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Air Ministry News Service

Air Ministry Bulletin No. 9982

VETERAN AUSTRALIAN SQUADRON IN TUNISIA.

With over 220 enemy aircraft to its credit, a veteran Royal Australian Air Force squadron is busy clearing the Luftwaffe out of the skies over Tunisia, to add to the top score for any squadron in the Middle East.

These are days the Aussies have dreamed of ever since they landed in Africa in 1940. From the beginning of general Wavell's campaign until the present they have moved to and fro in the desert tug-o' war, doing army co-operation work, fighter sweeps and fighter bomber raids. In between, they played an important part in the Syrian campaign.

Too often, in those early Middle East days, they were heavily outnumbered. They worked, during the retreats, on the "travel by night and operate by day" principle. Their commanding officer worked side by side with the humblest aircraftman. Yet their really one "black" day in November, 1941, was quickly atoned for a week later. In two days, 19 Huns went spinning downwards in flames.

There were exciting days, too. After only 35 operational hours, the international Rugby star, Flying Officer A. J. Barr (now prisoner of war) with eight 'kills', won the D.F.C., in dramatic fashion.

After he had shot down one of two attackers over El Agheila, he went on to destroy an Me. 109 which had forced one of his squadron's Kittyhawks to crash-land. As he glided in to pick up the stranded pilot, he was frantically signalled to. Glancing round he found three Germans on his tail. He turned quickly, claimed his third victim of the day, but was wounded in the leg and forced to land, escaping as the machine was shot up and burst into flames. After three days and nights of walking he returned with valuable enemy information.

There were lively celebrations when their commanding officer, Squadron Leader "Dobbie" Gibbes brought down their 200th Hun. The squadron was now moving forward with Montgomery's troops.

On the way to Tripoli they carried out a particularly daring raid on aircraft and drones far behind Rommel's lines. One of their pilots was hit by A.A. fire. He landed close to the enemy aerodrome. Gibbes dived down, landing alongside the damaged plane. Then began a race as German armoured cars roared towards them, their guns blazing. The escaping pilot crammed himself into the plane. The Kittyhawk began her run and the Germans were left cursing in clouds of dust.

That won the D.S.O for their popular squadron leader who had earlier received permission to continue flying although he has completed over 450 operational hours. First the extension was for Tripoli, now it is for the Tunisian campaign.

If Gibbes should be the lucky one to shoot down the 300th Hun there will be no more popular win in the squadron. But he won't claim it without the keenest competition!

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