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THE GAMBLE OF THE NORTH AFRICA LANDING

After months of secret planning at home and in the United States the story of the R.A.F.'s part in the campaign in North Africa opened in the small hours of Sunday, November 8, 1942. At 1 a.m. the American assault teams went ashore in landing craft from the convoy which had taken the Expeditionary Force safely into the Mediterranean. As dawn was breaking a party of R.A.F. ground personnel followed the assault teams on to the beaches east of Algiers.

It was not a large party and it consisted mainly of servicing commandos, while among the officers were two Group Captains and a Flight Lieutenant interpreter. The Americans had gone ahead to take control of Maison Blanche, the large civil and military airfield near Algiers, which was to become the first R.A.F. base in North Africa. The R.A.F. men came from the beaches, fell in on the road, and started off for the airfield.

At about this hour, sitting in their cockpits at a distant base, a squadron of Hurricane pilots were waiting to take off for Maison Blanche. They were urgently needed at Algiers to cover the now continuous landing from the convoy. Though they were to fly with extra fuel tanks they could carry only sufficient petrol for the outward journey, and they took off before word could be got back to them that Maison Blanche was safely in our hands. That was the gamble of that first morning. Had it failed, had the Hurricanes found no friendly landing place the enemy (now that the secret of the convoy's destination was out) might have bombed and broken up our shipping almost with impunity, and the success of the entire operation would have been in the balance.

As it was, however, the Americans took over Maison Blanche with little trouble, and when the Hurricanes landed during the morning they found the servicing commandos ready for them with fuel and other supplies now coming up in a constant stream from the beaches. Maison Blanche immediately became operational. Two more fighter squadrons arrived before nightfall and when on the following day the enemy sent over some thirty bombers he lost twelve and a number damaged. Our losses were nil. That is how the R.A.F. went with them and ahead of them.

Servicing commandos, R.A.F. units, and detachments of the R.A.F. regiment went forward the 150 miles to Djedjelli, and a squadron of fighters landed at the airfield there on the Thursday. On the same day American transport aircraft escorted by Hurricanes, dropped paratroops on Bone airfield, 120 miles still further along the coast. By Saturday, Bone, too, was operational. The possibilities of other airfields east and south of Algiers were reconnoitred throughout that first week. Paratroops - Americans as well as British - were dropped to prepare the way for the R.A.F. squadrons, and during the following week our Bisley bombers began operations with an attack on enemy shipping now beginning to put in at Bizerta. By this time American Flying Fortresses and light night-fighters were operating side by side with the R.A.F.

All this was only accomplished by the untiring efforts on the part of everybody - pilots and flying crews and ground staff personnel. Living conditions were rough, for there was little sleep and, as the enemy recovered from his initial surprise and strengthened his air attacks, there was often danger. But the spirit everywhere was splendid. In an order of the day Air Marshal Sir William Welsh commended the ground staff, particularly the servicing commando units. "They maintained" he said, "a large number of aircraft under most difficult conditions and repeated attacks by enemy aircraft. The highest credit is due to the officers, N.C.O's and airmen."

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This gallant work on the ground was paralleled by achievements in the air. During the three days, November 9, 12 and 13, thirty-four enemy aircraft were destroyed for the loss of only one of our own. November 26 was another good day, eleven enemy aircraft being destroyed. Two of our aircraft were missing, but the pilots of both were safe. Up to the end of the month 90 enemy aircraft had been destroyed for the loss of 19 of our own, seven pilots of which were safe.

During December the R.A.F. in North Africa has been steadily reinforced. Beaufighters, operating at night, are chalking up a mounting score of enemy aircraft destroyed, Hudsons are ranging far over the Mediterranean on anti-submarine patrols, and our fighters and bombers, operating closely with the U.S. 12th Air Force in support of the army in Tunisia, are flying often through shocking weather - for this is the rainy season in North Africa - to harry and disrupt the enemy's supply lines. He has the advantage of well-equipped airfields in Sicily and Sardinia, with runways for all weathers, and he is spared the long and risky sea journey which links the R.A.F. with England. For those reasons, and because of the present bad weather, which is allowing both sides to build up their strength, the fight for Tunisia must be a tough tussle. December, a period of planning and preparation, has lacked the drama and excitement of the early days, but when that necessary period ends the R.A.F. will be ready.

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