrity was guaranteed by Italy, which also promised every possible assistance. Soon Albania became economically and militarily dependent upon Italy. During the following years Albania remained a hotbed of revolt, where the divergent interests of Italy and Yugoslavia -- and thus also those of France -- conflicted.

After Abyssinia had been integrated into the Italian Empire and Germany had regained its independence on the European continent, the two countries became closely related. As a logical consequence Great Britain and France became partners in the Mediterranean and on the European continent.

Hitler's invasion of Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939 drove the European crisis situation to another high point. Mussolini took advantage of this diversion and occupied shortly afterward the country of Albania.

Once again the course of events had shown the close links between European policies and the interests of the countries bordering the Mediterranean.

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Chapter Two

Italy's Offensive along the French Alpine Front

The Diversionary Operation against Greece

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Chapter 2. The War Spreads to the Mediterranean

Section I. The Italian Offensive along the French Alpine Front.

Italy's Digression[1] into Greece.

Section II. Analysis of the German-Italian Military Alliance.

Italy Requests German Military Assistance.

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[1]The term Extratour (digression) was coined by Prince Buelow to typify Italy's behavior in 1906 at the Algeciras Conference, where that country's representative voted against Germany although Italy was a partner in the Triple Alliance.

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Section I: The Italian Offensive along the French Alpine Front. Italy's Digression into Greece

The so-called Pact of Steel — a military alliance between Germany and Italy — was concluded on 22 May 1939. This pact, however, did not make any provision for the case of war.

Mussolini's intervention failed to prevent the outbreak of the German-Polish conflict. The surprising sequence of victories won by German arms in Poland, Norway, and France subsequently worried Mussolini who had misgivings as to Italy's future role in the New Europe.

Up to that time Italy had stood aside, but Mussolini did not want to lose out at the time the fruits of victory would be shared. He expressed his ideas on this subject as follows: "I need a few thousand dead to justify my presence at the peace table."[2]

This attitude explains Italy's entry into the war, for which the German military were totally unprepared.

Actually, Mussolini had no strategic objective in the Mediterranean theater, the Mare Nostrum, that was of such vital importance to Italy. He simply wanted to take advantage of the collapse of France to achieve a cheap victory.

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[2] Raymond de Balot, The Struggle for the Mediterranean, p. 50

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Badoglio characterized Mussolini's attitude as follows:

"He was possessed by the fear (or notion) that he might be left out when the victors distribute the booty."[3]

From a military point of view the Italian attack along the French Alpine front was completely senseless. Moreover, the attack bogged down after minor initial successes. On the other hand, victory was within Italy's reach in Egypt.

Since Balbo's death on 10 June 1940, Marshal Graziani had become the commander in chief in Libya. The Italian Tenth Army was slow in getting started. It was not until 16 September 1940 that General Berti's eight divisions reached Sidi el Barrani. The British carried out a delaying action which was based on Marsa Matruh. After having reached Sidi el Barrani, the Italians stopped their advance and switched to the defensive. Meanwhile, they built up their lines of communication. Graziani's urgent requests for tanks and motorized reinforcements went unheeded.

Instead, Mussolini launched an attack on Greece on 28 October 1940, much to the surprise of his German ally. In Greece, Mussolini hoped to attain a quick victory that would permit him to expand his influence in the Balkans and later also in the Aegean. Because of the unexpectedly strong resistance offered by the Greeks in the Epirus Mountains, whose average elevation is about 6,600 feet, the Italian offensive ground to a halt as early as 6 November 1940.

[3] P. Badoglio, Italy and World War II, Memoirs and Documents (Munich and Leipzig, Lint, 1947), p. 31.

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This digression was not based on rational thinking. Instead of concentrating all the forces on an attack against Egypt in order to ascertain victory at a decisive point, Italy opened a new theater of war.

In this connection Ciano noted in his diary: "the Duce was furious that German troops alone were occupying the Rumanian oilfields."[4] Actually, Mussolini had not been notified in time that a German military mission had been dispatched to Rumania on 10 October 1940. Now, he in turn wanted to surprise his ally. Ciano asserted that Greece was invaded because Hitler had ordered Rumania.[5] Badoglio's statement that "the evil spirit of this (the Greek) campaign was Ciano,"[6] seems to be closer to the truth and invalidates Ciano's assertion.

Italy was incapable of conducting simultaneous military operations in three theaters of war, i.e. in Abyssinia, Libya, and Greece. This dissipation of forces led General Badoglio, the Chief of Staff of the Comando Supremo, to resign on 26 November 1940.

The illusion of a quick victory in Greece had hardly vanished, when the Italian fleet suffered a crippling blow in the night of

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[4]Count Ciano, His Diaries, 1937-1943 (Ciano Papers), Second Edition, (Bern, Scherz, 1947), p. 277.

[5]Ibid, p. 270.

[6]Badoglio, op. cit., p. 44.

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11 - 12 November 1940 in the Gulf of Taranto. British torpedo bombers put three battleships and two cruisers out of commission. The British had thus attained definite naval superiority.

In the meantime Great Britain had sent reinforcements and medium tanks to Egypt. On 10 December 1940 General Wavell launched an offensive which knocked out Italy's Army of Libya in a series of breath-taking combat actions. Four Italian divisions were annihilated; four others were encircled in Bardia. One after another the British captured Tobruk, Derna, and Bengazi. By February 1941 Graziani's army had been practically wiped out."[7]

In Albania the Italian Ninth and Eleventh Armies had run into serious difficulties when Greek troops began to counterattack on 18 November 1940. The winter weather then stopped major operations. For the Italians the year ended with a complete defeat in Libya and a serious setback in Albania.

Italy's entry into the war had changed the over-all political and strategic situation. The Axis Powers were unable to take advantage of this change because they had not made any preparations for coalition warfare. Their relationship was anything but trusting and confident. The differences in their aims were difficult to reconcile. This was hardly surprising, for the personalities of the two

[7] Walter Goerlitz, Der zweite Weltkrieg 1939-1945 (The Second World War, 1939-45), (Steingrubenverlag, Stuttgart, 1951), p. 108.

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dictators differed in so many ways. While Mussolini must be credited with more profound understanding of the ramifications of international politics, the Duce overestimated the military prowess of the Italian people in a very dangerous manner. Hitler, who was younger, had a more dynamic personality, but his political vision was confined to the limits of the European continent. Since the beginning of the war he had won unexpected victories that enhanced tremendously the mystic belief in his own mission; Mussolini, however, had meanwhile been completely overshadowed. With Hitler apparently having assumed the dominant position in Europe, Mussolini was obsessed with inferiority complexes; these were probably noticed by Hitler, who knew only too well that Mussolini was really the only person who could guarantee the continuity of the Axis partnership. For this reason, Hitler restrained himself in order to preserve his ally's prestige; he thus let matters drift, which would have required immediate decisive action. Italy's entry into the war therefore did not result in military coordination since each partner conducted his military operations according to his own devices.

The German General Staff was well aware of Italy's military weakness. By giving Hitler an objective description of Italy's military potential, multiple efforts had been made to reorient the Fuehrer's disastrous political alliances and military policies. But the memorandum, in which the German military attache in Rome during 1938-39 analyzed these factors in detail, was withdrawn from circulation and destroyed as ordered by Hitler in person.[8]

[8] E. von Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse. Erinnerungen des deutschen Militaerattaches in Rom 1936-1943, (Mussolini as Ally. Memoirs of the German Military Attache in Rome, 1936-43), (Tuebingen, Wunderlich, 1951), pp. 55-6.

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Actually, in April 1939 Mussolini himself had explained in a memorandum that Italy would not be ready to wage war before 1943.[9] It was therefore unreasonable to include Italy as a positive factor in German military planning.

So far as I know, Italy was only supposed to announce the mobilization of its forces at the time Germany invaded Poland. This gesture was designed to demonstrate the unity of the Axis Powers. However, the Italian king refused to approve this measure, and Mussolini in turn made immediate use of this refusal. He declared that Italy's entry into the war — which had not even been asked for — would be contingent upon deliveries of war materi al, which far exceeded Germany's availabilities.[10]

On 31 August 1939 Ciano informed the British ambassador in Rome that Italy would not fight Britain or France, "whatever Berlin says."[11] The political bonds between the two Axis Powers were therefore considerably weakened.

In July 1940 Ciano voiced Italy's far-reaching demands. He wanted possession of Nice, Corsica, and Malta. Italian protectorates were to be established in Tunis and in parts of Algeria. Moreover, Italy was to be granted strategic bases in Syria, Lebanon, Transjordania, and Palestine. In Egypt and in the Sudan

[9] Badoglio, op. cit., p. 17

[10] Information obtained by the author from General der Flieger (Lieutenant General) Jeschonnek on 27 August 1939.

[11] History of the Second World War. United Kingdom Military Series, London, 1954. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, p. 12.

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Italy wanted to take Great Britain's place.[12] Mussolini's demands for French territory compromised any possibility for closer German-French relations. Did Italy believe that it could conduct the Mediterranean war against Britain without any assistance? In any event, in July 1940, Italy did not undertake any action toward realizing its far-reaching objectives. On the other hand, Ciano took advantage of every possible opportunity to prevent closer German collaboration with France because he was afraid that such an improvement in the relations of those two countries would take place at Italy's expense.[13]

After its precipitated entry into the war Italy's deficiencies in military preparedness soon became manifest. Mussolini would have been only too glad to receive tanks, guns, small arms, ammunition, etc. But he was afraid that the presence of German troops on Italian soil would hurt his prestige. Although he had previously consented, he refused in November 1940 — at the very time the troop movement was being initiated — to permit the transfer to Italy of one German armored division and one air corps.[14]

While political differences had prevented any real collaboration between the two allies from the very beginning, the realities of the military situation eventually forced them to cooperate more closely.

[12] E. von Rintelen, op. cit., p. 102.

[13] Ciano, op. cit., p. 280.

[14] E. von Rintelen, op. cit., p. 101.

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The Italian Army's basic weakness that soon became only too obvious was its faulty military system. Italy had an Army of cadre divisions with 3,000 men each. Equipment and weapons were completely out-of-date. There was not a sufficient number of training instructors; the territorial-army type of organization led to frequent shifting of noncommissioned officers at company level. The selection of reserve officer replacements was equally unsatisfactory. Upon college graduation students qualified automatically for a commission in the Reserve without any thorough previous training. As soon as the Army was mobilized, the few Regular Army officers on troop duty were immediately transferred to senior staff positions. The Army was therefore short of experienced noncommissioned and company-grade officers.[15]

A reorganization had been planned according to which three armored and two motorized divisions were to be activated. Altogether some 24 corps with 69 divisions composed of 40,000 officers and noncommissioned officers as well as 300 - 450,000 men were to be newly activated. It is not known whether this plan was carried out and, if so, at what time it was implemented.[16]

Fluchter[17] gives the following strength figures for the Air Force, based on Badoglio's diary: only 1,200 out of 3,000 planes were

[15] During the summer 1943 the author had two Italian divisions -- the Cagliari and the Piemonte -- stationed on the Peloponnesus in his command. During various conversations with their officers he became thoroughly familiar with Italian military procedures.

[16] E. von Rintelen, p. 54

[17] Georg W. Fäuchter, Geschichte des Luftkrieges. Entwicklung und Zukunft, Bonn, 1954. p. 84ff, and p. 87.

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supposed to have been ready for commitment.[18]

The most powerful and proudest element of the Italian Armed Forces was the Navy. It consisted of 6 modern battleships, 7 heavy and 12 light cruisers, 60 destroyers, 68 torpedo boats, and 111 submarines of various types. The Italian fleet had numerical superiority over the British Mediterranean fleet. According to Admiral Weichold, the Italian Navy limited its activities to conducting exclusively defensive operations in the central Mediterranean. This fact was partly to be attributed to its complete inexperience in carrying out night operations.[19]

Italy's overseas forces consisted of 215,000 men in Libya under the command of Marshal Balbo and 200,000 men in Abyssinia, where the Duke of Aosta commanded. For the top-level command organization of the Italian Armed Forces as of 10 June 1940, see Appendix No. 1.

During military operations there were many instances in which Italians of all three military services gave individual performances of bravery and self-sacrifice. But it was the system — not the individual — that failed, especially as the war grew longer. The Italian soldier was willing and self-sufficient, and — with proper training and better equipment — he would have developed into a useful fighter of average quality.

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[18] P. Badoglio, p. 20.

[19] History of the Second World War, op. cit., p. 146, footnote 1.

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The digression into Greece apparently did not convince Hitler of the military ineffectiveness of his ally, even though he disapproved of the Italian attack in the Epirus Mountains at the beginning of the winter season and anticipated grave consequences. His displeasure found its expression in a letter he sent to the Duce on 20 November 1940.[20] Hitler clearly indicated the psychological and military consequences that would arise as a result of the Italian intervention in the Balkans, enumerating not only enemy measures but also probable Russian and neutral steps. He was particularly perturbed over the fact that the British would now be able to reach the Romanian oil fields from Greek air bases. The cities and ports of southern Italy seemed no less vulnerable to him.

He suggested a number of countermeasures to restore the situation -- such as Spain's entry into the war -- and arrived at the conclusion that no risk was too great to prevent the British from gaining a foothold on Thrace. This letter mentions for the first time that the German and Italian Air Forces ought to collaborate in the Mediterranean. At that time Hitler still hoped that Italy would be able to take Marsa Matruh and hold it so that the airfield would be available. In that event the entire Suez Canal and the eastern Mediterranean area would be within long-range bomber striking distance. The Mediterranean problem would have to be settled during the winter 1940-41

[20] The letter is supposed to be in the British archives, see also: History of the Second World War, Vol I, p. 240.

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because at that time "it would also be most suitable to commit German forces." But he wants his troops to "be returned" by the beginning of May at the latest. Hitler was convinced that, if the German and Italian Air Forces cooperated, the Mediterranean would be the "tomb of the British Navy" within 3 - 4 months. This would also be the prerequisite for the start of German military operations against Greece, which however could not be launched before the beginning of March 1941. As to the offensive operations in the direction of the Nile Delta he had arrived at the well-considered conclusion that such an offensive would not be feasible before the autumn of 1941.

This was the first time that Hitler had taken the Mediterranean Theater into serious consideration and had realized that the British Fleet would have to be eliminated in that area. The dates mentioned in the letter indicate that the "Blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union" had already firmed up in Hitler's planning and setting of objectives. Moreover, these dates also show how much he overestimated the effectiveness of the Italian Navy and how he underestimated the space and time needed to prepare such long-range operations. This was true even in the case of the German Air Force, its ground elements and supplies.

In Hitler's concepts the Mediterranean still played a subordinate part, which had no decisive influence on the over-all conduct of the military

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operations. He believed that with Italy's assistance the British Mediterranean Fleet could be crushed with the greatest of ease. He had not realized that Great Britain would suffer a death blow in the Mediterranean because all its Near East possessions would be jeopardized in case of a defeat in that area. A decisive victory could only be won, if the Mediterranean was immediately made the principal theater of war. In that event, however, the Duce would have had to let Hitler seize the initiative. The Chief of Naval Operations had suggested to Hitler on 6 and 26 September 1940 that the military main effort be placed in the Mediterranean.[21]

The Armed Forces High Command had also suggested such a solution. But first of all Hitler would have had to abandon the campaign against the Soviet Union. But Hitler never did any real weighing of the pros and cons of a Mediterranean operation nor did he fully plan or calculate the risks of such an undertaking in all seriousness. There are no signs that the Armed Forces High Command was engaged in any such serious planning at that time. And it is impossible to establish from hindsight whether such a switch in the main effort, which would have had decisive proportions, was at all possible. For this reason one can state only quite generally that the defective railnet in southern Italy and small capacity of the ports in North Africa would probably not have permitted the Germans to supply forces

[21] Admiral Kurt Assmann, Deutsche Schicksalsjahre, Wiesbaden, 1950, p. 341.

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supply the minimum forces needed for such an operation, namely one armored army and two air fleets. Another decisive point to be considered would have been the shortage of shipping space; of equal importance was the safety of naval convoys which the German Navy would have been unable to secure.[22]

The campaign against Soviet Russia had been irrevocably decided after Molotov's visit to Berlin in November 1940. For this reason the Mediterranean remained a secondary theater of war.

After the reverses suffered since Italy had entered the war, the morale of its people had dropped seriously. The people and the armed forces took part in the war without enthusiasm.

The disastrous defeat in North Africa,[23] as a result of which the loss of Libya and even Tripolitania became immediate threats, led Italy to request German military assistance on 19 December 1940.

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[22] Letter OKW/1848, Chief, Armed Forces Operations Staff, Chefsache, dated 13 August 1940.

[23] Von Rintelen, p. 116.

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Section I. The German Air Force Mission in Romania

The Balkans were within Germany's, Russia's, and Italy's sphere of interest. By using a system of bilateral pacts, Hitler attempted to integrate the southeast of Europe into the German economic system. Romania with its oil and grain surplus was of the greatest value to Germany. At a very early stage these German efforts toward economic integration began to conflict with Soviet Russian plans.

On 20 June 1940 Soviet Russia asked Romania to relinquish Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. The Germans, from whom Romania expected support, refused to intervene and advised Romania to concede. At the same time Germany requested Romania to come to an agreement with Hungary and Bulgaria which also had justified claims to Romanian territory that they had lost in 1919.

Germany and Italy settled the Romanian-Hungarian and Romanian-Bulgarian territorial differences by the Vienna Arbitration Award of 28 August 1940. Soviet Russia was displeased about the Award because it had not been consulted. This Russian annoyance gave room to uneasiness when the Germans sent a military mission to Romania after they had been asked to do so by that country's government.

General der Kavallerie (Lt. Gen.) Hansen was appointed chief of the Armed Forces mission which consisted of a number of training teams as well as other units. The Air Force mission was under the command of General der Flieger (Lt. Gen.) Speidel who was directly responsible to the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe.

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The German Air Force mission arrived in Bucharest on 10 October 1940. Its mission was twofold:

A. To organize the active and passive air raid protection facilities and to defend the Romanian oil fields against air attacks; and

B. To train and reorganize the Romanian Air Force, both the flying and antiaircraft units. This activity was to conceal the real German plans for military operations.

The following were designated as air defense areas:

1. The oil production and oil refining facilities at Ploesti;
2. The oil dump and port installations at Constanta;
3. The bridge across the Danube near Cernavoda with its pipe-line;
4. The oil tank and port installations at Giurgiu on the Danube; and
5. The air bases used by the Luftwaffe mission.

The forces available to carry out this mission were as follows: One reinforced flak division, two separate antiaircraft regiments with various attached units; one fighter group equipped with Messerschmidt 109's; Air Force signal units to maintain the aircraft warning service; special air raid protection units to fight oil fires; and construction units for a total of approximately 50,000 men (According to Lt. Gen. Speidel).

According to Greiner the mission in Romania was composed of one fighter group, 16 flak batteries, 10 fire fighting companies, and the 22d Air Landing Division, which were billeted in the vicinity of Bucharest and Ploesti.[24]

[24] Greiner (?), Oberste Kehrmachtsfuehrung (??), p. 386.

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According to Goerlitz the "training units" of the military mission were composed of one armored division as well as fighter and antiaircraft units.[25]

Oberst (Col.) Schlieter states that the Luftwaffe mission was composed as follows:[26]

a. From 29 March to May 1941: Group III of the 52d Fighter Wing.

b. After 1 May 1941: Group III of the 52d Fighter Wing as well as the following units subordinate to the Luftwaffe mission and/or to the Commander in Chief of the Army: The staff of the 22d Division with the 16th, 47th, and 66th Infantry Regiments; the 22d Artillery Regiment, the 22d Flak Battalion (Motorized), the 22d Reconnaissance Battalion, and divisional supply troops.

During November 1940 Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia joined the Tripartite Pact that had been concluded on 27 September 1940. (Bulgaria adhered on 1 March 1941). After Directive 20 had been issued on 13 December 1940, seven divisions that formed the nucleus for the Twelfth Army under Field Marshal List, assembled for Operation MARITA in southern Romania.

On 18 December Hitler issued Directive 21 according to which Soviet Russia was to be defeated in a "lightning campaign" even before the end of the war with Great Britain (Operation BARBAROSSA).

As a result of these directives the Luftwaffe mission in Romania had to set up an air force ground organization for German bombers and fighters.

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Moreover, for Operation BARBAROSSA the Luftwaffe mission would have to

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25 Walter Goerlitz, Vol. I, p. 196.

26 From the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command (Wall charts) referring to the distribution (disposition) of flying units on 29 March 1941 (Sheet 1), on 15 April (Sheet 2), and on 1 May 1941 (Sheets 3a and 3b).

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26 From the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command (Wall charts) referring to the distribution (disposition) of flying units on 29 March 1941 (Sheet 1), on 15 April (Sheet 2), and on 1 May 1941 (Sheets 3a and 3b).

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assume the functions of a front line air force command echelon.

In addition, the establishment of a German air warning net in Bulgaria was needed before the Twelfth Army could assemble. (Data from Lt. Gen. Speidel.)

In February 1941 Bulgaria agreed to let List's forces enter the country. A new theater of war was to be created; German forces had penetrated deep into the Balkans, and the Romanian and Bulgarian Black Sea coastal areas came under German control. These events became known to the Russians.

In his New Year's message Stalin had declared that Russia had mobilized its forces and that it would be ready. This attitude was caused by worry rather than by aggressiveness. When the German Ambassador in Moscow, Count von der Schulenburg, informed the Russian Foreign Commissar on 28 February 1941 that German troops had entered Bulgaria, Molotov declared: "This measure violates the security of the Soviet Union."[27]

The system of political agreements with the Eastern European countries, which Hitler had originally envisioned, had developed into a threat but did not necessarily have to lead to war with the Soviet Union."[28]

After the start of the Russian campaign 300 Russian aircraft were destroyed by planes and flak during the first three months, but the oil production and oil shipments were not affected. The German Air Force mission then became subordinate to the Fourth Air Force.

[27] Walter Goerlitz, Vol. I, p. 221.

[28] Walter Goerlitz, Vol. I, pp. 223 - 4.

In February 1941 Argentina agreed to let Japan's forces enter the country. A new disaster at sea was to be averted, however, when Japan penetrated deep into the Indians, and the Russian and Japanese fleet had been sunk at sea under heavy gunfire. Then events became clear to the Argentinians.

In his New Year's message Ortiz had declared that Nazis had neutrality in Europe and that it would be broken. This attitude was caused by a by either fear or sympathetic. Then the German submarine in Buenos, Ortiz was the President, informed the Russian foreign Commissar on 20 January 1941 that German troops had entered Argentina. Molotov declared this action violated the security of the Soviet Union.[21]

The weakness of political expectants with the Nazis Russian neutrality, which Ortiz had unofficially violated, had encouraged Ortiz's friends but did not necessarily have to lead to war with the Soviet Union.[22]

After the start of the Russian campaign 300 Nazis aircraft were captured by planes not lost during the first three months, but the air reduction and all aircraft were not affected. The German air force relation then became supplanted to the Russian air force.

[21] Latin American, vol. 3, p. 221.

[22] Latin American, vol. 4, pp. 203 - 7.

Section II. The Commitment of X Air Corps in Sicily. Its Order of Battle and Ground Organization. The Enemy Forces. The Struggle for Malta and the German Efforts to Intercept British Convoys.

On 27 November 1940 Hitler decided not to wait any longer for the capture of Marsa Matru by the Italians before he committed German air force units in the Mediterranean area, if necessary from Dodecanese bases. After discussing the details with the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe, Field Marshal Milch was to travel to Rome for conferences with the Italians.[29]

On 10 December 1940 "Special Operation Mediterranean" was ordered on the basis of agreements the German representative had made with the Duce. According to these arrangements one German fighter wing was to be committed from southern Italian bases for a limited time.[30]

The orders by which the X Air Corps was transferred to southern Italy have not been located to this date. The first pertinent document, Directive 22, orders among other things that the X Air Corps retain Sicily as basis of operations.[31] Its principal mission was to combat the British naval forces and to interdict the British waterways between the western ans eastern Mediterranean. By using intermediate airfields in Tripolitania the Air Force was also to take the necessary steps for bombing the British

[29] Excerpts from the handwritten notes of Ministerial Councilor Helmuth Greiner (The Fuehrer's war diary) regarding the daily conference at the National Defense Branch of the Armed Forces High Command on 27 November 1940.

[30] W.F.St./Abt.L.(I) Nr. 33 392 g.K.Chefsache of 10 December 1940 concerning

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(Continuation of Footnote No. 30)

the commitment of German air force units in Italy (Special Operation Mediterranean).

31 O.K.W./W.F.St.Abt.L. Nr. 44 018/41 g.k.Chefs of 11 January 1941. Directive 22 (Assistance of German Forces in Operations in the Mediterranean).

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supply ports and bases along the coast of western Egypt and the Cyrenaica, and thus give direct support to Army Group Graziani.

For the defense of Tripolitania the Commander in Chief of the Army was to activate a so-called blocking units -- the 5th Light Division --- which was to be committed against the British armored divisions.

By order of 20 January 1941, No. 440 18/40, classified TOP SECRET, the measures ordered in Directive 22 were given the code designation SUNFLOWER (Sonnenblume).

The transfer of X Air Corps got underway by mid-December. The corps had been stationed in Norway where it had been committed against British naval forces and shipping. The general commanding X Air Corps, General der Flieger (Lt. Gen.) Geisler, as well as his chief of staff, Oberst i.R. (Col.) Herlinghausen, had been naval officers so that they were well qualified for their new mission. The X Air Corps was directly subordinate to the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe.

In accordance with the combat mission Malta was the most important objective because British naval and air forces stationed on the island were able to bar communications between Sicily and Tripolis at any time. Moreover, Malta served as support base for convoys traveling from Gibralter to Alexandria. The following units were assigned to X Air Corps from 1 January - 8 February 1941:[32]

[32] From the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command (wall charts) pertaining to the disposition of flying units on 1 January, 20 January, and 5 February 1941 (Sheet 1), on 9 and 25 February and 18 and 29 March 1941 (Sheet 2), and on 15 April and 1 May 1941 (Sheet 3).

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Staff of X Air Corps: At Catania, later at Taormina.

Reconnaissance units:

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with a mobile intercept company.[33]

On 9 February the following new flying units were assigned to X Air Corps:

Bombers: 3d Group of Bomber Wing 30, equipped with Junkers 88 A-5 at Gerbini.

Dive Bombers: The staff as well as the 2d and 3d Groups of Dive Bober Wing 1, equipped with Junkers 87, model Ew.R at Trapani.

Fighters: 1st Group of Fighter Wing 27,[32] equipped with Bf 109 E-7/N.)

The British had naval superiority in the Mediterranean and aerial superiority in North Africa. On 10 June the British had approximately 200 airplanes in Egypt, while the Italians had 282 aircraft in Libya alone.[34] Other sources estimated the Italian air strength in Libya at 300 bombers, fighters, and dive bombers, excluding reconnaissance planes.[35]

On 8 December 1940, when they started their offensive, the British had 16 squadrons with approximately 240 planes ready for commitment.[36]

[33] Oberst (Col.) Kleyenstueber, Intelligence Officer of X Air Corps: "Direct Cooperation between the Air Force Radio Intercept Units and the Combat Units." Supporting studies?

[34] Denys Richards: Royal Air Force 1939-1945. London. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1953. Volume I,p.242,1 and p. 243.

[35] History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 208.

[36] Royal Air Force, Volume I, p. 266.

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In addition, the British had transferred four squadrons of bomber and fighter planes -- the 30th, 84th, 211th, and 80th Squadrons -- to Greece at the end of October 1940. The 112th Squadron turned over its fighter planes to the Royal Greek Air Force at the beginning of December.[37]

In Malta the following forces were available on 31.IV.(Mid)41:

No. 830 Squadron, Fleet Air Arm, 12 Swordfish Torpedoes;

No. 261 Squadron, Royal Air Force, 16 Hurricanes (and 4 in reserve);

No. 148 Squadron, Royal Air Force, 16 Wellingtons (and 4 in reserve);

No. 228 Squadron, Royal Air Force, 4 Sunderland flying-boats (and 2 in reserve);

No. 431 Flight, Royal Air Force, later redesignated to:

No. 69 Squadron, Royal Air Force, 4 Glenn Martins for reconnaissance (and 1 in reserve.[38]

The considerable forces of the aircraft carriers Ark Royal, Illustrious, and Eagle -- some 150 aircraft belonging to the Fleet Air Arm -- were occasionally committed in conjunction with Air Force attack units.

To oppose these forces X Air Corps had in mid-January 1941 some 240 aircraft available for commitment, including reconnaissance planes. To this figure should be added approximately 50 Italian fighter planes so that about 300 planes could be committed from Sicilian bases.

The British total strength without Fleet Air Arm was approximately 250 planes in Libya and about 50 in Malta or altogether some 300 aircraft. The Axis Powers had clear air superiority in attacks on Malta alone.

[37] Royal Air Force, Volume I, p. 256.

[38] History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 312.

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During the noon hours of 10 January 1941 the German units obtained their first major success. A convoy coming from Gibraltar was being taken under the protection of Admiral Cunningham's Alexandria-based fleet, when the aircraft carrier Illustrious was attacked west of Malta, suffering heavy damages."The attacks were made with great skill and determination and were quite unlike anything the fleet had experienced at the hands of the Italians."[39] The Illustrious was hit 6 times, the bombs damaged the flight deck, 9 planes were destroyed, and half the guns were put out of action. The ship's forward and aft were set afire. At about 1600 the aircraft carrier received another hit on its way to La Valetta which it reached nevertheless toward 2100. The total losses were 126 killed and 91 wounded.[39]

The following day -- 2 January(sic) -- at about 1500 the cruiser Southampton, guarding part of the convoy from Gibraltar, was so badly damaged halfway between Sicily and Crete that the British were forced to abandon the ship in the evening and sink it afterward.[40]

During the following days the X Air Corps concentrated its attacks, which were occasionally obstructed by bad weather, on the aircraft carrier anchored at La Valetta and the airfields Hal Far and Luca on Malta. These attacks, taking place on 16, 18 and 19 January 1941, did not however

[39] History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 319.

[40] History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 320.

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prevent the Illustrious from leaving port.

The aircraft carrier left La Valetta during the night of 23 January and arrived at Alexandria on 25 January at midday. The repair crews at Malta performed a remarkable feat which was complicated by the fact that the Illustrious suffered additional damage while the repair work was underway.[41]

Even though the Illustrious was not sunk, the commitment of X Air Corps had far-reaching consequences. The convoy traffic across the Mediterranean was temporarily interrupted because of the inavailability of the aircraft carrier, and urgently needed supplies destined for Greece had to be re-routed via North Africa. British Royal Air Force replacements and supplies had to be detoured via Takoradi.[42]

At that time the X Air Corps planned to paralyze the supply traffic via the Suez Canal. Initial plans called for Rhodos as attack base. But Rhodos was so short of supplies that it could not be used for that purpose until February. When agents reported that a major convoy was moving from Aden to Suez, it was decided to attack immediately.

Tobruk was under siege, with the capture of the fortress by the British an imminent threat so that only Benghasi would be available for a limited time. The distance from there to Suez was about 700 miles, which was beyond the range of Heinkel 111 planes. An additional difficulty was that Benghasi had no meteorological service or other ground installations that could be used as accessories. A Junkers 52 equipped with a radio set and DF equipment

41 History of the Second World War, Volume I, pp. 321-3.

42 History of the Second World War, Volume I, pp. 323-4.

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had to serve as a substitute for a ground radio station. Colonel Harlinghausen requested and received permission to take personal charge of the attack, because he had a particularly sound navigational background. He reported about the attack as follows:

"On 17 January 1941 I landed with about 12 - 15 aircraft of the 2d Group of Bomber Wing 30 in Benghasi. From there I sent three bomber aircraft on a reconnaissance flight to find the convoy. One of the planes observed the convoy approaching Suez so that its arrival during the following night seemed probable. Upon landing at Benghasi, two of the returning aircraft collided so that only eight were available for the attack. We started at dusk, each plane with an auxiliary tank and two tons of bombs. In order not to miss the convoy, I committed four planes in such a manner that they were to fly at ten-minute intervals from Port Said to Suez along the west-side of the Canal, while I with the remaining planes took the opposite route from Suez to Port Said along the east-side. None of the planes encountered the convoy; they dropped their bombs on secondary targets in port and canal installations. I saw a few ships in the roads of Suez, but their number did not in any way correspond to the convoy that had been reported. I then flew up the Canal to Port Said, but I still could not find the convoy. Thereupon I turned about and found the convoy with its ships anchoring far apart in the Great Bitter Lake. Since I had dropped half my bombs south of Port Said to sink a ferry, I used my my last bomb to attack a steamer, but missed. But even if I had sunk that ship,

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it would not have blocked the Canal. The attack was therefore unsuccessful. On the other hand, only one out of the eight planes returned undamaged to Benghasi; three crews had to make emergency landings behind the British lines because of the headwind they suddenly encountered. They were taken prisoner. I had to make a forced landing in the desert some 150 miles southeast of Benghasi, where I was found three days later.[43]

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[43] Excerpt from a private letter of Generallieutenant (Maj. Gen.) Martin Harlinghausen, dated 19 July 1954 ? Supporting studies ?
See also excerpts from the air situation report of the intelligence officer of the Commander in Chief of the Air Force for the period 8 January - 28 February 1941, Mediterranenan area, X Air Corps, pp. 21-2.

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Section III. Developments in the North African Situation during February and March 1941. Air Brigade Commander Africa. German Air Support for Rommel's First Offensive (24 March - 8 April 1941).

After much hesitation the Duce agreed to the transfer of an additional German armored division -- the 15th Panzer Division -- that was to join the 5th Light Division in North Africa. General Gariboldi had replaced Marshal Graziani as the Supreme Commander of the Italian and German forces in Tripolitania. Generallieutenant (Maj. Gen.) Rommel was appointed commander of the "German Africa Corps"; he arrived in Tripoli on 13 February 1941. The Italian High Command had transferred the armored Ariete and the motorized Trento Divisions to Africa from 17 January - 20 February 1941. Elements of the German 5th Light Division were moved in conjunction with the Italian forces. The 15th Panzer Division was to follow later.

Originally, Marshal Graziani had intended to stop the British advance along the coast near Misurata (170 miles east of Tripoli) and farther to the south of that town. He also wanted to station two divisions near the Tunisian border. The German liaison officer with the Comando Supremo, Generallieutenant (Maj. Gen.) von Rintelen had a private conversation with Mussolini on 9 February 1941, during which he convinced the Duce that Tripolitania would have to be defended as far to the east as possible. First, the British advance had bogged down

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because a new supply base would have to be established before the offensive could be continued into Tripolitania. Moreover, the French in Tunisia would not attack before Tripoli had fallen, and for this reason the two divisions along the Tunisian border ought to be transferred to the defensive line in the east. After Mussolini had replaced Marshal Graziani by General Gariboldi, he ordered the latter "to hold Tripolitania by mobile defense in the Syrte Desert." He appointed General Rommel as commander of all mobile German and Italian units.[44]

The motorized 5th Light Division, which had originally been activated as a "blocking unit" was primarily composed of machine-gun battalions and strong antitank units. It had only one motorized artillery battalion, one engineer and one signal company. The 5th Panzer Regiment with 45 light and 90 medium tanks and the 39th self-propelled antitank battalion were subsequently attached to the division. According to existing plans the transports moving these forces would be unloaded in Tripoli by mid-March. The staff of the German Africa Corps had at first no corps troops or supply columns. The 15th Panzer Division was not to be expected to arrive in Tripoli before the first half of May.

In February the High Command North Africa of General Gariboldi had five Italian divisions. The XXI Corps was composed of the Brescia and Savona Divisions as well as a mixed unit consisting of remnants of previously shattered divisions; the corps was in the Tripoli area. The X Corps was composed of the Bologna and Pavia Divisions and a mixed

44 The Campaign in Africa, Volum I, p. 20. Army Study. This presentation is extensively based on the Army study, "Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43"

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unit committed in what might be called an advance position east of the town of Syrte, with the armored Ariete Division behind it.

The combat efficiency of these Italian units was very limited. Their equipment was outdated, they lacked effective antitank weapons, and the supply organization was incapable of satisfying the demands of a war of movement. The armored Ariete Division had only ten tanks whose ineffectiveness had previously been demonstrated. The armored infantry had only very few motorized vehicles.

The training of all divisions had been greatly neglected. The morale of officers and troops had dropped to zero. The Italian soldier felt completely inferior to the British and considered any resistance he might offer as senseless. In Tripoli morale had reached a particularly low point.

It was known that the British tanks had reached El Agheila, along the eastern border of the Great Syrte, on 7 February 1941. Their reconnaissance patrols had penetrated areas some 60 miles farther to the west. The Italian High Command estimated the British strength at two armored divisions -- the 4th and 7th -- and three motorized divisions, two of which were Australian and one from New Zealand. An early British attack was expected.

As already mentioned, General von Rintelen considered this estimate as improbable. A thrust from El Agheila to Tripoli would have meant an additional distance of 475 miles to be convered by the British Army. Almost 350 miles of this distance led through the desert without water

[illegible] was completed, the Japanese effective American weapons, and the
[illegible] organization was incapable of satisfying the demands of a war of
attrition. The enemy Allied Islands had only one single-place fighter-
plane had seriously been demonstrated. The enemy fighter did only very
few damaged aircraft.

The training of all fighters had been greatly neglected. The morale
of officers and troops had declined to zero. The Italian soldier felt
completely inferior to the British and demonstrated any hesitancy to engage
after on operations. In Italy which had reached a particularly low point.
It was known that the British tanks had reached of armor, along the
eastern bank of the Sangro River on 7 February 1941. Their [illegible]
[illegible] had [illegible] were so [illegible] to the [illegible]
[illegible] contrast emphasized the British strength at the strategic disposition -- the
4th and 7th -- and their tactical situation, two of which were [illegible]
and one from the [illegible] to early British attack [illegible] objective.

As [illegible] indicated, General von Rintelen [illegible] this [illegible]
as [illegible] a threat from [illegible] in Italy would have [illegible]
additional [illegible] of [illegible] to be received by the Italian army.
[illegible] the [illegible] of this [illegible] had [illegible] [illegible]

or inhabited place. During a two-month offensive the British had advanced more than 600 miles and had suffered personnel and materiel losses that would have to be replaced. Their main difficulty would be in the field of supply since they could not base their supply system on the port of Benghasi which was within reach of the Luftwaffe. If the Britsh did launch their attack sooner than expected, it was to be hoped that the German Air Force would be capable of delaying their advance.

After his arrival in North Africa General Rommel decided to employ the first German troops immediately at Syrte in order to improve the morale of the Italians committed in that area. On 22 February the staff of the 5th Light Division assumed command over the German forces in combat and ordered -- in accordance with available intelligence information -- the reinforced 3d motorized reconnaissance battalion to advance to Arco dei Fileni (Arco Philenorum) some 105 miles east of Syrte. Soon afterward the division also moved to that town. By 26 February the following German units had arrived in the vicinity of Arco dei Fileni: Special Regimental Staff 200, the 2d and 8th Machine Gun Battalions; the 1st Battalion of the 75th Artillery Regiment (motorized), and the antiaircraft machine gun battalion of the 5th Light Division.

Patrols advanced as far as about 20 miles west of El Agheila and to the Oasis Marada, 60 miles south of El Agheila, without encountering any enemy forces near the oasis.

At the beginning of March the armored Ariete Division was moved up behind the 5th Light Division (See Sketch No. 1).

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During this period the enemy forces remained passive, displaying only minor reconnaissance activities.

The 2d Squadron of Reichel 126's 14 (7), which was subordinate to the German Africa Corps, limited its activities to visual and photographic reconnaissance near the front lines. Long-distance reconnaissance missions in the Cyrenaica were conducted from Sicilian bases.

As early as 13 February the X Air Corps had transferred to Brix-Dufan -- 100 miles south of Tripoli -- and Castel Benito the following forces to support the Africa Corps: The staff of the 3d Dive Bomber Wing with the command echelon, the 1st Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group, the 2d Squadron of the 2d Dive Bomber Group, and one squadron of the 26th Pursuit Interceptor Group. On 14 February the Germans conducted the first dive bomber attack on El Agheila. Since no further supplies of bombs were available in North Africa, the two dive bomber squadrons had to fly back to Sicily to pick up some bombs for subsequent attacks. The build-up of the ground organization was slow so that the availability of supplies remained unsatisfactory for some time.[45] The Italian flying units consisted of one fighter wing, one bomber wing, and one or two reconnaissance squadrons for a total of approximately 100 aircraft. After their earlier reverses the combat efficiency of the Italian air contingents was greatly reduced, all the more since most the planes were outdated.

The British Air Force remained relatively inactive during this period and failed to interfere with unloading operations in Tripoli during February.

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In order to guarantee effective air support in North Africa,

45 Oberstlieutenant (Lt. Col.) Walter Enneccerus, II./Stuka[2] auf Sizilien: 8.1. - 12.2. und in Afrika: 19.2. - 18.10.41; Karlsruhe Collection, pp. 17 - 18.

* Sketch No. 2.

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The agency "Air Brigade Commander Africa" was established on 20 February and Generallieutenant (Maj. Gen.) Froehlich with a corresponding staff was appointed to that position. He arrived at Syrte at the beginning of March; for the time being he remained under the tactical command of X Air Corps which made available the aircraft he needed. The Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe had outlined his mission as follows:

"The Air Brigade Commander Africa will direct and commit the elements of the German Air Force employed in the African theater of war -- such as flying and antiaircraft units -- in a manner that will guarantee maximum support of the Army units employed in that area."[46]

The following flying units were assigned to him:

On and after 25 February -- Dive Bomber Units: The staff of the 3d Dive Bomber Wing, the 1st Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group, the 2d Squadron of the 2d Dive Bomber Group.

Fighter Units: The 1st Squadron of the 27th Fighter Group.*

On and after 1 May: Reconnaissance Units: One pair of aircraft from the 1st Squadron of F 121's.

Bomber Units: One third of the 3d Squadron of the First Air Command (?).

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[46] Generallieutenant (Maj Gen.) Froehlich, "Fliegerfuehrer Afrika," p. 4, Karlsruhe Collection.

* Translator's Note: This information is in contradiction with that given on previous page: The arrival date indicated there is 13 February and the fighter unit has a different designation.

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Dive Bomber Units: The 3d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Wing from 10 April to 8 May, and the 2d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Wing after 8 May.[47]

In addition, the following units were subordinate to the Air Brigade Commander Africa: Air Force Signal Units: the 3d Battalion of the 40th Air Force Signal Regiment and the 11th Company of the 30th Air Force Signal Regiment; the 2d Air Force High Command Signal Platoon; and indistinctly designated elements of the 6th Air Force Command Signal Regiment with three air force signal companies (?).

Antiaircraft Units: 84lst Flak Battalion; the 2d Battalion of the 25th Flak Regiment, the 114th Reserve Flak Battalion as well as flak transport and POL trucking units and medical units.

The Air Force Commander attached to the Africa Corps had control over the following units: The 2d Squadron of Henschel 126's /14 (Tr. ?), a special messenger squadron, the 1st Battalions of the 18th and 33d Flak Regiments, the 9th and 10th Companies of the 25th Flak Regiments,

47 Fliegerführer Afrika for the time from 25 February to 19 June 1941 (The sources used were the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command (wall charts) pertaining to the disposition of flying units) Sheet 1 (Karlsruhe Collection).

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as well as one flak special equipment repair shop, which was motorized.[48] The following airfields were immediately available: Bir Dufan, situated some 100 miles southeast of Tripoli, Syrte, and Castel Benito, near Tripoli. Around mid-March the dive bomber units and the twin-engined fighter squadron moved to Tamat -- west of Syrte -- and El Machina, to the south of that town.

The organizational charts of the Air Force High Command reflect the disposition of the flying units only at certain intervals. The chain of command, however, changed far more frequently in accordance with the tactical situation and with the evaluation by the X Air Corps. It is thus that for instance one squadron of the 26th Pursuit Interceptor Group is not mentioned on Chart 1, even though it moved to North Africa as early as February. On the other hand, the 1st Squadron of the 27th Fighter Group did not move to Africa until 15 April, whereas it is mentioned on Chart 1 as early as 25 February. These divergencies originated probably in changes of equipment, overhauls, etc., in the zone of interior.

It is mentioned in the Army reports that the major part of the units assigned to the North African theater were shifted to the Balkans during the second half of March. This must be a mistake since only the staff of the 3d Dive Bomber Wing with the command echelon left Africa. The Air Brigade Commander kept the interceptor squadron and the two dive bomber groups.

48 Unterstellungsverhaeltnisse der in Afrika befindlichen Einheiten der

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(Continuation of footnote 48)

Luftwaffe Anfang 1941 (Order of Battle of the Luftwaffe units employed in North Africa at the beginning of 1941) without date or further details (Karlsruhe Collection).

* See Footnote 47

** See Footnote 44, p. 37.

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(Ennecerus p. 18, Footnote 45)

Apparently, the cooperation between the German Africa Corps and the X Air Corps was anything but close. The above Army manuscript never mentions the intervention of X Air Corps during the period 1 March - 7 April in the Tobruk-Benghazi-El Agheila area where the flying units were very active.[49]

General Gariboldi had meanwhile given in to Rommel's urging and had moved the armored Ariete Division and the partly motorized Brescia Division up to Arco dei Fileni. Eventually he even agreed to putting the Brescia Division under Afrika Corps control so that Rommel could pull the bulk of the 5th Light Division out of the forward area.

There still was no accurate information on enemy strength. British inactivity led to the conclusion that the enemy forces were weaker than the Italian High Command had assumed. On the other hand, the Royal Air Force had recently made more numerous and successful attacks on the unloading operations in Tripoli. So far, damages to airfields had been minor.

On 22 March Rommel was at Hitler's headquarters for conferences. He reported to the Fuehrer that his original mission of securing Tripolitania had been fulfilled. He did not intend to launch an offensive before both German divisions as well as the armored Ariete Division

[49] Situation report of the Air Force High Command intelligence officer for the period 1 March - 7 April, pp. 155-6, 159-161, 163, 165-8, 170, 180, 182-3, 186, 189, 195, 197-9, 203-5, 211, 213, 219, 225, 237, 242/431, 248, 250, 254, 258-9, 268-9, 276-7, 279, 285, 292 (Karlsruhe Collection).

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and the motorized Trento Division had been fully assembled. The date for launching such an offensive was not determined during that conference. On the following day Rommel reported to Mussolini, giving him the same information, whereupon he flew back to North Africa.

The 5th Light Division had meanwhile prepared a reconnaissance thrust on El Agheila. Rommel was in full agreement with this plan; he made Oberstlt. (Lt.Col.) Freiherr von Wechmar and his reinforced motorized artillery battalion responsible for the capture of El Agheila on 24 March.

At that time neither the German nor the Italian military authorities knew that the British had begun in mid-February to withdraw considerable forces from Libya in order to move them to Greece.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore had also been forced to transfer four fighter and bomber squadrons -- the 11th, 33d, 113th, and 112th -- to Greece; these were followed by the 208th on 6 April. Only four squadrons remained in Libya: the 3d and 73d Fighter Squadron, the 55th Bomber and Long-Distance Reconnaissance Squadron, and the 6th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron.

Although British reconnaissance crews reported the presence of Germans along the front line, Cairo headquarters doubted that major units were thus committed. On 2 March, when the British ascertained that a German armored brigade had already arrived in Africa and that reinforcements were following, General Wavell reported to London that a major German offensive before the end of the summer was unlikely because of the long distance from Tripoli to Benghasi, the scarcity of Axis shipping space, and the

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approaching hot season.[50]

Rommel, however, realized instinctively how weak the British really were after the reconnaissance thrust in force on El Agheila had succeeded. He captured Marsa el Brega on 31 March and Agedabia on 2 April against stiffening British resistance.

The German success at Agedabia opened the way into the Cyrenaica. Moreover, major combat efficient enemy units had been severely defeated during this engagement. The British lost quantities of materiel and were withdrawing to Benghasi.

On 2 April Rommel had to make an important decision. Was he to follow Gariboldi's orders and his own plans that he had submitted to Hitler only a few days ago? In that case he would have to stop the offensive and wait until the Italians had moved up and the 15th Panzer Division had arrived. Or was he to take advantage of his victory by pursuing the defeated British forces immediately and destroying them before they had time to buid up a defensive position? Was he to launch the pursuit in a frontal attack on Benghasi or was he to move across the unknown desert and attempt to overtake the British by a thrust on Ain-el-Gazala? The latter decision, which appealed to him more than the others, was adopted by Rommel who issued the corresponding orders on the battlefield of Agedabia on 2 April.

[50] Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, pp. 284, 286-7.

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While relatively weak forces, consisting of the 3d motorized Artillery Battalion and the partly motorized Brescia Division launched a pursuit via Benghasi toward Derna, the bulk of the forces, namely the 5th Light Division and the 5th Panzer Regiment, advanced in two columns across the desert via El Mechili (Mekili) in the direction of the Via Balbia to cut off the British troops' withdrawal. Benghasi was captured as early as 4 April, but in front of Derna the enemy forces offered strong resistance in order to cover the withdrawal movement. At the same time the advance across the desert presented far greater difficulties than Rommel had expected. The 5th Panzer Regiment lost its way and bogged down when its supply vehicles were stopped by low-level air attacks and were later unable to find the regimental combat vehicles.

The Germans were unable to seize Mekili until 7 April when they overcame the last resistance after heavy fighting. They captured 2,000 prisoners, including 5 generals. The most prominent of these were the Commander of the British VIII Corps, General Neame, and the Commander of the British 7th Armoured Division, General O'Connor. The great booty of motor vehicles, POL, and rations permitted the Germans to continue the operation sooner than could otherwise have been expected. When the 5th Light Division finally reached TMIMI, west of Ain-el Gazala, on 8 April, the bulk of the British forces had escaped the trap. Derna with its airfield had been captured the day before.

The 2d Reconnaissance Squadron (H) 14, commanded by OBSTLT. (Lt.Col.) Heymers, gave extremely valuable assistance during this fighting, particularly

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at Mekili, by performing reconnaissance missions without letup even during unfavorable weather. The dive-bomber group supported the ground operations with only weak elements until 2 April. Soon after the start of the operation the group was moved to Arco dei Fileni and after the fall of Benghasi to the Benina airfield, some 10 miles east of Benghasi. During the rapid pursuit in the direction of Mechili the dive bombers could not be committed because of the defective ground organization.*

This description of events furnished by the Army is partly contradicted by Obstlt. (Lt. Col.) Ennecerus' report on the contribution made by the Luftwaffe.** According to him, British troops withdrawing along the El Agheila-Agedabia-Benghasi route were attacked from the air by planes still operating out of the El Machina airfield. Later, the Luftwaffe flew missions against columns in the southern Cyrenaica from the Agedabia and and Benina airfields before Derna was seized.

The situation reports of the Air Force High Command intelligence officer indicate that, aside from reconnaissance flights in force, the X Air Corps conducted ground support operations on 28-29 March during the fighting near El-Bregha and attacked enemy tanks on 31 March with sizable forces protected by fighter planes. This was repeated at Agedabia on 1 April as well as northeast of Barce, and three days later the X Air Corps attacked retreating enemy columns southeast of Benghasi.***

*See also p. 52.

**Footnote 45, p. 18.

***Footnote 49, pp 319(325); 321(332); 338-340; 347; 349; 353; 363-4.

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The British Air Force had strongly intervened in the fighting at Marsa-el-Brega and at Agedabia and had inflicted serious damage on the supply columns in the desert. It made itself less felt during the pursuit operations at Mekili and Derna because it had lost its air bases and supplies at Benghasi and Derna and had been forced to withdraw eastward.

During the preceding engagements the British had suffered a severe reverse. The 7th Armoured Division had been almost completely annihilated, and only the 9th Australian Division had been able to escape to Tobruk. Rommel's advance threatened Egypt, and a revolt underway in Iraq since the beginning of April. There, pro-British Regent Abdullah Illah had been chased out of office by a military junta which was supported by the Arab nationalists in Cairo. Moreover, the German offensive in the Balkans had been launched on 6 April, involving the British expeditionary corps. The over-all situation gave cause to British anxiety.

The prestige of the Axis Powers, however, had greatly risen in the Arab world. Italy's morale improved with its soldiers performing better than expected. Rommel's reputation affected the British troops who were to remember the "Benghasi Pursuit Race" for a long time afterward.

The risk taken by Rommel when he launched an encircling movement

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across the desert had been crowned with success. Despite all the difficulties encountered in the desert, the German soldiers had performed excellently and had gathered valuable experiences.

Section IV

The German Air Force Liaison Staff in Italy. The German, Italian and British Air Forces in the Mediterranean Area in the Spring 1941. The Struggle for Tobruk and the Fighting at the Sollum Front up to 20 June 1941.

In June 1940 a German Air Force liaison staff had been established in Italy. A German transport group equipped with Junkers 52 was assigned to that staff in December 1940. From its base at Foggia the group flew personnel and materiel transport missions to Albania and performed valuable services. When the X Air Corps was moved to Sicily, the liaison staff assumed the function of an air command, an additional airfield having already previously been occupied at Naples Cancello. One of the most important activities was the resupply of the North African theater. The decisive importance of this theater to the overseas conduct of war had never been fully appreciated. The supply planning and the composing of naval convoys rested

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with the Italian Navy and the supply and logistics agencies in Rome. The air protection of the convoys, however, was the responsibility of the German and Italian tactical commanders in Sicily. This division of responsibilities led to much friction.

The German Air Force Liaison Staff in Italy established an "Air Materiel Command Africa" with local unloading staffs first in Tripoli and later at Benghasi. This command was to support the Air Brigade Commander Africa. Gasoline dumps were set up at Tripoli and later at Derna. Air base commands were established, at first at Castel Benito, and as the offensive progressed at Benina, Derna, Tmimi, and Gambut. The maintenance units consisted of a motorized field repair battalion and a vehicle repair platoon at Derna. The supply officer of the Air Materiel Command Africa had at his disposal one supply transport staff with 6 supply columns and 2 supply companies with equipment issue points and supply dumps at Tripoli and Benghasi. Finally, a field construction agency with suboffices at Tripoli, Benghasi, and Derna took care of the airfields and billets.

The special staff of Hauptm. (Capt.) Bleich was attached to an Italian desert squadron. He was directly responsible to the Air Force High Command, and his primary mission was to prevent any enemy surprise from Central Africa.*

German sea distress area squadrons stationed in Tripoli and Benghasi were subordinate to X Air Corps; in addition, Italian sea distress

* No reports pertaining to Bleich's activities are available.

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squadrons were responsible for rescue operations.[51]

There were two bottlenecks through which all supplies had to pass. First, the sea voyage from Naples and then the ever longer distances on the African continent. Except for the short lines from Benghasi to Sollum in the south and Barce in the East, there were no rail communications; the entire traffic had to use the improved Via Balbia or cross the desert. The distance along the coastal road from Tripoli to Benghasi is about 600 miles, and from there to Sollum along the Via Balbia also along the coast it is almost 400 miles. The total distance is therefore nearly 1,000 miles. Since the desert has nothing to offer except for a few water holes, the volume of supplies needed to maintain the flow of equipment and rations was tremendous. Transport planes were frequently used to move supplies by air; during these supply missions the Italians showed that they were unable to fly blind(only by instruments).

Desert flying presented no technical difficulties. Filters built into the intake tube could not fully prevent fine dust from penetrating into the motor. The best thing to do was to clean gasoline, air, and oil filters every two days. Ammunition also had to be frequently taken out of magazines and cleaned with gasoline if one wanted the casing to remain intact. The

51 Gend.Luftwaffe (Lt.Gen.) Ritter von Pohl, Verbindungsstab der deutschen Luftwaffe bei der Kgl. Italienischen Luftwaffe" (German Air Liaison Staff in Italy), pp. 1-3; 5-7; 9 (Karlsruhe Collection).
See also Footnote 48, p. 56.

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most exacting strain for the crews was the temperature in the cockpit which rose to almost 158°F on hot days.

Because of continuous attacks on Malta and the air protection offered in the Tripoli area only 20,000 out of 220,000 tons of supplies were lost during February and March 1941.[52]

The X Air Corps flew reconnaissance missions in the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Cyprus, along the North African coast from Tunis to Alexandria, and along the Suez Canal from Port Said to the Red Sea. The many rewarding targets in this extensive area could be attacked only if all available forces were concentrated for points of main effort. Such attacks led to momentary paralysis of the enemy forces but not to their annihilation. The ports of La Valetta and the airfields on Malta were the prinicipal night and day targets. The Suez Canal was first mined on 29-30 January 1940, and then again in February and March. These operations upset the British considerably and led to a number of countermeasures. But the canal shipping was not stopped.

British supply convoys along the North African coast which were supposed to feed their offensive as well as the convoys from Alexandria to Greek ports were also important targets for the Germans. To facilitate the Italian withdrawal, advancing British

[52] History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 369.

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armored points and their supply dumps were attacked from the air.*

After Rommel's successful advance the German air attacks were concentrated on Tobruk as of 12 April. Moreover, the protection of Axis convoys required the constant commitment of fighter aircraft. Despite the many attacks on Malta the Germans failed to blockade the island. British fighter planes took off from the aircraft carrier "Arc Royal" that had brought them within reach of Malta and reinforced the diminishing defensive resources of the island garrison. Individual ships or small convoys -- as for instance on 22-3 March -- took advantage of a bad weather spell to land the most urgently needed supplies.

For the multiple missions offering themselves to the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean, the forces of one air corps -- even if it was reinforced -- were totally insufficient. Furthermore, the German air corps often had to assume responsibilities that were actually Italian. The inevitable combat losses were within tolerable limits, but beyond that the forces of the X Air Corps were extended to the limit. The following table indicates the effort performed by the personnel and the demands made on the materiel during the months of February, March, and April 1941.

* Footnote 49, p. 57.

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The monthly average performance was:

1,061 hours of flying, with 1,244 as top performance for the 2d Squadron of the 26th Bomber Group;

1,377 hours of flying, with 1,516 hours as top performance for the 3d Squadron of the 26th Interceptor Group;

2,770 hours of flying, with a top performance of 3,688 hours for the 3d Squadron of the Special Purpose Transport Group.

In evaluating these figures one must consider that the number of planes that were ready for commitment was about 50 percent of the normal strength.[53]

During the period 1 February - 30 April 93,000 tons of enemy shipping were sunk and 359,000 tons damaged. These figures were very carefully examined and partly substantiated by aerial photographs.

The Army General Staff realized as early as the end of 1940 that the North African theater would drain its resources and left no doubt that the over-all significance of the operations in that area was only that of a delaying action.[54]

This "struggle for gaining time" had certainly been won by the X Air Corps, which, however, was incapable of forcing a decision.

The Royal Italian Air Force had so far not demonstrated the power and combativeness that had been expected.

[53] Gen.Kdo.X.Fl.Korps -I.T.Gefechtsquartier, 12 May 1941 Br.Nr. 1307/41 geh.Kdos. (Karlsruhe Collection).

[54] Excerpt from General Halder's study written in 1945-6 "Bedeutung des afrikanischen Kriegsschauplatzes" (Karlsruhe Collection).

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Only some of the fighter planes, such as the Fiat G.50's and the Macchi C.200's, the three-engine bombers of the Savoia S.79, S.84, and Cant Z.1007 B types, and the Cant Z.506 B torpedo bomber were equal to German or British aircraft. The technical instruments of the average Italian plane was not up to date, and the crews lacked experience in formation flying and in conducting coordinated attacks. Despite all efforts no uniform radio traffic control for the Italo-German conduct of operations -- neither for air-to-air nor for air-to-ground communications -- was ever established.*

There were not only the linguistic difficulties but also a certain amount of passive resistance on the part of the Italian staffs, which disrupted efforts at close cooperation from the very beginning. Air power was employed mainly according to Italian principles of war; in Abyssinia, Libya, and Albania the Italian Air Force was almost immediately out-maneuvered by the British. The Italian airplane production was incapable of immediately replacing losses suffered in combat. As a result the air force personnel, similarly to that of the Navy, suffered from inferiority complexes that were difficult to overcome. In cooperation with German units the Italian crews proved, however, that they were capable of performing well. Hauptmann (Captain) Mahlke, for instance, mentioned an air battle near Malta in which the Italian Macchi fighters intervened with extraordinary skill. At altitudes of only about three feet above the water level -- their propeller draft made the water splash behind them -- they got below

* Footnote 51, p. 66.

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the Spitfires and scored within a short time a remarkable number of kills. (According to the author, the Macci fighters brought down seven planes.)[55]

Later, in North Africa, Mahlke's dive-bomber group was reinforced by the Italian dive-bomber squadron "Piciatelli." After an initial failure during which the Piciatelli Squadron did not come down on its target, the Italian crews followed their German leaders willingly during the second attack. "After landing his plane the Italian squadron commander ran toward the German group commander and declared with overwhelming emphasis that the Italian had finally taken part in a real dive-bomber attack. They had properly aimed at their target and hit it because they had gotten sufficiently close to it, etc." From then on the Italian squadron was considered as fully capable of any future commitment and could be assigned targets accordingly.[56]

Hptm. (Capt.) Mahlke also reports the remarkable performance of an Italian commercial plane that saved German airmen in distress at sea. "During the withdrawal of troops to Trapani, Leutnant (Lieutenant) Nordmann had to make a forced landing at sea at the latitude of Pantelleria in the

55 Helmut Mahlke, "Der Einsatz der III./Sturzkampfgeschwader 1 im Mittelmeergebiet", p. 41, (Karlsruhe Collection).

56 Helmut Mahlke, op. cit., pp. 56-7 and pp. 63-4, as well as Stoll-Berberich, Der Einsatz der III./Stuka 1 im Mittelmeerraum, pp. 13-4 (Karlsruhe Coll.)

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Mediterranean. An accompanying Junkers 52 dropped a life raft that Lt. Nordmann and the radio operator reached after swimming some distance. The air rescue planes that were immediately sent out were unable to find the raft because of darkness. The recovery operations initiated the following day remained unsuccessful because of low clouds and bad vision. On the third day the drifting crew was accidentally seen by a commercial plane of the "Ala Vittoria", which landed on the water despite the rough sea (3-4) and the 16 passengers aboard. The plane took the exhausted German airmen aboard and flew them to Tripoli.**

The instances reported by Hptm.(Capt.) Mahlke might have been isolated, but they demonstrated that favorable inclinations and good will were inherent in the average Italian flyer who wanted to fight in conjunction with the German airmen. If German-Italian cooperation rarely succeeded, the reason was to be sought in the Italian military system and the sensitiveness of the senior staff officers and commanders.** The Germans also often lacked the ability to adjust to foreign people and their characteristics. The Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe had also failed to make sufficient efforts, even before the outbreak of war, to establish a trusting relationship with the Axis partner and to improve the recognized weaknesses of the Italian airplane production facilities.

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* See Footnote 56.

** See p. 27.

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The British were unable to take advantage of their victories over the Italians in the Cyrenaica because they had to transfer sizable forces at the decisive moment, when they had to support Greece. The Abyssinian theater of war tied down British and South African forces, and the revolt in Iraq assumed considerable importance at the beginning of April. The appearance of the Luftwaffe in Sicily had increased the seriousness of the situation since the Mediterranean was no longer as safe as before. British airplane replacements therefore had to be brought up via Takoradi in general.

As early as 1936 the Imperial Airways had started a weekly flight from Lagos in Nigeria (along the westcoast of Africa) to Khartoum. This air route was improved after the collapse of France, and the starting point was moved to the port of Takoradi along the gold coast, where the climate was more favorable. The airplanes unloaded at Takoradi had to fly some 4,000 miles to Cairo with a dozen intermediate landings in the desert before they reached their destination. The flight took at least eight days, and there was the usual proportion of losses.[57] After the summer of 1941 American planes were moved up along the same route.

The British pursuit of the defeated Italian forces into Tripolitania could not be continued at the former speed because Luftwaffe interference limited the flow of supplies through the ports of the Cyrenaica.

[57] Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Vol. I, p. 247-8.

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Securing the line of communications from Alexandria to Greece also required sizable forces. The mining of the Suez Canal gave rise to serious concern because all traffic arteries passed through the canal. A great variety of expedients had to be used to protect British shipping.[58]

The Royal Air Force had done its best to avert disaster. During March and the first days of April it had frequently bombed the port installations in Tripoli and the German airfields in the Syrte area. During the German advance into the Cyrenaica British planes had given the ground forces their utmost support. Their numerical weakness* and the loss of their airfields in the Cyrenaica had contributed to reducing their effectiveness. The only assets remaining in British hands were Malta and Tobruk, both under heavy German-Italian pressure. "The unsinkable aircraft carrier Malta" and the former Italian fortress Tobruk were to attain decisive importance during the further course of the war.

No less an expert than Churchill, the British prime minister, had stated that the appearance of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean was the first of a series of unfavorable events. His premonitions were to come true in the near future.

Even though Rommel had been unable to encircle the British forces during their withdrawal from Benghasi, he exerted every possible pressure, hoping to arrive simultaneously with them at the gates of Tobruk.

[58] History of the Second World War, Vol. I, pp. 326-8.

* See p. 57.

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He probably believed that the defeated British troops would be incapable of defending the fortress for any length of time. Such ideas might have motivated him in ordering General von Kirchheim to capture Tobruk with hastily assembled forces by a coup de main on 9 April. The attempted coup de main failed.

With all the stubbornness and tenacity peculiar to Rommel, he made repeated efforts to seize the fortress by head-on attacks that weakened the combat efficiency of his troops quite considerably. On the other hand, his attempts to seize the fortress by surprise on 9 April and during the following days were fully justified.

But after 12 April Rommel ought to have realized that the British had established themselves firmly in Tobruk and had decided to offer strong resistance. At the same time, his weak forces with their shortage of artillery would be incapable of breaking through the pillbox line. Why detailed sketches of the fortifications, which must have been in Italian hands, were not submitted to him can only be explained by the precipitated manner in which events developed since 24 March.

Rommel probably also was not aware of the fact that aerial photographs of Tobruk were available; it may be presumed, however, that these photographs covered the port area but not the defensive belt facing landward. No orders were issued at that time to the Luftwaffe to produce photographic data of the defensive installations facing the German ground forces. For these reasons the attack launched by the 5th Light Division, including its subordinate 5th Panzer Regiment, on 14 April

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was no longer justified, quite apart from the fact that the troops had not been given sufficient time to prepare for the attack.

The last attack, launched in the evening of 30 April by major armored infantry elements of the 15th Panzer Division across more favorable terrain from the southwest, failed for the same reasons as the attack of 14 April although the attackers emerged from a sector that had hitherto been defended by the Italians. This attack led to the seizure of a sizable part of the outer defensive belt but bogged down in front of the second position, the existence of which was unknown to the attackers. Even so the German forces repelled all enemy counter-thrusts in their newly won defense line.

When the orders for that attack were being issued in the morning of 29 April, the Commanding General of the 15th Panzer Division, General von Prittwitz had raised several objections. He asked for time to carry out reconnaissance missions and to initiate the attack forces in the terrain. He also wanted a rest period for the units that had been moved up by air. In addition, he asked that the 2d Battalion of the 33d Artillery Regiment be assigned to the division to give direct support to the attack forces. Finally, he requested that the attack be delayed until the evening of 2 May so that the 2d Battalion of the 15th Rifle Regiment which was moving up could be employed as divisional reserve after its arrival. Why Rommel did not accept these justified suggestions is difficult to explain. In so doing the "tactician Rommel" acted against his own principles and overstrained the troops that were at his disposal.

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During his attempts to seize the fortress by a coup de main Rommel had not forgotten to secure his east flank along the Egyptian border. As early as 12 April the 3d motorized Artillery Battalion reached Bardia without encountering resistance; elements of the 15th Panzer Division captured Sollum after a brief struggle. On 14 April Oberst (Col.) von Herff -- the commander of the 115th Rifle Regiment -- was appointed commanding officer of all German and Italian troops in the Capuzzo-Sollum-Bardia area with the mission of covering the Libyan border and preventing enemy interference in the siege of Tobruk.

The fighting for Halfaya Pass, situated six miles southeast of Sollum, predominated over all other events in this sector during the following months.

The elevated ground of the Libyan desert extending from Bardia via Sollum toward the south drops suddenly from an elevation of about 600 feet without gradual transition along the edges facing east. Only at Halfaya Pass and 25 miles to the south at Batuna can vehicles ascend to the plateau without too much effort. At all other points even infantrymen are scarcely able to climb the steep slopes.

On 26-27 April German troops seized the Halfaya Pass, which the British recaptured on 15 May. Having control of the pass, the British threatened the nearby Sollum front. Rommel had the impression that the British had massed strong forces to relieve Tobruk by a counteroffensive.

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He dispatched all troops he could somehow spare as well as every available tank to the Sollum front. On 27 May the Germans recaptured once more the Halfaya Pass and occupied it with major forces.

The hard and costly fighting near Tobruk had meanwhile calmed down, and the Germans had tightened the ring around the fortress. The motorized Trento Division and the Pavia and and Bologna Divisions had arrived in full strength by mid-May in addition to major elements of the 15 th Panzer Division. Rommel was thus able to withdraw the bulk of the 5th Light and armored Ariete Divisions from frontline employment and finally form reserves from the units he had pulled out.

Since the beginning of June all signs pointed to further strengthening of the British forces along the Egyptian border. The number of motorized vehicles observed by the Germans exceeded 1,000. The 15th Panzer Division commanded by Oberst (Col.) Neumann-Silkow took preparatory steps to repel the attack that was to be expected within a short time. The division had constructed a system of strong points* that were to be defended by their occupants. The mobile forces of the division had been assembled between Capuzzo and Bardia under the commander of the 8th Panzer Regiment. They consisted of the 8th Panzer Regiment with 2 tank battalions and a total of 80 - 85 tanks, one reinforced motorized rifle company, one reinforced motorcycle company, the staff and one company of the 33d Antitank Regiment, and one medium and one light antiaircraft battery.

* See Sketch 3.

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The opposing forces were estimated to consist of 150 - 200 tanks, with the number of the motorized vehicles having meanwhile risen to almost 2,000.

On 15 June, shortly after midnight, the British launched a major attack. They advanced along the coastal plain and against the Halfaya Pass, while strong elements penetrated from the south in the general direction of Capuzzo.

General Rommel had alerted all reserves the day prior to the attack, and during the night of ~~the~~ 14 April he moved up the 1st Battalion of the 5th Panzer Regiment and assigned it to the 15th Panzer Division. On 15 June around 1000 he ordered the 5th Light Division to move to the Sollum front and ~~attack~~ advance toward the enemy flank via Sidi Omar - Sidi Suleiman. This attack force was composed of the 3d motorized Artillery Battalion, the 5th Panzer Regiment ~~minus~~ less its 1st Battalion, the 3d Machinegun Battalion, the 39th Antitank Battalion equipped with self-propelled guns, the 1st Battalion of the 75th Artillery Regiment, and the Anti-aircraft Machinegun Battalion.

During the two-day battle many critical situations occurred for the Germans who were facing a superior opponent. During the afternoon of 15 June the British succeeded in breaking through the strong-point system near Capuzzo, and by the morning of 16 June the enemy penetration reached as far as Upper Sollum.

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Now the Halfaya Pass was also threatened from the rear. A bitter struggle for the pass had been waged throughout this period, with the German garrison still holding out despite growing shortages of water and ammunition.

The counterattack, which the reinforced 8th Panzer Regiment launched in the morning of 16 June in the direction of Capuzzo, failed with the German forces suffering considerable losses. The regiment withdrew and assembled in its former staging area. The fate of the 5th Light Division was unknown since it had been impossible to reestablish signal communications with the division. If the British massed all their forces for an attack on Bardia, their breakthrough in the direction of Tobruk would in all probability be successful.

In this critical situation Oberst (Col.) Neumann-Silkow decided at about 1000 to risk everything and commit the reinforced 8th Panzer Regiment in an afternoon attack against the enemy west flank north of Sidi Omar. This daring decision seemed justifiable because he hoped that this move would permit his forces to operate in conjunction with the 5th Light Division after all.

Against all expectation the British remained inactive in their captured strong points during the afternoon so that the critical situation seemed to have passed by the evening.

On the afternoon of 17 June the tension finally relaxed since the enemy forces were driven back between Sidi Suleiman and Bir-Chirba,

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while the reinforced 5th Panzer Regiment of the 5th Light Division advanced as far as Halfaya Pass. The battle had been won.

However, no major elements of the British forces had been

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encircled or cut off during their withdrawal because the 5th Light Division -- ignorant of the over-all situation -- had not advanced southeastward in the direction of Batum but had been attracted by the Halfaya Pass as if by magic.

The pursuit of the defeated enemy by the 15th Panzer Division failed probably because of a shortage of POL and ammunition. The supply columns were delayed by constant low-level air attacks so that they were unable to reach the combat forces on time.

Orders from corps headquarters, which the 15th Panzer Division had expected throughout 16 June, failed to arrive so that a coordinated operation with the 5th Light Division that might have been undertaken on 17 June did not materialize. From his command post near Tobruk General Rommel could not issue a corps order because he did not know the over-all situation. For this reason he had ordered only the advance of the 5th Light Division toward Sidi Suleiman, an excellent move. General Rommel had not taken any personal part in the fighting as he had usually done. He had probably believed that the Tobruk garrison would make a breakout attempt in conjunction with the attack on the Sollum front, in which case he considered his presence with the inexperienced Italian divisions opposite Tobruk as essential for the event of a critical situation. But his part in the over-all success was therefore by no means diminished. Any delay in moving up the 5th Light Division from Tobruk might have changed the outcome of the battle. In view of the uncertain situation

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opposite Tobruk, Rommel's decision to relinquish his reserves was surely a difficult one to make.

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Even though the battle of Sollum did not lead to the annihilation of the enemy forces, it turned out to be a major success. The British had failed in encircling the German troops providing flank cover along the Sollum line and in relieving the fortress Tobruk. They suffered a serious setback in the attempt of achieving both, and their losses of materiel were heavy. They started the attack with 300 tanks, and -- according to their own data -- they had only 40 left at the end.

The splitting up into six separate "forces" transcended the tactical ability and training in mobile conduct of operations of their intermediate commanders. If two of their forces (combat teams) had pinned down the ~~enemy by~~ (Germans) attacks along the coastal plain and at Halfaya Pass, the other four forces would probably have succeeded in making a breakthrough toward Bardia from the south, had they been under Unified leadership.

The Contribution of the Luftwaffe.

The achievements of the Luftwaffe are not properly emphasized in Army study.* The co-authors from the Air Force probably lacked the correct data.

As of 10 April the Air Brigade Commander Africa had the following units at his disposal: The 1st Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group, the 2d Squadron of the 2d Dive Bomber Group, and the 3d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group until 6 May, which was then replaced by the 2d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber group and one squadron of twin-engine fighters (# 26).

These units operated from the Derna and later also the Tmimi airfields; they also used Gambut as an emergency field. Since they had not enough

* See Footnote 44, pp 191-5.

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transportation capacity at their disposal, they were unable to quickly switch from one airfield to the next.

By mid-April the first flights of the 1st Squadron of the 27th Fighter Group arrived in North Africa, and by the end of the month the group was fully combat efficient at the Ain-el-Gazala airfield. For a short while in June one squadron of the 26th Fighter Group was also available to the North African theater.[59]

As early as 7 April air reconnaissance gave an exact description of the enemy situation west of Tobruk; the assembly of troops, etc., was very effectively disturbed by the dropping of bombs and by direct fire of machine guns from aircraft. During the following days Tobruk was attacked almost incessantly. The Luftwaffe mission was to reduce the supply flow to the encircled fortress by ocean vessels and to support the ground forces in their struggle to approach Tobruk. The attacks on naval vessels usually took place beyond the vision of the ground forces and were therefore not properly appreciated by them although they benefited from them indirectly.[60]

On 18 April the German forces near Sollum suffered losses from the fire of medium naval guns, whereupon the 3d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group sank the 8,000-ton monitor that had caused these losses. Both dive bombers and fighters intervened in the ground fighting at Capuzzo and Sollum which led to the capture of Halfaya Pass on 25-26 April. Because of the difficult situation at Tobruk the air force assistance was only slight

During the air attacks on Tobruk the German Africa Corps designated

[59] Oberst (Col.) Neumann, commander of the 77th Fighter Group, Einsatz der

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(Continuation of Footnote # 59)

fliegenden Verbaende in Nordafrika, pp. 1-2 (Karlsruhe Collection).

[60] Lagebericht des Ob.d.L. Ic, 8 - 22 April 1941, pp. 379 (383), 388, 400, 406, 421, (424), 437, 439, 441, 457. (Karlsruhe Collection).

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such aerial targets as battery positions, strong points in the defensive positions, etc./ After 20 April the air attacks gradually became stronger until they reached a certain climax on 30 April, on which day 63 dive bombers and fighters participated. This continued until 4 May. After that, the waterpumping system of the fortress as well as the distillation plant and the vessels in the port were the main targets. Eventually, the British were unable to land except during the few hours of darkness.

During the defensive fighting that ended in the loss of Halfaya Pass, dive bombers and fighter intervened frequently on 15 and 17 May.[61]

After the struggle for Tobruk slowed down, the Luftwaffe could lend assistance to the ground forces in their effort to retake Halfaya Pass. On 25, 26, and 27 May as well as on 28 and 30 May German aircraft supported the advance of the ground forces by low-level attacks on British tanks and motor vehicle assemblies southeast of Sollum, at Halfaya Pass and near Bug-Bug, midway between Sollum and Sidi Barrani.[62]

During the defensive battle near Sollum the ground forces were given extensive air support. During the noon hour of 15 June the air attacks were directed at armored forces and motor vehicle assemblies near Bir Chirba, and 11 British planes were knocked out at that time; additional sorties were

[61] Lageberichte des Ob.d.L.Ic, 23 April - 26 May, pp. 1,6,20-1, 30, 39, 45, 52, 58, 65, 77, 92/92, 118, 136-7, 149 (Karlsruhe Collection).

[62] Lageberichte des Ob.d.L.Ic, 27 May - 15 June, pp. 2, 6, 11-2, 22 (Karlsruhe Collection).

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flown during the afternoon hours against enemy troops in jumpoff positions near Bir Chirba and Capuzzo.

On 16 June 51 bombers flew continuous missions during the fighting at Capuzzo, Sidi Omar, Sidi Suleiman, and south of Halfaya Pass. On 17 June 80 bombers and fighters again flew support missions during which they knocked out 14 Hurricanes. On 19 June all flying ceased because of sand storms, and the next day troops and an assembly of 80 motor vehicles were effectively attacked near Bugbug. Italian dive bombers and fighters participated in these operations with considerable success.[63]

In this connection it ought to be mentioned that, upon request of the Africa Corps, the 104th Rifle Regiment and the 33d Engineer Battalion were transferred by airlift from southern Italy to North Africa.

The assertion that the heavily committed ground forces were not sufficiently supported by the Luftwaffe during the battle of Sollum can therefore not be upheld.

On the other hand, the antiaircraft artillery received full recognition by the Army ever since the fighting in mid-April. "The successful defense against the enemy tank forces during the battle of Sollum would not have been possible without the support of the 88-mm. flak guns."*

In the reports of the air force intelligence officer the performance of the flak units also received proper credit. "A flak battery shot down three Hurricanes during the fighting near Sollum and immobilized 99 enemy

[63] Lageberichte des Ob.d.L.Io, 16 June - 30 June, pp. 2, 10-1, 13, 15, 18-9, 21, and 26. (Karlsruhe Collection).

* See Footnote 44, p. 195.

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tanks. In addition, the battery took 79 prisoners and captured 3 anti-tank guns, a prime mover, and 23 trucks.*

The Army recriminations regarding insufficient cooperation do not seem unjustified.

The Air Brigade Commander Africa, Gen.Lt. (Maj.Gen.) Froehlich, who had formerly been in the Austrian Army, was an experienced combat officer. But he apparently lacked understanding for the role of air operations in support of the ground forces. There was no Luftwaffe liaison officer attached to the Africa Corps staff who might have acted as coordinator for air-ground matters.

General Froehlich's command post was at the principal airfield, toward the end at Derna, from which he directed the employment of his units. He occasionally maintained personal contact with Africa Corps officers, but during the rest of the time he relied on tele-communications. What was lacking was an officer at the Africa Corps headquarters who could constantly advise and express ideas and anticipate the need for aircraft commitments in accordance with the ground situation developments.

It is true that the flying formations had not enough vehicles and signal equipment, but an advance command post and combat landing field might have been improvised near Gambut or in the Sidi Azeis area for the duration of the Sollum battle. In that case the Air Brigade Commander

* See Footnote 63, p. 18.

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Africa would have been able to maintain closer contact with the 15th Panzer Division and might also have been in a position to establish the whereabouts of the 5th Light Division. To pursue the defeated British Forces he would have needed bombing planes with the proper range, which he would have had to request from X Air Corps.

Since 6 April the X Air Corps was fully engaged in the fighting in the Balkans and in disrupting the supply traffic between Alexandria and Greece, quite apart from its secondary missions. At the beginning of June it transferred its units from Sicily to Athens, which in turn were diverted by the fighting in Syria after 9 June. Only in the most urgent instances was the corps able to reinforce the flying units in North Africa. It seems, however, quite possible that a senior Air Force officer of greater ability, who would have had the suppot of Rommel's influential personality, might have been able to coordinate effectively all ground and air operations during the battle of Sollum despite the existing difficulties.

After mid-April the Royal Air Force gained air superiority over Tobruk. Its low-level fighters and bombers could inflict losses on German troops and supply columns in rear areas practically without risk of air opposition.

After the air attacks on Malta relented, the British Navy also enjoyed greater freedom of action. Its destroyers sank on 16 April elements of the 15th Panzer Division staff and the entire divisional signal battalion

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as well as the staffs of the 33d Artillery Regiment and the 115th Rifle Regiment.

The campaign in Abyssinia had meanwhile ended, and the British troops employed in that area as well as reinforcements from Britain were moved up to the Egyptian frontline.[64]

After German fighters reappeared at Tobruk, the British lost their superiority. A British flyer who had been shot down by the Germans characterized the situation as follows: "Every day without German fighters above us was like a holiday."*

On 3 May Air Marshal A.W. Tedder replaced Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur M. Longmore. The revolt in Iraq and the brief campaign in Syria in June diverted additional squadrons from the Egyptian theater. Despite these diversions and the losses at Crete Sir Marshal Tedder (sic) was able to muster 200 combat efficient planes for Operation BATTLE AXE at Sollum. As usually before an offensive, the British attacked German airfields and rear area communications during the night before the attack.

During daytime the British fighter provided constant cover for the advancing ground forces. With only 100 fighters available, only a few planes could be up in the air at the same time. But since the British Army had requested this type of protection for only three days, Marshal Tedder finally agreed to provide it.

[64] Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-1945, Volume I, pp. 304 -5.

*See Footnote 46, p. 10.

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Operation BATTLE AXE was supposed to result in the relief of Tobruk, and the British advance from 14 - 16 June took place under a "fighter umbrella." The German ground forces suffered , above all at the beginning of the battle, from low-level air attacks on the BAE battle field and in the rear areas. Contrary to the usual reports, the British emphasized the German planes they had knocked out without mentioning their own losses which amounted to at least 30 planes, most of them Hurricanes.

Since the Germans did not intend to advance into Egypt, "air reconnaissance on 18 June revealed the extraordinary picture of two armies withdrawing in opposite directions."

The British acknowledged the heavy tank losses with a certain amount of resignation: "The operation* vanished just like the weapons of its code designation."[65]

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[65] Denis Richards, Volume I, pp. 336-7.

* Operation BATTLE AXE

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CHAPTER FOUR

The German Air Supremacy in the Mediterranean Area

Section I. The Commitment of the German Air Force in the Balkan and Greek Campaign.

Section II. End of Fighting on the Greek Mainland. Preparatory Attacks Flown against Crete by VIII Air Corps. The Strategic Improtance of Crete in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Section III. The Seizure of Crete. Its Exploitation by the Germans. German Air Intervention in Syria and Iraq.

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Section V. The Arrival of Second Air Force in December 1941; Its Organisational Structure of Flying and Ground Units. C-in-C South -- Prospects for 1942.

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Section I.

The Commitment of the German Air Force during the Balkans and Greek Campaign

Great Britain reacted promptly to the Italian declaration of war presented to Greece on 28 October 1940. The British took over Suda Bay on Crete and secured this naval base. In addition, they transferred the 30th Squadron — a mixed bomber-fighter unit -- to Eleusis airfield in order to protect Athens. Other British units were transferred during the month of October and subsequent months.*

Along the Epirus line the Greeks had assembled the bulk of their Army -- the West Macedonian and Epirus Armies composed of 12 infantry divisions, 1 cavalry division, and 3 infantry brigades -- and had driven back the Italians far beyond the Albanian border despite the hardships of winter.

The area along the southern Yugoslav border between Lakes Doiran and Presba remained uncovered, whereas south of the Rhodope Mountains the Greeks had built the Metaxas Line which offered sound protection against an attack from Bulgaria. However, aside from fortress units the Greeks had only four ~~inferior~~ badly equipped divisions for the defense of the entire border area facing Bulgaria.

In view of the concentration of German forces in Romania, the Greeks had to take into account the possibility of German intervention, a possibility

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* See page (?)

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that loomed ever larger the more unfavorable the Italian position in Albania became and the greater the threat presented to the Ploesti oil fields by the presence of the Royal Air Force at Greek air bases.

Marshal Papagos was fully aware of the weakness of the Greek defenses along the Bulgarian border, if the Germans chose to attack. Nevertheless, on 13 January 1941 he rejected the dispatch of British troops offered by General Wavell, the British Commander in Chief in the Middle East, because the offer was too small. Marshal Papagos asked for 9 divisions with the necessary air support units, whereas General Wavell could promise only 2 - 3 divisions with relatively weak air support. At the time he actually had only two regiments with a few tanks. Papagos indicated that he would request British help if and when German troops moved from Romania into Bulgaria.

General Wavell considered the seizure of the island of Rhodos to prevent the Luftwaffe from using its airfields as bases. But not even this plan was carried out.

Realizing that Turkey's attitude was decisive for the Allied position in the Middle East, the British resumed negotiations with that country's representatives on 31 January 1941. Turkey, however, resisted all efforts of British diplomacy and refused the military assistance it was offered,

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asserting very definitely that it would remain neutral.[66]

During a second meeting in Athens on 22 February 1941, which was attended by the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Dill, in addition to General Wavell, the discrepancy of concepts regarding a common British-Greek conduct of operations became manifest once again.

While Marshal Papagos agreed that a German invasion of Greek territory ought to be stopped along the line Vermion Mountains - Mount Olympus - Kaimaktchalan, he made his agreement contingent upon Yugoslav neutrality.* An early surrender of the Bulgarian-Greek border areas and the Saloniki Basin would cancel out any hope for a change in Prince Regent Paul's policy and for Yugoslavia joining Greece in a war against both Axis partners. Until 2 March 1941, when another conference took place in Athens, the British had not succeeded in clarifying Yugoslav intentions. The British request to withdraw to the "short line" was refused then as before, but Marshal Papagos consented that the British Expeditionary Corps occupy this line for the time being together with two Greek divisions.

In North Africa the victorious British forces had meanwhile conquered

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66 History of The Second World War, Volume I, pp. 340-3 and p. 346.

* See sketch #1.

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the Cyrenaica. The British had to decide whether they ought to drive the Italians from their last strong points in Tripolitania and thus definitely liquidate the Italian colonial empire in North Africa or whether they ought to keep their promise to Greece. After German troops entered Bulgaria on 2 March, they decided to give assistance to threatened Greece.

Between 7 and 31 March the headquarters of I Australian Corps with corps troops, the 6th Australian and 2d New Zealand Divisions, and the 1st Tank Brigade of the 2d British Armored Division disembarked at the ports of Piraeus and Volos. The tank brigade moved to the lower Vardar west of Salonika, the 2d New Zealand Division took up positions north of Mount Olympus in the bend of the Aliakmon River, while the 6th Australian Division was to block the Aliakmon Valley up to the Vermion Range.[67]

The Royal Air Force received reinforcements at the same time.* Air Vice Marshal J.H. D'Albiac, the British commander of the Air Force elements in Greece, had on 6 April 1941 some nine squadrons, mostly fighters and bombers, at his disposal.[68]

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[67] Kurt von Tippelskirch, The German Campaign in the Balkans, 1941, Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau, February 1955, Issue # 2. Mittler u.Sohn, Darmstadt.
The description of the ground fighting is largely based on this essay.

[68] History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 365, states that the 45th Squadron (Blenheims) and the 247th Squadron (Hurricanes) were transferred to Greece in addition to the squadrons listed on p. 57 of this study. Richard Denis, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, pp. 256 and 284 does

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(Continuation of Footnote # 68)

not make any such statement. The total strength of the Royal Air Force has therefore been assumed at 11 squadrons.

* See p. 57

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The shortage of airfields and the unfavorable weather hampered the employment of the Royal Air Force from the outset. The only all-weather runways in existence were at the Tatoi and Eleusis airfields in the Athens area, and even these were still being built. The distance from there to the Epirus front was 250 miles over difficult mountainous terrain. The distance to Valonn , the south Albanian port of debarkation used by the Italians, was more than 300 miles. To improve the air support of the ground forces, two landing fields were built near Janina and Larissa, about 40 and 110 miles respectively from the fighting front. These fields were used by both British and Greek planes. Supplies were delayed by deficient rail a d road communications. The signal communications were also in bad shape. The air warning system was almost completely undeveloped. D'Albiac had about 200 airplanes; the British (sic) and primarily the Yugoslav Air Force had been estimated at 100 aircraft below strength.[69]

Marshal Papagos had not given up hope that Yugoslavia would join Greece, all the more since the Yugoslav Government had put out feelers only a few days before it had joined the Tripartite Pact. The coup d'etat of 27 March seemed to bring about the situation Papagos had hoped for. In a conference with the Yugoslav Deputy Chief of Staff General Jankowitsch

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69 Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, p. 294.

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that took place during the night of 3-4 April, Marshal Papagos was unable to make Yugoslavia abandon part of its territory in the south so that particularly strong force could be assembled along the Greek border. Both generals, however, agreed that they ought to defeat the Italians in Albania in a combined operation as soon the German offensive was launched. General Jankovic agreed that even before 12 April -- the day when the Yugoslav mobilization would be completed -- four Yugoslav divisions would invade Albania from the east and north while the Greeks would launch a simultaneous offensive in the directions of Tirana and Durazzo.

Marshal Papagos therefore left the bulk of the Greek Army along the Albanian front, while the area between Lakes Doiran and Presba was still insufficiently protected by elements of the British Expeditionary Corps with two subordinate Greek divisions. By making these dispositions of forces Marshal Papagos relied entirely on the success of the Yugoslav plan of operations and had lost the initiative.

The assembly of List's army in three march echelons of altogether 18 divisions in Romania had been delayed by snow storms, the bad road net, and the slow diplomatic negotiations with Bulgaria. It was not until 28 February 1941 that the first German troops crossed the Danube, and on 2 March the first march echelon entered Bulgarian territory.

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