

Air Ministry News ServiceLAST SCENES AT A WESTERN DESERT AIRFIELD

Although in the end they were forced to withdraw, the Allied Air Forces in the Western Desert fought a close rearguard action.

When columns of German tanks were only fifteen miles away from their landing grounds not only the whole desert fighter forces, but the bomber forces, too, stood firm and struck back.

It was on Wednesday that the threat really developed. From dawn fighter patrols and fighter escorted raids by Boston bombers of the South African Air Force took up the attack on enemy tanks and armoured columns. All day long they carried on a shuttle service--take off, drop bombs, land, refuel, rearm, and take off again. Enemy transport was harried and fires were left burning among tanks and trucks.

In the evening, the last blow was struck. First a fighter force went out and ground-strafted Gazala aerodrome damaging nearly a score of Messerschmitt 109s on the ground. Shortly afterwards the last heavy Boston raid set out to attack the enemy wherever he was nearest.

"We were standing on the landing ground when they returned", writes an R.A.F. officer. "It was nothing but an arid stretch of desert-- a few tents and a thick cloud of dust kicked up by the constant take-offs.

"All around were grouped the air crews, grimy and dust-covered from days of continuous fighting, but cheerful with their tails still up.

"Then the Bostons came back. They had been gone only a few minutes but their bomb racks were empty. The nearest column of tanks they reported was only about five minutes flying time away. It might be on the landing ground within an hour or so. Everybody knew that the withdrawal could not be longer postponed. Lorries took on board tents and the ground crews. The convoys of trucks formed up and moved quietly off across the desert. The air crews climbed into their Bostons and took off.

"At the nearest fighter landing ground the squadrons were still up patrolling over the enemy columns only a few miles from their base. They flew and fought till nightfall.

"Then the drama transferred itself to the dug-out which served as the fighter operations room on the landing ground. From time to time news of the enemy tank movements came in on the telephone. Outside in the cool quietness of the desert evening the fighters and bombers alike were dispersed around the aerodrome. All tents had been struck and piled on lorries ready to move off at short notice. Everybody slept out in the slit trenches or on the open ground.

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"The news that came in over the telephone was not reassuring. The nearest enemy tanks were only fifteen miles away. At midnight they were being engaged by the Free French. An hour later the German tanks had been driven a little north on to Gambut aerodrome. At 2 a.m. they had been driven from there and nobody knew where they had gone in the darkness. The moon had set. It was said they had turned to the north-east towards us.

Messengers went round the camp shaking sleeping men by the shoulder and telling them to be ready to move off at first light.

"The hour before dawn was the most anxious, for the fighter and bombers still stood on the aerodrome and the German tanks column still hovered somewhere near. We were gathered in the last tent left standing, drinking hot tea from a dixie and chewing bacon and sausage sandwiches to the light of a single hurricane lamp. The field telephone was still ringing with orders to get rid of any surplus aviation petrol, to demolish aircraft that were useless and could no longer fly.

"Then it was light, and the shapes of the waiting aircraft gradually formed from the dimness of the landing ground. It was magnificent. The trucks formed up into convoy. Two columns of black smoke rose into the air from where two useless aircraft had been fired. Then the squadrons began to take off.

"It had been worth it. They had risked staying almost in the front line so as to be able to strike at the enemy until the last moment. They had been within easy striking distance of the tanks. But now it was light the aircraft were away. The whole force had fought until the last moment and had been withdrawn in safety. That was something of a triumph.

"They circled the landing ground and headed towards the desert tracks to cover the withdrawal of the ground forces. We climbed into our trucks and rumbled slowly after them.

"That was yesterday. All day it was just a steady trek across the desert, lines of trucks, everywhere, choking dust, maps and compasses to study, cans of bully beef for lunch and a brew of hot coffee that the padre made on a fire of camel thorn twigs. Overhead swept the fighters on patrol and never a German aircraft came near us.

"By evening we were at the new landing grounds and the whole force was reformed. The withdrawal was done without fuss hurry or concern. We came back steadily, and brought all our gear with us. Within twelve hours the fighters were fully equipped to fight again and the bombers to recommence their raids."