

HOW ALLIED AIR FORCE STRUCK AT ROMMEL AGAIN

By its record fighter-bomber blitz against Rommel's retreating army, the Allies' Western Desert Air Force has once again shown the weight of blow which can be struck when circumstances warrant.

For almost three weeks, while the two armies faced each other just south of Agedabia, phrases such as "nothing to report" or "air activity was on a reduced scale" described the battle area activity.

It would be wrong to think of this period as one of rest. Despite the absence, until the past few days, of battle area targets, many hours of operational flying were planned while feverish preparations have been going on for the next stage of the drive to Tripoli, preparations that can be crystallised into one all-embracing word, "supply".

Since the Eighth Army began its advance our troops have never been without the co-operation of the Allied air force. While our fighters placed a shield above the heads of the army, our fighter-bombers were ready to blast any positions where a rearguard had hoped to stand or delay.

When the land stalemate period set in south of Agedabia, the air war did not abate. Over the battle area pilots made sweeps to test enemy air strength and also tactical reconnaissance which gave vital information to the army.

Our coastal shipping was bringing up greatly-needed supplies to Tobruk and Benghazi, and above these ships our fighters patrolled. The ports, too, had to be protected; while deep out into the Mediterranean, our reconnaissance aircraft had to scour the seas for any signs of hostile shipping. On routes that the Germans are using to send their transport aircraft carrying supplies to Rommel, our twin-engined fighters have patrolled, and time out of number have intercepted Junkers 52 convoys and severely mauled them.

Meanwhile, our medium and heavy night bombers were active almost every night. Four-engined bombers by day and night, were carrying immense bomb-loads to drop on Naples, Tunis and Tripoli, while medium bombers have also been attacking supply ports. Our plan of operations included Crete, which was raided at intervals. Torpedo aircraft have had unprecedented success in attacks against enemy shipping.

This is a non-stop air war. There has been an advance of more than 1,000 miles from our original supply bases. Tribute is due to the maintenance and supply experts in headquarters, to the pilots and navigators of the heavy transport aircraft who have been flying loaded machines to aerodromes littered with wrecks and pitted with bomb holes, and to the men of the motor transport who have been driving their lorries from the first light in the morning until darkness. These men, through superlative efforts, have never failed in their job.

From the Libyan frontier to Benghazi, there stretches over three hundred miles of roads, with another hundred miles to Agedabia. Almost all the way there is just one road, not two or three on which to spread out road-supply transport. Large areas were mined, and along very few sections, traffic could not move off the road.

Ambulances had to hurry with wounded men. Lorries transporting many thousands of enemy prisoners had to rush from the battle area.

Against this fast-moving tide the squadron vehicles of the R.A.F. had to push on to keep the air striking force in the vanguard. Even the fastest of our transport aeroplanes had to fly for five hours to take supplies to the front, while our road convoys travelled for nearly a week.